Everyday Migrant Accompaniment: Humanitarian Border Diplomacy

Cristina Churruca-Muguruza | ORCID: 0000-0002-3425-1938
University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain
cristina.churruca@deusto.es

Received: 19 March 2021; revised: 1 December 2021; accepted: 1 February 2022

Summary

This article advances the notion of humanitarian border diplomacy, contributing to current academic discussions on humanitarian diplomacy and on the practice-theory nexus by conceptualising NGOs’ migrant accompaniment at borders as a form of everyday humanitarian diplomacy. The contention is that humanitarian diplomacy is similar to other diplomatic practices. Starting by rethinking humanitarian diplomacy, it discusses the emergence of humanitarian border diplomacy as a key component of everyday migrant accompaniment. Humanitarian border diplomacy focuses on advancing migrants’ rights, seeking to make helpful, empowering and transformational interventions in an attempt to resist and change the contemporary global governance of migration. The article presents the everyday diplomatic practices of the Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes in Melilla, on Spain’s southern border, as an example of humanitarian border diplomacy. At the border, as an alternative space for resistance, difference and otherness, the need for diplomatic culture as the symbolic mediation of estrangement is revealed.

Keywords

humanitarian diplomacy – migrant accompaniment – everyday diplomacy – border diplomacy – Melilla
1 Introduction

The term ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ emerged as a concept in the early 2000s to recognise the role that humanitarian actors play in negotiating access, assistance and protection for civilians in conflict and complex emergencies. It has been succinctly defined by Antonio De Lauri and Salla Turunen as ‘advancing humanitarian interests and aims by diplomatic means’. Humanitarian diplomacy is increasingly understood as a key component of humanitarian action and as a new kind of diplomacy. However, this does not mean that it has been practised only recently. Humanitarian diplomacy ‘is rooted in the history of humanitarian action dating back to the nineteenth century’. It has been carried out by humanitarian workers for a long time at all levels and in many different contexts and situations. However, this type of diplomacy has only recently been conceptualised by practitioners, humanitarian organisations and scholars.

Only a few humanitarian agencies — such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and, to a lesser extent, Doctors without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières, MSF) and practitioners such as Jan Egeland (former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief) — have reflected on their humanitarian diplomatic practices. Even MSF avoided using the term ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ to describe the experience of the compromises and transactions made by the representatives of the organisation when negotiating with governments and local and international

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1 The author would like to thank Diego Fernández Maldonado and Josep Buades from the Jesuit Migrant Service in Melilla, and Marisa Maro from the Association Geum Doudou, for their generosity in sharing their time and experience, and the reviewers of the earlier version of this manuscript for their valuable suggestions and comments. This paper is part of the project “Humanitarian Diplomacy: Assessing Policies, Practices and Impact of New Forms of Humanitarian Action and Foreign Policy” funded by the Research Council of Norway (project number 286859) and led by Antonio De Lauri at the Chr. Michelsen Institute.

2 De Lauri 2018, 1.

3 De Lauri and Turunen 2021, 1.

4 Régnier 2001, 1215.

5 See, for example, Harroff-Tavel 2005; Minear and Smith 2007; Régnier 2011; Egeland 2013; Davutuglu 2013; Rousseau and Sommo 2018; De Lauri 2018; Slim 2019; Turunen 2020.

6 The ICRC has developed its own definition of ‘humanitarian diplomacy’, which reflects its specific mandate. See Harroff-Tavel 2005.

7 In 2009 the IFRC adopted a Humanitarian Diplomacy Policy and its Explanatory Memorandum as part of its Strategy 2020. See IFRC 2009a. Since 2010 the IFRC has established a division in charge of promoting humanitarian diplomacy.

8 Moreels 1989; Egeland 2013.
political and military forces to help and reach the most affected people in conflicts such as those in Yemen, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.9

Humanitarian diplomacy carried out by humanitarian organisations is framed as distinct from other diplomatic practices by virtue of its focus on humanitarianism and humanitarian aims.10 As Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp acknowledge, representatives of humanitarian actors ‘have traditionally positioned themselves as outsiders acting upon a world of insiders, that of the system or society of sovereign states’.11 Yet Ole Jacob Sending’s analysis of ICRC diplomatic practices notes that ‘the ICRC may well refer to this as “humanitarian diplomacy” and thus as distinct from what diplomats representing states engage in, but the practice it engages in is similar’.12 Most approaches to humanitarian diplomacy concentrate on ‘maximising support for operations and programs, and building the partnerships necessary if humanitarian objectives are to be achieved’.13 This conception of humanitarian diplomacy emphasises the technical, logistical and material dimensions of diplomacy. However, it does not give sufficient importance to the meaning of diplomacy as a social practice.14 Moreover, the restricted focus on armed conflicts and emergencies obscures other humanitarian diplomatic practices that have emerged in other contexts as a manifestation of the pluralisation of diplomacy.15

