

Session 4 – Humanitarian Diplomacy Leadership and New Actors

Opening statement by Panos Moutziz, Executive Director, Global Executive Leadership Initiative – GELI

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers at DIHAD for extending this invitation and for orchestrating this exceptional event. My sincere congratulations for once again making Dubai the epicenter of humanitarian action, bringing together thousands of practitioners, hundreds of organizations, the private sector, and governments all under one roof. This is of tremendous value to all of us.

The magnitude of organizations in attendance and the caliber of presentations and discussions here are truly impressive. Equally significant is the diversity of participants, with a notable representation from this region and beyond. Thank you to the city of Dubai for hosting us.

Upon arrival in Dubai, one is immediately struck by the spirit of innovation, design, technology, and the incredible dynamism propelling us into the future. These are the very traits urgently needed in the humanitarian sector. We live in a world that is changing fast, yet there is a sense the humanitarian sector is unable to adapt at the same speed to this changing world. Visiting Dubai is undeniably inspiring in its ability to change and adapt.

I commend the decision to dedicate the entire three days of this DIHAD conference to humanitarian diplomacy. This session has a specific focus on Humanitarian Diplomacy and New Actors. Please allow me to share some reflections before presenting the distinguished panel members and asking for their thoughts. We will also have time after that to hear your questions and reflections.

Throughout my 35-year career as a humanitarian practitioner, I have witnessed remarkable transformations in humanitarian operations. As humanitarians, we have become better organized, better coordinated, faster at delivering aid and have achieved better results.

However, at the same time, the needs today surpass any previous era, with multiple crises from Gaza to Sudan to Ukraine, to Myanmar just to name a few. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a world where our collective efforts often fall short of protecting, assisting, and preventing crisis and famine. This reality is both disheartening and profoundly frustrating.

At the same time, the disparity between needs and available funds is perhaps at the highest we have ever seen. Many people including children go to sleep every night feeling hungry, some at the stage of famine, unprotected and having their most basic needs unmet. This underscores the critical importance of doubling our efforts in humanitarian diplomacy, to be able to advocate for their needs and negotiate the best possible results.

Five years ago, I was tasked with establishing the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI), recognizing the pivotal role of leadership in the humanitarian and development sectors. Today, I have the privilege of leading this organization with a sole focus on investing in leadership development for leaders across the sector who are working in humanitarian and development operations around the world. When establishing GELI, we sought input from hundreds of leaders and continue to do so regularly in order to design leadership programs that match their needs. The unanimous feedback we received from leaders in our sector, was in identifying humanitarian diplomacy as the number one top skill in need of strengthening. Some of them told us they felt desperate, having tried everything possible to achieve results but without much progress.

Humanitarian diplomacy encompasses negotiation skills for senior leaders as well as influencing skills. Negotiations is an art and a vital tool in our work to enhance access and better delivery of assistance and protection. We negotiate on behalf of those we serve with governments, non-state actors, donors, and amongst ourselves. We constantly try to find ways to better advocate, influence, win the hearts and minds of governments, donors for people rights. Negotiation and advocacy are constant endeavors in our work.

The most frequent question we ask ourselves is what is the best strategy to achieve our objectives? Humanitarian diplomacy needs to be tailor made in each context making use of opportunities, partners and mobilizing everybody possible. It has to be culturally appropriate and fit to the context.

In a world where social media's influence is pervasive, the opportunities it presents are immense. At the same time, the role of discreet diplomacy and influencing leaders to make ethical decisions is equally critical. To date, GELI's courses on negotiations and influencing skills remain the most popular due to the pressing need to navigate increasingly challenging circumstances in complex operations.

But what is the role of humanitarian diplomacy? Humanitarian diplomacy aims to achieve humanitarian objectives through diplomatic channels, placing the people we assist at the forefront. It endeavors to protect human life and dignity through high-level engagement aimed at influencing parties to armed conflicts and their sponsors.

