

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY RE-IMAGINED

Towards a community-driven and justice-oriented approach to protect civilians



Founder IREMO in the field at Horonder Village as she engages with community members (Credit: Oxfam)

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Executive Summary

Humanitarian diplomacy is gaining renewed prominence within the European Union (EU) and among its Member States, with new policy initiatives and strategies aimed at strengthening the protection of civilians and promoting compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL). However, this momentum risks remaining largely rhetorical unless it is fundamentally reoriented toward tangible protection outcomes, meaningful engagement with conflict-affected communities, and accountability for violations.

Today's conflicts - characterised by rising geopolitical tensions, weakened multilateralism, and persistent impunity - underscore the urgent need to rethink humanitarian diplomacy. Across contexts such as Sudan, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, and Ukraine, civilians continue to face grave violations of IHL with limited consequences for perpetrators. This has eroded trust in international tools and mechanisms, while at the EU level it has raised serious questions about the credibility and consistency of its action and that of its Member States.

This briefing argues that **humanitarian diplomacy must be re-imagined as community-driven and justice-oriented**. Rather than focusing primarily on access negotiations or diplomatic processes, it should prioritise the rights, safety and dignity of people affected by conflict and guarantee their protection. This requires a shift from top-down, state-centric approaches to models that recognise and empower local actors as central agents of diplomacy. Community leaders, civil society organisations, and local networks already play a critical role in negotiating access, mediating tensions, and protecting civilians - often with greater legitimacy and effectiveness than international actors.

A central finding of the consultations underpinning this report is that **local expertise remains systematically undervalued and instrumentalised**. Conflict-affected communities are frequently excluded from decision-making spaces due to structural barriers such as language, visa restrictions, and tokenistic engagement practices. Addressing this gap requires a redistribution of power, resources, and decision-making authority, enabling local actors to shape diplomatic agendas and influence outcomes directly.

At the same time, the report highlights that **accountability must be a core element of humanitarian diplomacy**. Persistent double standards in upholding IHL - where strong commitments in some crises are not matched in others - have weakened its deterrent effect and allowed violations to continue unchecked. Diplomatic statements alone are insufficient; they must be accompanied by concrete measures such as targeted sanctions, arms sales restrictions, and sustained political pressure to prevent and stop violations. Unless there are consequences for violations, humanitarian diplomacy risks reinforcing cycles of impunity rather than halting them.

The briefing also emphasises that **humanitarian diplomacy is inherently political. While it must remain grounded in humanitarian principles, it cannot be isolated from broader peace and political processes**. Its effectiveness depends on the ability of states and institutions to leverage political influence, coordinate across humanitarian and diplomatic channels, and combine quiet engagement with principled public advocacy where necessary.

To enhance impact, the EU and its Member States should pursue a more coherent and integrated approach that aligns humanitarian, political, and economic tools. This includes strengthening coordination across institutions, embedding humanitarian considerations into foreign policy, and ensuring that diplomatic efforts are informed by realities on the ground.

The report concludes with key recommendations to the EU and EU Member States:

- **Shift power to local actors** by funding and recognising community-led diplomacy and protection efforts.

Systematically provide funding to support community-led diplomacy and protection, and mandate EU Delegations to include local actors in shaping humanitarian diplomacy priorities and dialogues.

Community-led efforts should be systematically documented, recognised, and integrated into EU policy discussions, including in Senior Officials Meetings, Council Working Groups, and funding conferences.

- **Facilitate meaningful inclusion** by putting local expertise at the centre and removing structural barriers to participation and enabling direct engagement of affected communities in decision-making forums.

Ensure EU-hosted forums include funded participation of local actors through Schengen visa facilitation, interpretation budgets, and hybrid participation, building on existing but limited inclusion practices in EU humanitarian consultations.

- **Integrate humanitarian diplomacy into broader political strategies**, leveraging both diplomatic and policy tools to influence conflict parties and their behaviours.

Strengthen coordination between ECHO, EEAS, and EU Delegations, and ensure that where quiet diplomacy fails, the EU can escalate through Foreign Affairs Council decisions, coordinated demarches, or restrictive measures, combining humanitarian and political influence.

Existing commitments such as the EU Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Protection of Civilians and the EU Guidelines on Promoting Compliance with IHL provide a strong normative basis, but their impact depends on consistent follow-through and monitoring of results at country level by EU Delegations.

- **Ensure accountability** by consistently applying IHL and respond adequately to violations, including through political, judicial and economic measures.

When humanitarian diplomacy alone does not work, the EU and EU Member States should systematically link diplomatic engagement to consequences for IHL violations, using the political, judicial and economic instruments at their disposal.