Against this background, the objective of this article is to unravel everyday humanitarian diplomatic practices carried out by humanitarian organisations with the aim of furthering the interests of migrants at borders.16 These diplomatic practices are referred to in this article as ‘humanitarian border diplomacy’. This article aims to contribute to current academic discussions on humanitarian diplomacy and on the practice-theory nexus by analysing and conceptualising NGOs’ everyday migrant accompaniment work at the border as a manifestation of everyday diplomatic practices. It suggests that NGOs’ humanitarian diplomacy as a diplomatic practice or practices is simply a type of diplomatic engagement — albeit a particular one. Humanitarian diplomacy, like diplomacy in general, must be understood by its practices.17

9 Allié 2012, 4-12.
10 Régnier 2011; Minear 2007; Turunen 2020, 467.
11 Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp 2016, 2.
12 Sending 2015, 276.
14 Cornago 2020, 30; Sending 2015.
15 Cornago 2013; Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp 2016, 4-6.
16 In this article we use the term ‘migrants’ to refer to any person who has left their country of origin, for whatever reason, to go to another country and who does not have the nationality of the latter country. We include in this definition refugees and asylum seekers.
17 Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp 2016, 1-10.
Therefore, this article proposes to look at what makes these new NGOs’ humanitarian practices diplomacy. Humanitarian border diplomacy emerges as a way of conducting diplomacy within the multiple dynamics of power that are involved at the border ‘as a site of the production of sovereign power but also of resistance and struggles’. In this context, this article disentangles the work of the Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (SJM) in Melilla on Spain’s southern border — where it assists and defends the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers — as an example of humanitarian border diplomacy. While Melilla exhibits some unique features, it also contains many elements that are being repeated at other sites and on other scales at other borders across the world, particularly the borders of the Global North.

Humanitarian border diplomacy resists the advent of what William Walters called the ‘humanitarian border’: ‘the reinvention of the border as a space of humanitarian government’. Measures of migration control have transformed border crossing into ‘a matter of life and death’. Research on the humanitarian border analyses the increasing use of humanitarian narratives by policymakers, as well as the increasing involvement of humanitarian organisations in border management. Borders are herein conceived from a border-critical studies perspective as multifaceted spaces of interactions and intersections among ‘a range of practices or “borderwork” in everyday life’. Understanding borders as mobile, relational and contested sites no longer confined to political margins but embedded in everyday life opens the way to move beyond the

18 Brambilla and Jones 2019, 3.
19 Following the Report of the World Commission on Forced Displacement, the term ‘Global North’ refers to the developed countries of destination of forced migrants from the developing, lower-income countries of the Global South. See Chumir Foundation and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) 2019, 4-5.
20 Walters 2011, 138. Drawing on the work of Didier Fassin, who connects humanitarianism to the broader field of government outlined by Michel Foucault, Walters understands the humanitarian as a complex domain possessing specific forms of governmental reason. If the humanitarian can be situated in relation to the analytics of government, it can also be contextualised in relation to the biopolitical. According to Walters, what is so characteristic of the humanitarian is ‘minimalist biopolitics’, that is, ‘entities devoted to monitoring and assisting populations in maintaining their physical existence’. See, Walters 2011, 143-144.
21 Walters 2011, 137.
23 From the late 1980s and early 1990s, the understanding of borders has evolved from interpreting borders as fixed territorial lines dividing sovereignties, to the idea of bordering as a set of sociocultural and discursive processes and practices and has become an interdisciplinary field of study. See Brambilla 2015; Brambilla and Jones 2019; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012.
politics of fear that drives securitisation and militarisation of the border and to point towards an alternative space of resistance and struggle for what Arjun Appadurai has termed a ‘politics of hope’. The politics of hope, which proposes more nuanced engagements with hope as a feature of quotidian social life and with the conditions for its cultivation, means giving back the visibility to stories of resistance and struggle, including those of civil society actors and ordinary people.

To unravel the everyday humanitarian diplomatic practices carried out by NGOs accompanying migrants at borders, this article is divided into three main sections. It first discusses the traditional understanding of humanitarian diplomacy carried out by humanitarian organisations and proposes rethinking humanitarian diplomacy from a broader understanding of humanitarianism and recovering the historical idea of diplomacy as a varied art of persuasion. It then explores migrant accompaniment and the diplomatic practices that it entails as a manifestation of everyday diplomacy. Finally, it presents the case of the SJM’s everyday diplomatic practices in Melilla as an example of humanitarian border diplomacy.

