

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY

Practitioners
and Their Craft



Edited by Larry Minear and Hazel Smith

Humanitarian diplomacy: Practitioners and their craft

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**United Nations
University Press**

TOKYO • NEW YORK • PARIS

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Introduction

Larry Minear and Hazel Smith

This volume offers a series of intimate glimpses into the day-to-day complexities of mounting and maintaining humanitarian activities in some of the world's most conflicted, intractable and remote settings. Readers will visit 14 different theatres in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America during the Cold War and the post-Cold War periods. The activities reviewed include not only the provision of emergency succour but also the protection of basic human rights.

As an aid to understanding the challenges faced and the experiences recounted, this volume offers the concept of humanitarian diplomacy. This we understand to encompass the activities carried out by humanitarian organizations to obtain the space from political and military authorities within which to function with integrity. These activities comprise such efforts as arranging for the presence of international humanitarian organizations and personnel in a given country, negotiating access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, monitoring assistance programmes, promoting respect for international law and norms, supporting indigenous individuals and institutions, and engaging in advocacy at a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives. Humanitarian diplomacy involves activities carried out by humanitarian institutions and personnel, as distinct from diplomacy exercised by traditional diplomats, even in support of humanitarian activities.

Having introduced the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, we must quickly qualify it. As pointed out by Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi in his Foreword, most humanitarian practitioners do not think of them-

selves as diplomats. Diplomacy is a specialized function carried out by a special category of personnel. The duties and obligations of official diplomats and the conduct of their functions are clearly framed by international law and custom. Behind the discomfort of humanitarian officials with the diplomacy label is the fact that diplomacy involves regular interactions with host political officials, be they state or non-state actors. Whereas the portfolio of diplomats is eminently political, humanitarian agencies seek to establish and maintain their non-political *bona fides*.

The experiences recounted in this volume display humanitarian agencies at work in highly political and politicized settings. From the rich data and analyses provided, readers will themselves be able to reach a judgement about the extent to which the term “humanitarian diplomacy” is appropriate to describe the activities conducted. The first chapter of the book therefore provides an analysis of the craft of humanitarian diplomacy, building on recurring themes from the following 14 case studies. The second chapter compares and contrasts humanitarian and traditional diplomacy.

In addition to breaking new intellectual ground in introducing and testing the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, this volume is innovative in its use of practitioners as both the subjects and the objects of the research process. We have quite intentionally asked humanitarian officials themselves to function as policy analysts, reflecting on activities for which they themselves had major operational responsibility. We did this in part because scholars have not had the sustained access to some of the geographical areas in times of conflict or, for that matter, to the internal documentation that chronicles agency experience. We also chose this course of action because practitioners, as major actors in these settings, have an important perspective to contribute. The reflection process in which they are engaged may also play a useful role in the lesson-learning efforts of their organizations and the humanitarian sector as a whole.

Enlisting practitioners into policy analysis, however, edges some of them onto unfamiliar ground. Even senior officials, accustomed to write reports that are primarily descriptive, are less familiar with the task of examining policy options, assessing the impacts of strategies adopted or rejected, or moving from the very specific circumstances encountered and decisions taken to identify lessons of wider import. To guide the reflection process as well as to ensure a certain comparability among case studies, the editors and contributors agreed a template for the preparation of their chapters. Each chapter accordingly has five sections: context, operational issues, obstacles and opportunities, negotiations, and wider implications.

Some of the authors chafed more than others under these strictures, and there remains a certain unevenness from one chapter to the next.

We hope, however, that the results of the template structure will assist readers in making sense of the experiences shared. Some will want to read the volume from the top, following the presentation of the case studies continent by continent. Others will gravitate to a chapter of special geographical appeal. Readers with specific policy interests – for example, in identifying the problems encountered by humanitarian organizations or in assessing what may have been sacrificed, if anything, in the pursuit of humanitarian access – may wish to read a given section of each chapter back-to-back.

This volume is the product of a strenuous research process that began in 2002 when the design of the undertaking was agreed and funding was provided by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United States Institute of Peace and the United Nations University (UNU). Discussions of the entire group of authors in Bangkok in March 2004 helped establish the analytical framework and sort out certain methodological issues. Discussions among a smaller group of authors in Rome on the occasion of a lessons-identified workshop hosted by the WFP in November 2004 helped refine the approach further and identify cross-cutting issues and tentative conclusions.