Ultimately, restoring the credibility and effectiveness of humanitarian diplomacy requires moving beyond rhetoric toward a model that is inclusive, politically engaged, and firmly centred on justice and protection. Without such transformation, it risks becoming another unmet promise for those living through conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Boosting Humanitarian Diplomacy in Challenging Times

Humanitarian diplomacy is receiving renewed attention. The European Commission's recently released Communication on Humanitarian Aid seeks to strengthen this approach, while EU Member States are increasingly placing it at the centre of their strategies - some even adopting dedicated policies. However, if it is not rooted in affected communities, accountability, and political leverage, it risks becoming little more than a rhetorical exercise.

Today's reality for civilians in conflict makes this risk starkly visible. Civilians are living through a rapidly shifting global landscape marked by increasing multipolarity, a paralysed UN Security Council, and deepening domestic political polarization.

Mass atrocities committed in Sudan and Palestine reached the threshold of genocide, according to their respective UN Commissions of Inquiry, while violations have gone unpunished in DRC and Lebanon. International diplomacy has not lived up to its tasks of civilian protection, conflict mediation and resolution accordingly. National NGOs in Lebanon documented systematic attacks against health workers across 2023-24 which further eroded trust by communities in the role of humanitarian actors to alleviate suffering – despite appropriate UN Security Council resolutions and protection safeguards offered by IHL, getting too close to first responders was perceived as risky. Communities in Ethiopia still contended with the delays in accountability and transitional justice for violations that occurred during the conflict in Tigray, which a cessation of hostilities brought to an end. Civilian infrastructure in Ukraine – ranging from housing blocks to power plants, was still deliberately or indiscriminately targeted in the conduct of hostilities.

As geopolitical tensions intensify and domestic pressure within EU Member States rise, consensus on protection of civilians becomes harder to reach. In the European Union in particular, it has become a challenge to articulate the value of global engagement and uphold principled humanitarian action in an environment that is, increasingly, inward-looking and prioritises security and defence at the expense of international solidarity, human rights and sustainable solutions to conflicts and displacement.

While the EU and its Member States formally uphold their commitment to a rules-based international order grounded in multilateralism, several voices at the EU and EU Member States have stated that this order has been tested to its limits, with a growing consensus that the post-WWII institutions are increasingly unable to respond effectively to contemporary geopolitical and systemic challenges.¹ In this landscape marked by a lack of political courage, only a small group of EU Member States is increasingly stepping up to ensure that IHL remains central to EU policy. Spain, for instance, has taken a leading

¹ Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2026 (European Commission, 9 March 2026)
<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_576>

role in promoting international law and accountability, including in the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, and has sought to encourage other Member States to align with this approach.

The EU Commissioner for Crisis management Lahbib, too, stressed that International Humanitarian Law (IHL) must remain central to the EU's global engagement.² Under her leadership, the European Commission has launched work on a policy initiative aimed at strengthening the EU's humanitarian diplomacy on IHL, and on improving the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers in armed conflicts. Equally, a number of EU Member States have recently adopted or updated their own humanitarian diplomacy strategies.

Finally, targeted multilateral efforts are gaining traction, such as the Political Declaration on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and the establishment of new state-led initiatives to defend international (humanitarian) law, including the ICRC's Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to IHL, and the Hague Group in response to the genocide in Palestine are helping to reaffirm core principles of humanity and civilian protection. The EU and its Member States have backed many of these efforts – from Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Protection to the EU Guidelines on Promoting Compliance with IHL and the annual CO-JUR report.

This renewed attention reflects an understanding that, far from being obsolete, international law is essential for navigating today's volatile conflicts and their impact on civilians. Taken together, these developments present a critical opportunity and provide EU leaders with the chance to scale up collective efforts to protect humanitarian space and safeguarding civilians.

But how do the intentions outlined above truly translate into today's realities on the ground? Or do persistent double standards continue to shape how the EU and its Member States apply international humanitarian law in practice?

To what extent does this selective approach undermine the EU's credibility, and what would it take for the EU to move towards a more community-driven and justice-oriented model of humanitarian diplomacy?

To explore these questions, Oxfam brought together policymakers, humanitarian practitioners from conflict-affected countries and INGO advocates to find answers to these questions in a series of roundtables that took place behind closed doors between July 2025 and January 2026. This outcome document summarises the proceedings and adds a specific set of policy ideas that the organisation has developed. It is expected that policymakers and participants to the sessions will further reflect upon these policy messages and, ideally, carry some of these recommendations into their diplomatic practices.

As a humanitarian, development and campaigning organisation, Oxfam sees humanitarian diplomacy not only as access negotiation, but as a tool to protect civilians, uphold IHL, challenge impunity, and shift power towards affected communities and national actors. Ultimately, IHL and protection standards do not lack relevance; it is their application that is lacking. The challenge is not to prove their value, but to ensure that

² Lora Borisova (@borissovalora), 'A forceful reminder by @hadjalahbib ...' (X, 14 March 2026) <<https://x.com/borissovalora/status/2032834806015217836>>

states apply them consistently and attach consequences to violations. And those are political choices.