The article relies on desk research and the qualitative analysis of primary data obtained from interviews conducted in the framework of fieldwork in Melilla. Since 2015 (with the exception of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the author has travelled to Melilla with students from the University of Deusto NOHA Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s in International Humanitarian Action for a short period (four to five days each time) to meet with the different organisations that work with migrants. In April 2019, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the Association Geum Doudou, Accem, the Spanish Commission for Aid to Refugees (CEAR) Melilla, the SJM, Melilla Acoge, Save the Children, the Spanish Red Cross in Melilla and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The interviews had a special focus on the humanitarian challenges at the southern border, the associations’ work with migrants, and their relationship with the authorities to advance the interests of migrants. At the end of August 2021, the author

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25 As Brambilla and Jones note, the politics of hope is not simply an assumption that ‘things will develop in a desirable direction, but an active relation to real tendencies that is necessary to achieve social change for the better’. In this regard, knowledge production is a way to move beyond the politics of fear and actualise the politics of hope. It means a further critical interrogation of the notion of struggle and an understanding of borders (reconceived as ‘borderscapes’) as a site of struggle. ‘Struggle’ means migrant struggles, including their daily strategies and resistances but also other border experiences including those of civil society actors and ordinary people. Brambilla and Jones 2019, 299-300.
held another interview with the SJM-Southern Border team to clarify different aspects of its diplomatic practices.26

2 Rethinking Humanitarian Diplomacy

Since the publication of *Humanitarian Diplomacy: Practitioners and Their Craft* by Larry Minear and Hazel Smith in 2007, the concept of humanitarian diplomacy has been gaining ground.27 The volume offered ‘a series of intimate glimpses into the day-to-day complexities of organising and maintaining humanitarian activities in some of the world’s most conflictive, intractable and remote settings’. Minear and Smith proposed the concept of humanitarian diplomacy as ‘an aid to understanding the challenges and the experiences’ recounted by humanitarian workers in different contexts, from Asia to Latin America, during and after the Cold War. Their understanding was that humanitarian diplomacy encompasses ‘the activities carried out by humanitarian organisations to obtain the space from political and military authorities within which to function with integrity’.28 The meaning of integrity comes from the classic principles of humanitarian action: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.29

In 2010-2011, when the IFRC set out to devise a strategic concept of ‘humanitarian diplomacy’, 89 different definitions were found.30 Yet, they all converged in recognising that the raison d’être of humanitarian diplomacy was to ensure that humanitarian workers at all levels and at all times are granted access to disaster victims, and, most importantly, that aid is delivered according to humanitarian principles. These definitions are related to a particular normative framing of humanitarian action followed by ‘Dunantists’ (after the Red Cross founder Henry Dunant) or ‘classic’ humanitarians.31 In this vein, the IFRC’s 2020 Strategy and the ICRC established that humanitarian diplomacy ‘is

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26 The University of Deusto Research Ethics Committee qualified the project as favourable (code: ETK 26, 15-16), according to the Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679), which was approved by the EU Commission and the EU Council in April 2016.
27 Minear and Smith 2007a.
28 Minear and Smith 2007b, 1.
29 See Gordon and Donini 2016; IFRC 2014; Pictet 1979; Sphere 2011; Slim 2015.
30 Régnier 2011, 1213.
31 McGinty and Peterson identified a range of overlapping normative networks that exist within the humanitarian industry. Besides Dunantist organisations, the ‘new humanitarians’ or ‘Wilsonians’ place major emphasis on human rights, justice, solidarity and the need for concrete political action. Some researchers make geographical, conceptual and practice-based divisions that ‘point to the existence of a fractured humanitarian system
concerned with persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act, at all
times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with total respect for humani-
tarian principles (our fundamental principles). This definition of humani-
tarian diplomacy, which has become generally accepted, refers to no specific
context. However, even new approaches to humanitarian diplomacy focus on
the study of diplomatic practices related to emergencies or their avoidance.

Humanitarian diplomacy has also been considered to be different from
‘conventional’ or ‘formal’ diplomacy because the humanitarian imperative
‘has a different logic and framework, dynamic and urgency’. Régnier noted
that although ‘humanitarian diplomacy is often defined with reference to the
diplomacy of states’, the two forms of diplomacy are different, particularly
regarding their scope, as ‘humanitarian diplomacy is not limited to interna-
tional relations alone’. For Minear and Smith, ‘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’. Like Régnier, they regard humanitarian diplomacy
as unique because of its humanitarian focus. Using a broader definition of
humanitarian diplomacy that includes state and non-state actors, Turunen
still stresses its distinctiveness from other forms of diplomacy, by reason of its
‘focus on humanitarianism and humanitarian aims’.