In the intervening period, during which our manuscript has been reviewed and critiqued by the United Nations University Press, the situations described in a number of the case studies have changed, whether for the better or the worse. Since each of the chapters represents a “snapshot in time” of a particular humanitarian initiative, we have not asked the authors to update their analysis to accommodate late-breaking developments. For the most part, recent events do not change the analysis already offered, although they may highlight the importance of some of the options earlier embraced or discarded.

We see this volume as a contribution to a growing literature on the exercise of humanitarian action. It seeks to inform practitioners in their exercise of the craft of humanitarian diplomacy. It will also interest diplomats, many of whom have no working understanding of humanitarian principles or of the need for protecting the independence of humanitarian action. In addition, it should provide information for the concerned international public, on whose informed support sustained and effective humanitarian action depends.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express special appreciation to the chapter writers. Their experience, enthusiasm and painstaking drafting and redrafting have enriched not only their own chapters but also the volume as a whole.

We also wish to thank the humanitarian agencies for facilitating their involvement and for enabling them to make use of potentially sensitive material. Thanks to individual and institutional engagement, this undertaking has already played a role in the wider lesson-learning effort in which the humanitarian sector is now engaged.

We are grateful to the main institutional underwriters of this project: the United Nations University and the United Nations World Food Programme. The project also benefited from a generous grant from the United States Institute of Peace. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) underwrote the costs of attendance at the two authors' workshops by the contributors from their ranks. We also offer a special word of thanks to Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi for agreeing to write a Foreword to the volume and to Asif Khan of his staff for his role in the process. The perspective of a respected international diplomat on the interface between humanitarian and classic diplomacy is particularly illuminating.

Numerous other individuals have made important contributions. At the United Nations University, Ms Yoshie Sawada provided ongoing administrative support. We would also like to thank all in the UNU Peace and Governance Programme and at the UNU Press for their support. At the WFP, particular thanks are owed to Valerie Guarnieri, who assisted in the project at all of its design and implementation stages. We also wish to thank Nicholas Crawford and Sarah Laughton for their interest in identifying and applying lessons from the study to WFP programmes. We would like to thank the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Tbilisi, Georgia, and Ingrid Kolb-Hindarmanto of Unicef Georgia for their kindness in arranging a research visit for Hazel Smith in June 2004.

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United Nations University Press is the publishing division of the United Nations University.

Cover design by Rebecca S. Neimark, Twenty-Six Letters

Printed in India

ISBN-10: 92-808-1134-7
ISBN-13: 978-92-808-1134-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Humanitarian diplomacy : practitioners and their craft / edited by Larry Minear and Hazel Smith.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 9280811347 (pbk.)

1. Humanitarian assistance. 2. War relief. 3. Diplomacy. I. Minear, Larry, 1936– II. Smith, Hazel, 1954–

HV639.H85 2007

363.34'988—dc22

2006028976

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Humanitarian professionals are on the front lines of today's internal armed conflicts, negotiating access through physical and diplomatic roadblocks to reach imperiled civilians. They frequent the corridors of power, interceding with politicians and diplomats in countries wracked by violence, in capitals of donor governments that underwrite humanitarian work, and at the United Nations Security Council. They provide the media with authoritative and catalytic information about situations of humanitarian extremity.

This volume provides a compendium of experiences presented and analyzed by 14 senior humanitarian practitioners who led humanitarian operations in settings as diverse as the Balkans and Nepal; Somalia and East Timor, and across a time frame from the 1970s in Cambodia and 1980s in Lebanon to more recent engagement in Colombia and Iraq. Their unique experiences and insights from the field are framed by context-setting essays on the theory and practice of humanitarian diplomacy and on the ingredients of the craft as practiced by humanitarian professionals.

This volume provides a unique resource for the practitioner, policy communities and students of humanitarian action, as well as for the concerned international public on whose support humanitarian action in such settings depends.

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Book information:

ISBN 92-808-1134-7;
450pp; US\$37.00

Order from:



**United Nations
University Press**

53-70, Jingumae 5-chome, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150-8925, Japan
Tel +81-3-3499-2811; Fax +81-3-3406-7345
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