Beyond Rhetoric: Embedding Local Expertise in Diplomatic Agendas

"We are alive, but we are not okay. Humanitarian diplomacy did not evacuate me, I evacuated myself." The participant described Gaza as a collective punishment experiment, tolerated by the same international system that claims to protect civilians. "If humanitarian diplomacy had worked, the siege would have ended long ago. People in Gaza are not asking for charity. They are asking for eggs, milk, and the right to live. They are asking to be seen." The speaker called for one simple act: keep contact. "Even a virtual call is a form of hope. Enough reports. We need action."

While the interest in humanitarian diplomacy strategies grows in the EU and EU member states, people living through conflict feel increasingly abandoned by the very systems meant to protect them amid rising number of violations and ongoing impunity. Continued engagement by humanitarian actors, such as keeping contact - as suggested by the speaker - is the bare minimum to safeguard humanity. Yet, it is not enough: it must be accompanied by measures that prioritise rights and agency of conflict-affected communities, many of whom view silence, inaction, diplomatic cover, and continued arms transfers in the face of serious violations not as neutrality, but as forms of complicity. Often, they do not see the impact of promoting International Humanitarian Law (IHL) if the political will to uphold it is absent. They do not feel protected by those standards: such exposure to harm in turn enables further violations and atrocities by warring parties.

The first step for States seeking to implement humanitarian diplomacy strategies would be to establish trust with communities affected by conflict. This requires a meaningful dialogue, which is grounded in the local expertise, lived experiences, and community-led perspectives, and through which the EU and its Member States can build credibility and effectiveness into their role as broker and problem-solver for humanitarian issues. The limited inclusion of local voices and expertise in shaping humanitarian diplomacy is a gap that needs to be filled as a matter of urgency.

Aiming to bridge the divide between legal-political discussions and the realities of conflict-affected contexts, Oxfam therefore organised a series of Humanitarian Diplomacy Working Sessions. The sessions centred the expertise of national actors while providing policy options aimed at strengthening the EU's capacity to respond to today's most pressing humanitarian challenges. In all sessions the need for more inclusive, practical, and context-driven discussions on International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian diplomacy was stressed. Three main messages emerged:

1. **Humanitarian diplomacy must start with those affected by conflict themselves.** This means moving beyond symbolic gestures and committing to real power sharing with communities and other local actors, acknowledging the complexity of today's crises, and addressing the colonial legacies that still shape humanitarian decision-making.

2. **Accountability.** States bear primary responsibility under international humanitarian law to investigate and prosecute violations, but persistent impunity continues to fuel ongoing violence and obstruct justice for affected communities. Humanitarian diplomacy should become more justice oriented: protecting rights, dignity and power of people affected by conflict. At the same time, international humanitarian organisations also have responsibilities to use their voice, evidence and influence to help protect communities, staff and partners.
3. **Humanitarian diplomacy cannot be separated from broader peace and political processes.** Its effectiveness depends on acknowledging that it is inherently political given its engagement with power, influence, and decision-making, while ensuring it remains strictly guided by humanitarian principles and is not instrumentalised for partisan, military, or security purposes.

This briefing note captures these insights with the aim of shaping an effective humanitarian diplomacy approach.

As the sessions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule, all quotations in this paper are not attributed.

1. Effective diplomacy starts with listening

“Events like Protection of Civilians (PoC) Week are designed and designated for internationals only. You don’t see a lot of passion. The problems are not theirs. For them, it’s the same issues and the same conversations over and over again. I speak about things I see and live. I don’t need someone to prep me or Google search for me. I share what I feel, think, and experience. There’s a lot at stake for me, and that’s why I give it my all.”

Many decision-making spaces, donor conferences and diplomatic high-level discussions on humanitarian diplomacy are still located far from affected communities, removed from the everyday negotiations that actually determine whether aid reaches people. Meanwhile those negotiations are already happening. Local civil society groups, community leaders, mutual aid networks, and municipal actors routinely broker access where international organisations cannot. They mediate with armed actors, reopen roads, resolve community tensions, and navigate complex power dynamics that outsiders rarely grasp. These practices should be seen as a form of humanitarian diplomacy at community level, while international actors continue debating principles from afar.

In Nyabiondo, DRC, for instance, thirty-seven women were arbitrarily detained by an armed group solely because they were married to members of another group. They were held unlawfully and in breach of due process, in inhumane and degrading conditions, and exposed to high risks of sexual and psychological violence. The Forum des Femmes de Nyabiondo mobilised immediately. They challenged the legality of the arrests, demanded engagement with the armed group’s commander, and sustained pressure until all thirty-seven women were released. This was humanitarian diplomacy - led by local women, rooted in legitimacy, relationships, and courage - and it prevented serious violations.