The concept and limits of humanitarian action, which frame the definition
of humanitarian diplomacy, are the subject of heated debate regarding who
engages in such action, the motivations involved, and the impact and outcomes
of the action. Humanitarian organisations understand their mission differ-
cently depending on their mandate and the context in which they operate. At
the core of the tension between a more restrictive and a broader understanding
of humanitarian action is the idea of ‘humanitarian exceptionalism’ grounded
on the ethics of humanitarian principles. Yet, the vast majority of humani-
tarian organisations accept a wider interpretation of humanitarian action
that, besides classic humanitarian assistance work, protection initiatives and

32 IFRC 2009, 25.
33 Turunen 2020, 474.
34 Minear 2007, 33.
35 Régnier 2011, 1216.
36 Minear and Smith 2007, 1.
38 Turunen 2020, 467.
the promotion of social cohesion, includes actions to reduce vulnerabilities and promote and protect human rights.41 Many NGOs embrace a ‘solidaristic’ approach that combines material support with removing the structural causes of suffering and poverty, and active engagement in improving rights.42 Thus, humanitarian diplomacy can be defined as a way of advancing humanitarian interests and aims by diplomatic means. It is a key component of humanitarian action and, by definition, a fundamental expression of the universal value of solidarity between people.

Examining humanitarian diplomatic practices from a broader perspective does not mean that the significance of analysing such practices as an instrument to avoid humanitarian disasters and ‘to reach people in need of humanitarian aid’ fails to be recognised by scholars and practitioners.43 Humanitarian diplomacy plays an important role in the creation of humanitarian spaces in a world where protracted conflicts persist, civilians continue to be killed or maimed, there are mounting protection challenges and displacement is increasing. In addition, more people are facing food insecurity while there is a resurgent threat of multiple famines, the frequency and diversity of infectious disease outbreaks is on the rise, and there are persistent constraints on humanitarian access.44 The type of humanitarian diplomacy that emerged as a response to the complex emergencies of the 1990s, characterised by the intensification and internationalisation of internal conflicts, is therefore crucial to providing assistance in conflict areas.

In the context of global migration there is, however, a need to rethink the meaning of humanitarianism45 and of humanitarian diplomacy. Humanitarian actors need to position themselves to change the policies that create death and violence at the border. ‘New’ governmental humanitarianism co-opts and de-naturalises the language of humanitarianism to represent migrants as a threat to border security and as victims of smuggling and trafficking, dispossessing them of agency and rights.46 Humanitarian discourses and practices have become a key component of governmental migration and border

41 This encompasses both short and longer-term actions taken to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after natural or man-made crises and disasters.
43 Turunen 2021, 462.
44 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA); Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). For an overview of key trends and their recurrence in recent years, see UNGA-ECOSOC (2021); UNGA-ECOSOC (2020); UNGA-ECOSOC (2019); UNGA-ECOSOC (2018); UNGA-ECOSOC (2017).
46 Moreno-Lax 2017, 120.
managing. The prevention of migrant deaths has long been used to justify restrictive migration and border policies creating a false dichotomy between securitisation and humanitarianism. Paolo Cuttita explains how governmental humanitarianism at the EU sea border creates not only ‘non-rights-bearing subjects’ but also ‘rights bearing [subjects]’ but it does so only in so far as the pledge to protect migrants’ rights support restrictive policies and practices.47 Governmental humanitarianism contributes to the process of depoliticisation of migration by ignoring the political character of migration and border regimes. In this context, humanitarian border diplomacy emerges as a means to advance the cause of forced migrants. It is driven by the humanitarian imperative but also by a political commitment that is not at odds with solidarity and compassion.48

The analysis of humanitarian diplomacy has also focused mainly on the different processes and forms of negotiation undertaken to provide assistance and to protect vulnerable civilians.49 Only a few authors have recovered the idea of humanitarian diplomacy throughout history as a ‘varied art of persuasion’.50 Most approaches to humanitarian diplomacy, and to diplomacy in general, fail to recognise a broader understanding of diplomacy as a social practice.51

Noé Cornago’s study of diplomacy as a form of heterology from a historical perspective aptly noted that the academic literature on diplomacy largely focuses its efforts solely on the semantic field of international relations among states, while ignoring the interpersonal meaning of the term. Limiting the meaning of diplomacy to relations among states, isolated from any social experience and deprived of any relevance in daily life, has resulted in gender, race and class issues continuing to be ignored in the main currents of diplomatic studies until relatively recently.52 The definitions of diplomacy focusing on relations among states are merely resistant to recognising that diplomacy ‘is nothing more and nothing less than a particular expression of the wider