Humanitarian diplomacy entails influencing armed conflict parties and others, including states, non-state actors, and civil society members. As we saw during the COVID pandemic, humanitarian diplomacy can cover every aspect of daily life. It is

motivated solely by humanitarian concerns, principles and operates through a network of relationships, both formal and informal, bilaterally and multilaterally.

While traditional actors have long been involved in humanitarian diplomacy, emerging new actors are gaining recognition for their contributions.

But what are the challenges of humanitarian diplomacy today?

Unfortunately, one characteristic of humanitarian actors is a lack of unity. The humanitarian system inadvertently fosters competition rather than collaboration. This absence of well routed collaborative leadership results in funding and space competition, compelling humanitarian actors to operate independently to preserve their mandate and space.

Simultaneously, the sector has become increasingly risk-averse. As Jan Egeland said yesterday, we must amplify our advocacy for people in need. We must exhibit more bold leadership, courageous leadership, be the voice for the voiceless, and demand protection for millions.

It is clear, the enormity of today's humanitarian tasks cannot be tackled by any one entity alone. Silos must be dismantled, fostering collaborative leadership across organizations. We must do better at engaging current partners and at the same time reach out to engage with new actors, soliciting their support.

Who are these emerging “new” actors in humanitarian diplomacy?

Allow me to list a few that we could certainly engage more.

Local and grassroots organizations possess invaluable local insights, yet they are often sidelined in decision-making and not involved sufficiently. The World Humanitarian Summit recognised localisation as a critical area for growth, yet progress has been slow.

Cultural and religious leaders shape community attitudes and can have a significant influence.

Private sector partnerships offer resources and logistics. Do we partner with them enough? Our worlds are often far apart yet we share the same planet and concerns.

Youth and women organizations bring fresh perspectives and energy. How often do we engage with them in humanitarian diplomacy?

Technology companies offer tools for crisis communication and coordination. Do we use them enough?

Social media influencers, sports people and celebrities bring significant influence for advocacy. Do we run enough campaigns with them to support protection for people in need?

Philanthropic foundations play a pivotal role in funding innovative approaches.

Academic institutions offer expertise and analysis from a different perspective often with a critical evidence-based critical eye, evaluating our work and offering an open space for self-reflection. Do we do this enough?

Digital information analysis in humanitarian operations, leveraging technology for real-time data analysis is vital. Do we use this tool enough?

These diverse actors enrich humanitarian diplomacy, enhancing our responses to crises. The question you heard me asking several times is: do we engage with new actors sufficiently?

Looking at today's protracted crisis and major emergencies we ask ourselves; Is humanitarian diplomacy failing? Why do we see these crises going on for years and years without being able to stop them and bring a change?

Humanitarian diplomacy today faces formidable challenges, but it would be an oversimplification to declare it universally failing. Humanitarian diplomacy remains indispensable in responding to crises, upholding human rights, and alleviating suffering. However, it requires concerted efforts more than ever before, including engagement with new actors to fortify its efficacy, deepen collaboration, and uphold humanitarian principles.

The crux of the matter is that humanitarian crises demand political resolutions. While we, as humanitarians, strive to champion the rights of those we serve and urge political stakeholders to take action and assist those in need, the ultimate solution lies in political will and commitment to enact lasting change. We must continue our advocacy efforts relentlessly, amplifying the voices of the vulnerable and holding decision-makers accountable for their responsibilities towards the most marginalized in our society.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some wise words from the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founding father of the United Arab Emirates, who once said,

'True wealth is not measured in money or status or power. It is measured in the legacy we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire.'

Let us aspire to leave behind a legacy of compassion, solidarity, and humanity.

Thank you.

I would like to now turn to the distinguished panel members and ask for their reflections on the topic of humanitarian diplomacy and new actors. I would like to introduce them in the order they will speak:

- Dr Manal Omran Tarayam, CEO and Board Member Noor Dubai Foundation
- Mr. Fyras Mawazini | Director of International Development for SOS Méditerranée
- Mr. Simon Missiri | Special Representative IFRC and Director, Global Humanitarian Services and Supply Chain Management (GHS&SCM)