In the discussion on access diplomacy, the importance to reframe access was made very clear. ***“Access was never just about permissions or physical corridors. It rested on relationships built over years. Access exists long before humanitarian organisations***

arrive and continues long after they leave.” In Sudan, community-run emergency response rooms have provided large scale assistance where the formal system cannot reach. Across the Sahel and eastern DRC, local organisations negotiate passage and mediate access through relationships built across generations. Indeed, access is not merely negotiated at checkpoints or in capitals; it is produced through long-term relationships, trust, legitimacy and proximity.³ Community-led solutions often arise from social and cultural realities that external actors can overlook. Diplomacy that focuses primarily on negotiating permissions and logistics risks missing the deeper political and social dynamics that shape humanitarian space.

Meanwhile, the current geopolitical climate has deepened distrust toward international actors, significantly constraining their ability to exert influence. This dynamic became particularly evident in the aftermath of the escalation of hostilities in Gaza, reflecting a broader erosion of confidence in international systems and institutions. In Yemen, for example, international efforts alone have struggled to secure meaningful progress in negotiating the release of NGO workers. In contrast, local actors - including tribal leaders and community mediators - often appear better positioned to shape outcomes and unlock access.

“Diplomatic initiatives assume that professionalism requires distance and that neutrality means detachment.⁴ Instead, what is happening on the ground shows that legitimacy often comes from proximity.”

Humanitarian diplomacy cannot rely on a one size fits all model: what succeeds in one context may fail in another. **“It all starts with listening and giving communities agency over needs assessments: what do people affected by conflict actually need?”**

To genuinely understand the complexity of conflict-affected environments, diplomatic efforts must place communities and national civil society at their core. Despite being both the first and last responders in crises, however, national experts and aid workers in conflict-affected settings are still largely sidelined from strategic decision making, including from diplomatic spaces where their voices could drive real change.

“We should be at the centre of humanitarian diplomacy. We face the direct consequences of violence and are deeply rooted in the communities we serve, giving them insights and access that international actors simply cannot match.”

Most large-scale donor events, humanitarian conferences and diplomatic fora still operate only in English, without interpretation into other languages. This alone excludes many women’s rights organisations and community leaders. Visa barriers to Geneva, Brussels and New York remain a major obstacle despite those locations hosting key humanitarian meetings.

Aside from practical reasons, however, the exclusion of local actors from decision making fora, occurs because their lived realities challenge the narratives and priorities the international community prefers to hear.

³ Oxfam, “Reclaiming Humanitarian Access. The right to reach and be reached.”, April 2026.

⁴ Local actors often reject the notion of neutrality as detachment. For them, neutrality as a deterrent from seeking justice legitimizes inequality. **“Access is political by nature, because it determines who is allowed to act, who decides and whose reality counts,”** emphasizes a Nigerian actor in recent research by Oxfam, titled “Reclaiming Humanitarian Access”, April 2026.

“These higher platforms are monopolized by the UN and INGOs. It was just me and someone from South Sudan. Even when local actors are present, their participation is often tokenistic and controlled. Most international organizations avoid advocacy around Ethiopia. And those based in New York or Geneva are detached from the ground. I saw it during PoC Week – it was either risk aversion or detachment.”

Too often, national actors are expected to speak with one voice for all civil society, they are often pressured to tailor their contributions to pre-set talking points, limiting the diversity and richness of their perspectives:

“Why - when western civil society is not unified - do we expect unity from Sudanese, Yemeni, or Palestinian partners? We, local actors, are treated like tools, not leaders.”

True inclusion means that people can articulate their needs as they understand and experience them. They are believed. Their words are not translated into institutional jargon before reaching decision-makers. They should not just be asked to provide testimonies or legitimacy to what States want to hear. Instead, they must be given decision-making power, funding and ownership over the resulting policy.

The specific lens or framing that is imposed on national humanitarian workers' perspectives - or local communities- carries additional burden for women and girls, whose exclusion is justified on the perceived need to “protect them from risk”. This is a patronizing argument. It preserves international power while women in conflict areas continue to take risks every day. Women in Yemen, Afghanistan, and many other places, have been systematically excluded from decision-making and coordination platforms, weakening humanitarian responses in a context where their participation is indispensable. Risk must be managed with women's organisations, not used to manage them out of decision-making spaces.

Meanwhile it is crucial to recognise that national representatives are more than merely “a voice.” Too often, “real expertise” is assumed to reside in multilateral hubs such as Geneva, Brussels, or New York, while those affected by conflict are reduced to testimonies or symbolic voices. Yet they, too, possess deep, context-specific expertise and should be recognised accordingly. As one participant put it plainly: ***“I no longer want to be introduced as ‘the Afghan woman’ bringing yet another story. I want to be presented as an expert in my field, just like the other experts around the table.”***

Diplomatic efforts remain largely driven from the top down, with strategies and priorities imposed externally rather than built with the people who understand the crisis from within. Moving beyond symbolic inclusion requires a shift toward meaningful power sharing and decision making.