47  Cuttita 2019, 17-22.
48  With the 2015 European migration crisis, volunteer and grassroots groups’ humanitarian initiatives emerged alongside humanitarian organisations, and have been described as solidarity humanitarianism (Rozaku 2017, 2020), volunteer humanitarianism (Sandri 2018) or grassroots humanitarianism (McGee and Pelham 2018). They endorse a horizontal, anti-bureaucratic and political form of assistance, and set being with refugees/asylum seekers/migrants at its core. A critique of this type of informal humanitarianism is that, while it may have best of intentions, its work is not professional and has the potential to do more harm than good.
49  See, for example, Clements 2020.
50  Slim 2019, 68.
51  Cornago 2020, 30.
52  Cornago 2013, 8-9.
domains of social relationships, albeit an especially stylised and important one. Based on this premise, Cornago proposed:

a new understanding of diplomacy, able to respond to the current complexities of global politics, would need to restore the hidden continuity existing between professional diplomatic intercourse and everyday life, hence recovering its lost meaning as a way of knowing and dealing with otherness.

3 Migrant Accompaniment: Everyday Humanitarian Border Diplomacy

Forced displacement is a defining issue in global politics. According to the UNHCR, approximately 82 million people are displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events that seriously disturb public order. Migration flows are mixed, which means that economic migrants travel the same routes as asylum seekers and refugees. Most of them are in need of humanitarian assistance for the basic necessities of life in order to survive. Humanitarian concerns about these mixed flows include the need to reduce or prevent the deaths of migrants on their way to the Global North, to help families know the fate of their missing relatives, and to identify and process asylum seekers in order to protect refugees and their rights. Regardless of their category, forced migrants are entitled to the protection of their fundamental rights, hence the changing nature of government response to forced migration presents a fundamental new challenge to humanitarian action. The increasing number of people being forcibly displaced has triggered the building of more fences at land borders, an increase in push backs, detention and deportation practices and violence against asylum seekers and migrants at borders.

53 Cornago 2013, 11.
54 Cornago 2013, 12.
55 UNHCR 2021.
56 Chumir Foundation and ODI 2019, 1.
57 Zetter 2015.
58 Rights to protection and other entitlements belong to everyone, and most certainly to forcibly displaced people. They are not contingent on a particular legal status. See Chumir Foundation and ODI 2019, 4-5.
59 Der Derian and Schockaert 2009, 105-117.
In this context, migrant accompaniment at European and US borders, as well as at other borders around the world, has emerged as a humanitarian act of solidarity moving beyond the delivery of humanitarian aid by offering companionship, active listening and a focus on individuals' personal needs and concerns. Migrant accompaniment occurs in a context of increased criminalisation of those people who help migrants and refugees. The term 'accompaniment' refers to the concept of 'accompanying' as a way of being, of sharing migrants' and refugees' daily life. It means 'reaching refugees through hospitality'. Mark Cachia, in his research on asylum seekers in the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) welcome network in France, has underlined the idea of accompaniment 'as mutual recognition of the other's humanity'. Unlike other types of humanitarian action, accompaniment aims 'to lessen the enormous power gap between humanitarian worker and beneficiary and hopes to increase the desire for genuine participation of displaced people in programmes and services affecting them'.

Accompaniment entails informing migrants about their rights, advising them and supporting them to better advocate for their rights. Accompaniment aims not only to give and receive support, but also to provide a space to empower migrants. Reflecting on her accompaniment work with migrants in the United States over the years, Whitney Duncan emphasises that 'as a model of resistance, acompañamiento or accompaniment, highlights the suffering and solidarity that immigrants experience in the contemporary political atmosphere'. Although accompaniment has traditionally been linked to faith-based organisations moved by a feeling of compassion and service, it has

61 Hampton et al. 2014.
63 Accompaniment relates to ‘companion’ as ‘one who accompanies another’ (Webster's Dictionary), and ‘a person who shares your experiences, especially when these are particularly pleasant or unpleasant’ (Oxford English Dictionary). The history and etymology of ‘accompany’ in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary indicates that is comes from Middle English ‘accompanien’, ‘to make (someone) a companion or associate, be in company with, attend’.
64 Gavin and Vella 2013, 31.
65 Gavin and Vella 2013, 18.
66 Gavin and Vella 2013, 32.
68 Duncan 2018.
69 It is difficult to trace the origins of migrant accompaniment, but it seems that the JRS was the first organisation created in 1980s with an explicit accompaniment mandate, including service and advocacy for refugees and other forcibly displaced people to respond to the plight of the Vietnamese boatpeople.
evolved into a movement to advance the rights and dignity of migrants. Today, it is not only faith-based organisations such as the SJM, the JRS and the Church Council, for example,70 that have developed accompaniment programmes, although there are also those promoted by the Red Cross,71 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and some governmental agencies.72