The humanitarian system must change its ways of working and break the usual cycle of consultation at the beginning, followed by a policy or project that no longer resembles what communities asked for. The structural inequalities embedded in the humanitarian system stress the need for decolonising humanitarian diplomacy.

Good practices:

- *The Humanitarian System Transformation through Local Humanitarian Leadership (HST-LHL) programme, implemented in partnership with the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrates how insights and learning from local and national actors can be fed into policy discussions and decision-making spaces in the Netherlands and beyond.*

- In 2025, ECHO consulted communities and Yemeni civil society in order to better integrate the concerns of a variety of people in Yemen into higher level discussions, such as the Yemen Seniors Officials Meeting in May 2025.

2. Accountability: Moving Beyond Statements and Double Standards

“Humanitarian diplomacy is diplomacy in the service of saving lives.”

The EU’s credibility on IHL has been weakened by its double standards as strong commitments to accountability and civilian protection in some crises are not matched by comparable action in others. Selective concern or inadequate actions to demand compliance have allowed serious violations to continue with little or no repercussions for those who flout the rules.

Elective enforcement weakens the protective function of international law for everyone. When allies or partners are given a free pass for serious IHL violations, slowly but surely, the deterrent value of IHL is eroded across contexts. Equally, statements of concerns lose their (already limited) strength whenever they are not accompanied by tangible actions such as diplomatic demarches, arms embargoes and other appropriate measures that raise the costs for those behaviours. Several examples attest to that, but a recent statement by EU Foreign Policy Chief Kallas after Lebanon was hit by Israeli attacks is a case in point as she urged Israel to halt its attacks in Lebanon as “its right to defend itself does not justify inflicting such massive destruction”.⁵ Yet a call for an end will never bear the same level of diplomatic pressure as suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which includes compliance with International Human Rights Law in its Art.2 as a criteria.

Participants in the working sessions emphasized the need to move decisively beyond declarations and towards measurable, pragmatic support for IHL and for what should be the core objective of humanitarian diplomacy: protecting civilians.

In all sessions, participants repeatedly referred to Israel's atrocities in Gaza, as an example of how the repeated failure to attach consequences to serious violations can enable further atrocities. Each time observers believed they had witnessed the most harrowing scenario, a more severe one followed: from the first electricity blackout because of a siege and the first attacks on civilian infrastructure, the collapse of essential services, restrictions on humanitarian access, to the militarisation of aid and starvation as a method of warfare, culminating in famine as evidence that statements of concern have not been matched by effective action. Yet disregard to provisional measures by the International Court of Justice (2024), weak responses by Third States with power to influence parties to the conflict and the ongoing impunity allowed these atrocities to proceed unchecked.

As one participant asked: ***“Nobody stops Israel, even though the ICC issued arrest orders. Does the law apply to everyone, or do EU’s allies deserve impunity? How does diplomacy***

⁵ Nicholas Vinocur, ‘EU’s Kallas urges “heavy-handed” Israel to end strikes in Lebanon’ (POLITICO, 9 April 2026) <<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-kallas-urges-israel-end-strikes-lebanon/>>

address these obsolete standards? Where do we go if these principles are being challenged?"

It should be borne in mind that concerns about accountability extended far beyond Gaza and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In Yemen, humanitarian workers face daily restrictions, detentions, intimidation, and pervasive threats that endanger both their safety and the quality of aid they can deliver. In Lebanon, attacks on humanitarian personnel have highlighted a widening accountability gap - further aggravated by the country's lack of ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Across contexts, impunity remains a key driver of continued violence, while meaningful accountability seems out of reach. Participants underlined that justice and accountability for war crimes and other violations are essential to restoring credibility in humanitarian diplomacy and securing compliance with IHL. It so follows that without a deterrent to curb their harmful behaviours, warring parties feel legitimised and emboldened in their attacks against civilians.

The discussion also highlighted that, when high level diplomatic efforts successfully result in agreements, they either fail to prioritize IHL and protection, but also often fail to create real, lasting change on the ground.

"Too often, diplomats step back once an agreement is signed, without setting up any system to check whether the promises are actually being followed."