The everyday job of migrant accompaniment involves dealing with immigration authorities advancing the cause of migrants and working in partnership and networks with different organisations to avoid decisions to detain an individual or group, and even avert deportations or push backs, and to advocate for the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.73 It is in this context that everyday humanitarian diplomacy emerges as a key component of migrant accompaniment. Humanitarian actors particularly use diplomacy to advance migrants’ interests at borders where violations of rights and guarantees or omissions occur with impunity. Constantinou has cautioned that while ‘images, narratives and practices of diplomacy occur on a daily basis’, the everyday life and the normality of diplomacy are not easily recognised, at least within the discipline of international relations.74 In his words:

diplomacy can be broadly understood to emerge whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause, or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations. In the quotidian, diplomacy ceases to be a professional skill or special technique and thus captures a wider spectrum of social activities.75

Everyday diplomacy, like diplomacy in general terms, can sometimes involve simply mediating to obtain access to legal aid for an international protection applicant, presenting the case of an asylum seeker, advocating for the interests of unaccompanied minors or attempting to persuade and influence

70 Church Council.
71 An organisation called Cooperación y Desarrollo con el Norte de África (CODENAF) accompanies vulnerable migrants in North Africa, specifically in Morocco. In Mexico, the NGO Centro Integrar created an accompaniment programme in 2019 to advance the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in Mendoza.
72 As an example, see Government of the Autonomous Community of Navarre.
73 See, for example, the work of the Justice Power network, which is made up of twelve organisations, including the UNHCR, to make visible the powerful effects of legal empowerment programmes to advance the rights of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in the United States.
74 Constantinou 2015, 23; Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016.
75 Constantinou 2015, 24.
the immigration authorities to reconsider their decisions. These are some examples of the daily work of NGOs working in migrant accompaniment. Humanitarian border diplomacy is framed within such an idea of everyday diplomacy, of being present in the day-to-day lives of migrants and refugees in detention centres, in the hearts of cities, in refugee camps, in conflict zones, in post-war settings and on remote borders.

Humanitarian border diplomacy is set within a context of an alternative culture of diplomacy that could be deemed as mediation aimed to ensure equality. Constantinou’s concept of ‘homo-diplomacy’ as a humanist invitation to attempt new and audacious diplomatic engagements for the better mediation of the many forms of estrangement in global life, is highly suggestive in understanding the everyday diplomatic work carried out by NGOs engaged in migrant accompaniment. Humanitarian border diplomacy as homo-diplomacy, encompasses an understanding of the human dimension of diplomacy and the concept of its transformative potential. The humanitarian mission to support migrants is a negotiation effort against national and international political agendas. In this regard, it is more than a mere job; it is an experiential task of everyday diplomats or ambassadors. Accompanying displaced persons and refugees is a way of advocating and promoting a common humanity at land, sea and air borders where migrants experience discrimination and arbitrary decision-making.

National law and administrative regulations can also characterise borders as zones of exclusion or exception for human rights obligations and seek to exempt them from compliance with the human rights safeguards, checks and balances that are usually embedded in national laws. Thus, at borders, difference and otherness reveal the need for diplomatic culture. Diplomatic culture emerges ‘as the necessary third space for mediating alienation’, in other words, ‘as the symbolic mediation of estrangement’.

Diplomatic work is ‘traditionally about representing a polity vis-à-vis a recognised other’. In accompaniment, NGOs act on behalf of migrants and their interests vis-à-vis the representatives of the state concerned. Accompaniment

76 Constantinou reviewed the diplomatic role of the San Pablo mission, which he validated and assessed not (only) based on the official credentials and instructions given. He evaluated it instead by the usefulness of this conduct and the effectiveness of the mediation work of spiritual alienation and addressing others’ material needs as an alternative form of diplomacy. Constantinou 2006, 354-359.

77 OHCHR 2014, 1.

78 Constantinou 2016, 31.


80 Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 528.
diplomacy has a ‘universalistic tone’ as authority becomes tied to a symbolic global governance system of migration. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers find that their states of origin are either unwilling or unable to protect them (which is why they leave their countries), and they are also unprotected by the state whose border they have crossed. The representatives of humanitarian NGOs working on accompaniment make the cause of migrants a diplomatic mission.