As a result, the parties to a conflict feel little pressure to respect their commitments or their IHL obligations - especially when it comes to protecting civilians and allowing humanitarian access. The Pretoria Agreement which put an end to hostilities in Northern Ethiopia in 2022 was mentioned as a clear example: important commitments were made by all warring parties under international supervision, but its monitoring was found wanting and lagged behind. The Global Protection Cluster reported that the restoration of basic services was inconsistent, and despite the halt in active fighting, insecurity and access dynamics in contested areas continued with incidents of looting, arbitrary detention and harassment.⁶

Another key concern in this regard is the **relationship between access and justice**. Delivering assistance to an area does not guarantee that all those in need are reached. Humanitarian responses can unintentionally reproduce existing inequalities: women may face barriers to accessing distributions; minority groups may be excluded from aid systems; and certain communities may be considered politically inconvenient or too difficult to reach. Access must therefore account for who is included and who is left behind. ***"Access cannot be reduced to logistics alone; it is inseparable from protection, justice, accountability, and shifting power toward affected communities."***

Accountability was also raised regarding the responsibilities of international humanitarian organisations themselves. Attacks on aid workers are increasing⁷,

⁶ Global Protection Cluster, *Ethiopia Protection Analysis Update: The Critical Need for Protection amongst Armed Conflict and Climate Shocks* (August 2025)

<https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/ethiopia_protection_analysis_update_august_2025_final.pdf>

⁷ Humanitarian Outcomes, *Aid Worker Security Database: Figures at a Glance 2025* (August 2025) <https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/HO_AWS-Figures_0825_E.pdf>

compounded by disinformation and smear campaigns that further endanger staff, erode public trust and undermine the legitimacy of humanitarian action. The psychological toll on staff and their families, and particularly on women, has become impossible to ignore, underscoring the need for stronger mental health support and more robust duty-of-care systems.

Furthermore, survivors count on international organisations to support them in the way to justice. As one legal expert from an international NGO put it: **“Each legal filing, each survivor statement, is a political act that reasserts the value of human life and the rule of law. Sometimes provisional measures to protect humanitarian access might not be enforceable, but it shows survivors that someone is watching.”** Another participant reframed accountability unequivocally as a political act, concluding: **“If there’s one constituency that will keep us honest, it’s the survivors.”**

Good practices:

- *West Bank Protection Consortium through which EU Member States invest in infrastructure for communities under Israel's illegal occupation and at risk of forcible transfer in the West Bank as well as step up their political statements in case of demolition of EU / EU Member State funded infrastructure.*
- *Measures taken by Belgium, Ireland, Slovenia and Spain, including on banning trade with Israeli settlements, closing the airspace for Israeli military, etc.*
- *Collective efforts by the international community to stop the blockage of the port of Hudaydah in Yemen in 2022, as well as negotiations to extend the temporary ceasefire around that same time.*

3. Humanitarian Diplomacy in a Political Reality

While there is not one overall accepted definition, it is broadly understood that humanitarian diplomacy encompasses **the private or public negotiation, persuasion, and relationship-building efforts undertaken by humanitarian representatives to secure access to people in need, protect civilians, uphold international humanitarian and human rights law, and ultimately reduce human suffering during crises.** While these activities are grounded in humanitarian principles, they cannot be isolated from broader peace and political processes.

There is increasing concern, however, that the term “humanitarian diplomacy” risks turning into a buzzword without an agreed definition. This underscores the need to rethink and clearly redefine what it entails and what it does not. Its limits must also be recognized: humanitarian diplomacy cannot resolve the root causes of conflicts or crises. Yet it plays a critical role in mitigating suffering, enabling humanitarian access, opening operational space, and strengthening civilian protection. Linking humanitarian diplomacy to targeted peacebuilding efforts in these contexts was indicated by several participants as key action to bring about change at the national and local level.

To be both effective and principled, humanitarian diplomacy demands political will and a willingness to engage politically while staying anchored in humanitarian values. It must be integrated more deliberately into wider peace and political processes, ensuring humanitarian considerations inform high-level political decisions. **Effective humanitarian diplomacy starts with an admission of its inherently political nature, even as it remains principled and impartial it still forms part of the foreign policy toolkit that States and other stakeholders resort to.** In some cases, this will happen through regional groups or ad hoc coalitions with an influence on parties to the conflict. In other settings, stronger multilateral coordination is essential, with actors such as the European Union and its member states encouraged to leverage political influence beyond strictly humanitarian channels.

Discretion is still an important part of humanitarian work, but it is not enough on its own. Humanitarian actors also need **clear, principled public advocacy** so their concerns and expertise reach the appropriate decision-makers at political level with an ability to halt violations and harmful behaviours. Humanitarian organisations should be able to provide evidence-based advocacy, while also referring to the need to tackle the root causes of the ongoing suffering of communities affected by conflict. Ongoing NGO campaigns calling for a halt in trade, including services and investments, with Israeli settlements, or for arms embargoes to warring parties, for instance the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Israel, whenever these arms are used to violate IHL, in breach of the Arms Trade Treaty, benefit from the participation of humanitarian organisations.

At the same time, **humanitarian diplomacy goes beyond advocacy**: it provides a space for principled engagement that helps both humanitarian and political actors operate in complex and often unstable environments.

The EU and its Member States are also caught in the same dilemma. They question whether working towards strong Council Conclusions which might close communication channels with parties to the conflict or seeking diplomatic entry points behind closed doors to influence them.

In one session, an EU Member State official described the **careful balance between public messaging and quiet diplomacy**, for example when pushing back against new NGO registration rules that would have required aid organizations to hand over sensitive data, such as staff lists.

During discussions on how humanitarian and political work interact, several dilemmas emerged:

➤ **Sovereignty vs. Solidarity**

How can aid be delivered without appearing to interfere in a country's sovereignty, which can make diplomatic work more difficult? Working with military or authoritarian authorities may be necessary to reach people in need, yet it is often avoided because it can be seen as legitimizing those actors. Donors often feel the need to stay engaged to avoid abandoning affected communities. But when doing so, how can the EU and its Member States avoid taking on responsibilities that should be the remit of the governments of conflict-affected countries?

➤ **Fewer words of concerns and more targeted sanctions?**

How can the traditional tools for enforcing international humanitarian and human rights law still be used effectively? Some participants highlighted the importance of careful communication: finding shared ground rather than using accusatory language. At the same time, others stressed that concrete action is needed, especially given the risk of EU inconsistency or accusations of double standards.

Stronger and more systematic coordination between the EU's humanitarian and diplomatic arms is essential to advancing principled and effective humanitarian diplomacy. This requires clearly defined roles and responsibilities across country, regional, and headquarters levels; stronger linkages between humanitarian, policy, geographic, and diplomatic units; and dependable communication channels that ensure developments on the ground meaningfully shape high level engagement.

Equally important is more coherent coordination between the EU and its Member States - across and between their respective humanitarian and diplomatic actors - to enable unified, mutually reinforcing diplomatic action. As one diplomat noted, ***"It is crucial for humanitarian and diplomatic representatives to join forces. Because if quiet humanitarian diplomacy for access or protection does not lead to the wished impact, we should be able to open the political toolbox to add pressure to the parties in conflict to cease IHL violations."***

Good practices:

- *The humanitarian department of the Belgian Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) makes sure to include focal points of the political sections of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) when meeting with representatives from organisations active in humanitarian contexts. They also actively seek ongoing synergy between other departments at the DGD / MFA.*
- *The set up of a Humanitarian Diplomacy Platform for the DRC in the margins of the EHF 2025. This provides a space for both political and humanitarian representatives of the EU (EUSR, EEAS, ECHO) and EU Member States to exchange regularly with NGOs on the humanitarian situation in the DRC.*

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This briefing shows that while the European Union and its Member States are renewing their focus on humanitarian diplomacy, its effectiveness ultimately depends on whether it increases the protection of civilians. To do so, it must be grounded in the lived realities, agency, and expertise of conflict-affected communities. A community-driven and justice-oriented approach is not an aspiration. It is a prerequisite for restoring credibility, relevance, and impact.

At its core, this requires a redistribution of power—shifting from top-down, externally driven diplomatic processes towards meaningful partnerships with actors affected by conflict who already practice humanitarian diplomacy daily through negotiation, mediation, and protection work.

It also demands that accountability be placed at the centre of all efforts. Without consistent political will to uphold international humanitarian law and attach consequences to violations, humanitarian diplomacy risks doing harm and reinforcing the very patterns of impunity it seeks to address. The EU and its Member States therefore have a clear task before them: they should align their diplomatic, political, and economic tools in a coherent and principled manner, ensuring that commitments and obligations to civilian protection are applied consistently across the board and without double standards.

Finally, humanitarian diplomacy must be fully integrated into broader political and peace processes, acknowledging its inherently political nature while remaining firmly grounded in humanitarian principles. This means leveraging influence when and where it matters, strengthening coordination across institutional levels, and embracing both quiet engagement and public advocacy as needed.

Only through inclusive participation, supporting community-led initiatives and linking diplomacy to accountability and justice, does the EU have the chance to re-shape humanitarian diplomacy into a tool that is fit for purpose, one that replaces crisis management with an active contribution to protecting lives, upholding dignity and rebuilding trust in international norms. Failing that, humanitarian diplomacy will be yet another broken promise for conflict-affected communities, keeping them away from the safety, dignity and justice they are entitled to.