4 SJM Migrant Accompaniment: Humanitarian Diplomacy at Spain’s Southern Border

The SJM is a network of Jesuit organisations working to accompany, serve and defend the rights of migrants in Spain. It began by accompanying migrants in Melilla on Spain’s southern border in a network with the JRS-Europe and other allied entities after the 2005 ‘border fence crisis’. That year, more than 5,500 immigrants entered Spanish territory through the Ceuta and Melilla border fences, and massive assault attempts were recorded, with groups of up to 600 immigrants jumping the fences simultaneously. Several people were killed and dozens injured by the use of force by both the Moroccan and Spanish authorities. Hundreds of immigrants, including potential asylum seekers, were detained by Moroccan security forces and transferred to areas on the border with Algeria and Mauritania, where, according to the immigrants themselves, they were left without food and water. As a response, the Spanish government decided to install coil-shaped blades (‘concertinas’) on the fences in addition to a three-dimensional tow or third fence. The three layers of fencing on the Spanish side encircle the entire 12-square-kilometre (km²) area of the city and extend a short way into Mediterranean waters. In response to voiced concerns, Spain removed the ‘concertinas’ that caused serious injury to migrants jumping the fence and replaced them with a barred structure. However, the fence was extended from 6 to 10 metres in some areas, which could also lead to serious injury if people climb the fence and fall.

81 Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 529-530.
82 Constantinou 2016, 24.
83 See www.sjme.org.
84 The term ‘Spain’s southern border’ refers to the points of access for north-bound migration flows from Africa to Spanish territory.
85 See CEAR 2017; SJM 2018; Tyszler 2016.
86 Martín 2021.
As a European land frontier with Africa — a condition that is shared only by Ceuta — Melilla sits at a European migratory crossroads. Since 2006, the SJM has supported the JRS’s concern about having a presence on North African migration routes, as a result of a prior commitment to fight the externalisation of migration management beyond EU borders.87 The management of the southern border plays an important role in the externalisation of European border control, which has been accompanied by constant erosion of the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to enter and settle in the European Union.88

Melilla is a Spanish autonomous city, located on the northwest coast of Africa, sharing a border with Morocco. It has an area of 12.3km² and a population of around 90,000 inhabitants. This European enclave on the border with Africa shows an inequality gap of 9:1 according to the World Bank.89 This border characterises and defines the city. Melilla’s exceptional character is built on geopolitical, economic and security considerations. Although it belongs to an EU Member State, Melilla has a special status within the European Union. It is excluded from the Schengen area of free mobility of persons, grants special tax conditions to its inhabitants and companies, and feeds informal trade networks on both sides of the border.90 It is also excluded from NATO’s automatic defence mechanisms. Furthermore, it is subject to Spain’s complex relationship with Morocco, which has been marked by latent conflicts (e.g., Western Sahara, claims over Spanish enclaves in North Africa and fishing resources) and by an intense bilateral agenda (as neighbours and as a national and European border, due mainly to the terrorist threat, drug trafficking, smuggling and, more recently, irregular immigration).91 Over the past three decades, Melilla has become increasingly important as a gateway for migratory flows from Morocco, the sub-Saharan region and, more recently, Middle Eastern

87 JRS 2018.
89 González-Páramo 2019, 3.
90 As a border town with little indigenous industry, Melilla is supported by EU and government funds. However, it participates in the migration control industry in southern Europe. European externalisation policies have facilitated the transformation of European border control into a flourishing industry to manage the control, reception and return of migrants. See Fundación Pro Causa 2020a; and Lemberg-Pedersen 2018.
91 See López Belloso and Fernández Rojo 2021.
countries. This in turn has converted Melilla into an exceptionally securitised city.

The city’s geopolitical situation explains why the management of this southern border has long been of special interest to contain unwanted migration flows. It was at the beginning of the 1990s that the first persons from sub-Saharan Africa tried to reach Europe by crossing the border between Morocco and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. This coincided with the adoption of restrictive visa policies by European countries and the growing difficulties faced by those trying to reach Europe legally. A robust non-entrée regime, ‘Fortress Europe’, was progressively built to protect European borders. With the entry into force of the Schengen Treaty in 1995, Spain developed more elaborate border-control policies and erected progressively higher fences around the two enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta. It was the first EU country to erect fences on external borders to prevent migrants and refugees from reaching European territory.