THE EU AND EU MEMBER STATES MUST:

BRIDGE THE GAP FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL:

- **Redistribute resources, authority, and agency to local actors who best understand the impact of conflict** and the issues that humanitarian diplomacy aims to solve. Allocate flexible funding mechanisms that prioritise support to community-led advocacy initiatives.
- **Explicitly recognise, support, and fund community-led protection efforts**, including women-led self-organisation, negotiation, mediation, and engagement with armed actors, as legitimate forms of humanitarian diplomacy and protection. Women lead impactful diplomatic efforts, often outside formal institutions, and these contributions should be **systematically documented, recognised, and integrated into EU policy discussions, including in Senior Officials Meetings, Council Working Groups, and funding conferences.**
- Acknowledge and commit to the diversity and full breadth of local civil society. This means **looking beyond traditional, centralised partners and treating a wide spectrum of local actors as legitimate voices and equal partners.** To make this happen, they must **systematically provide interpretation services, facilitate visa access, and remove other barriers to participation in decision-making platforms.** Community representatives should be enabled to directly shape decisions from their respective contexts, rather than being limited to consultative roles.
- **Embrace voices that favour debate**, including whenever they might challenge or question policy measures and/or the status quo that diplomats and practitioners may be supporting. The resulting conversations should be viewed as essential to shaping more just, effective, and accountable humanitarian action.

ADAPT THEIR WAYS OF WORKING FOR IMPACTFUL DIPLOMACY:

- **Strengthen the link between regional diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy discussions in Brussels and EU MS capitals.** To begin with, EU and Member State country and regional representations must play a crucial role in supporting community-led humanitarian diplomacy initiatives and ensure that they widely consult and engage with national humanitarian actors and civil society groups about the most pressing humanitarian concerns to be solved (e.g. access, attacks against aid workers, the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure). These efforts should be fully reflected in decision-making: **regional and country representatives of the EU and EU Member States should be systematically included in humanitarian diplomacy discussions at EU and capital level.**
- Integrate humanitarian diplomacy into broader peace and political tracks, including via regular exchanges between humanitarian and political representatives of the EU and EU Member States. **Diplomatic outreach should address humanitarian concerns in a principled way while not stepping back from using political leverage in case of ongoing IHL violations.**
- **Better align their roles across the various Council Working Groups** to ensure that political measures can be mobilised when necessary to ensure that parties to conflict comply with their obligations under international law. In addition to deploying its existing humanitarian tools, they should **make full use of its political and economic leverage, including through trade agreements, arms embargoes, political demarches, targeted sanctions.**
- **Invest in increased knowledge of IHL and humanitarian principles, by providing targeted training for diplomats,** both in capitals and across regional/country delegations in order to better prevent and respond to reports of IHL violations, with a view to protecting the safety and dignity of civilians in conflict.
- Fully **implement the EU Foreign Affairs Conclusions on Protection,** by preventing and halting cycles of violence through diplomacy, negotiation for protection, early warning systems and protection by presence.

PURSUE ACCOUNTABILITY:

- **Use their collective influence to support effective humanitarian diplomacy and accountability** for war crimes, crimes against humanity and atrocities. **When agreement amongst the 27 EU Member States cannot be reached to support accountability measures, smaller groups of like-minded Member States should take the lead** and use their leverage to push for respect for international humanitarian law.
- **Refrain from supporting serious violations of IHL in a given conflict, as it will undermine protection for civilians in other conflict and put lives at risk.** Member States must be principled, consistent and coherent in promoting compliance with existing norms regulating conduct of hostilities and draw attention to the serious implication that any breach entails. To this extent - in compliance with the Arms Trade Treaty - ensure that art. 6 is upheld and that signatories **stop arms transfers and military aid that exacerbates violence and is potentially used for war crimes.**
- **Support existing mechanisms and standards to track, monitor and stop direct attacks against civilians,** including aid workers (UN SC Res 2730) and the use of starvation as a weapon of war (UN SC Res 2417). These norms, if adequately adhered to, can bring about clear, tangible impact for communities living in conflict and put an end to violations while protecting the safety, dignity and rights of those at risk.

Methodology

Oxfam organised five exchanges between July 2025 and January 2026. All were held in a hybrid format to enable inclusive participation, particularly from those based outside Brussels. The exchanges were under strict Chatham House rules to encourage open and candid dialogue.

The topics of the sessions were IHL centred and had a specific focus on

- Navigating Diplomatic Complexity and the Role of Local Actors in Humanitarian Diplomacy;
- Diplomacy for the Safety of National Aid Workers;
- Ensuring protection of Women and Girls in Conflict;
- Reframing Access Diplomacy through Local Leadership;
- Building a Stronger Humanitarian Diplomacy Response to Attacks on Water;

More than 50 EU and Member State representatives – together with international and local IHL and protection experts – took part in the sessions.

The real driving force, however, came from actors in conflict-affected areas, whose lived experience in delivering frontline advocacy and humanitarian responses cut straight to the heart of both the obstacles and the solutions that humanitarian diplomacy contends with at various levels, from the communities to political stakeholders.

About Oxfam

Oxfam is a global movement of people who are fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. We are working across regions in more than 70 countries, with thousands of partners, and allies, supporting communities to build better lives for themselves, grow resilience and protect lives and livelihoods also in times of crisis. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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