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92 For this reason, Morocco is heavily subsidised by the European Union. See Tyszler 2016, 10; and Pro Causa 2019, 7-8.
93 For the exceptional characteristics of Melilla, see Gabrielli 2015; González-Páramo 2019; Johnson and Jones 2016, 61-80; Mutlu 2012; Tyszler 2016.
94 Melilla, as is the case with other border cities inside and outside Europe, is both the epitome of the global model of migration management and a laboratory for the externalisation policies that are now being implemented throughout the European Union. See González-Páramo et al. 2019, 15-24.
95 Jüneman, Fromm and Scherer 2019; Orchard 2014; Zetter 2014.
96 The management of the external border is a key component of migration control in an area of freedom, security and justice without internal borders (the Schengen area). Articles 77(1)(c) and 77(2)(d) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that the European Union is to move towards the gradual establishment of a system of integrated management of external borders. Article 4(2) of the Treaty on the European Union and Article 72 TFEU make it clear that Member States are ultimately responsible for their own internal security and for the management of their external borders.
97 Fencing has emerged as part of individual states’ response to migration pressure. Before 2015, only three countries had resorted to erecting fences at external borders Spain, Greece and Bulgaria. Border fences raise serious issues in light of the EU Member States’ obligation, under Article 4 of the Schengen Borders Code, to apply the code in full compliance with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the requirements of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and obligations related to access to international protection. Furthermore, features that put people’s lives at risk or create a risk of disproportionate harm (e.g., coil-shaped blades in Melilla) do not appear to be a proportionate measure to implement the duty to prevent unauthorised entry under the Schengen Borders Code. See Churruca Muguruza 2019; European Parliament 2017; FRA 2020; Triandafyllidou 2010.
In Melilla, only people fleeing the Syrian conflict, Algerians and Moroccans have a real possibility of applying for international protection at the border post. This is not possible for sub-Saharans, whose only viable option is to jump the fence, hide in vehicles, cross the sea in unsafe craft or even swim. Those who manage to jump over the three fences without being immediately returned, the so-called ‘rejection at the border’, have the right, according to Spanish law, to be temporarily accommodated in the Centre for the Temporary Stay of Immigrants (CETI). They can also move freely in Melilla while their expulsion procedure for an irregular administrative situation or their asylum request is processed. In Melilla the people who request asylum are not transferred until their dossier has been completed, which can take months. It is therefore a dissuasive strategy used by the authorities to prevent people from seeking asylum.

When the SJM arrived in Melilla there were only organisations from Melilla working with migrants (Accem, Melilla Acoge, the Red Cross and Cáritas). It was not until the migration crisis of 2015 that humanitarian organisations such as the Association Geum Doudou, CEAR, Medicos del Mundo, Save the Children and the UNHCR disembarked. While the Melilla organisations chose to ‘enter’ the CETI every day to offer their services, the others decided to work with migrants outside the centre to keep their independence and as a form of protest against what they considered to be inadequate management of migrants’ reception. These organisations opened reception spaces outside the CETI to assist migrants and asylum seekers and help them defend their rights. Only CEAR had an office in the CETI for asylum seekers.

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98 Spanish law allows ‘rejection at the border’ of any third national detected scaling the fence in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, provided that this complies with international refugee law. However, how this compliance is ensured is not clarified. This concept was introduced by adding Additional Provision 10 to the Law on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain (Aliens Act) in March 2015.

99 Some are transferred to the peninsula for their entry into the Foreign Internment Centres, where they will be held for a maximum period of 60 days. If there are readmission agreements in place, they will be deported to their home countries. If the latter is not possible, they are transferred to Humanitarian Reception Programme Centres run by NGOs (e.g., Accem, the Red Cross or CEAR) for a stay of months. Asylum seekers or refugees are transferred to Refugee Reception Centres.

100 The CEAR lawyer who works at CETI explains that many people give up their request for asylum due to the waiting time imposed before transfer to the peninsula: it is higher than for those who do not apply for asylum.

101 Accem and Melilla Acoge are in charge of training tasks. Cáritas organises recreational activities and the Red Cross provides psychological and health care, in addition to offering translation services to inmates.
Upon arrival in Melilla in 2006, the SJM found that the migrant population were unprotected, especially those people who were in transit. Violations of rights and guarantees occurred with the excuse that the city had a unique legal status. These violations included cases of summary returns at the land border; peculiar operations carried out by the security forces in contiguous waters; and returns of people who landed on islets and rocks under the readmission agreement signed with Morocco in 1992. Migrants also faced various problems during their stay in Melilla, such as restriction of the free movement of asylum seekers; and lastly, the specific circumstances of unaccompanied foreign minors under guardianship and of young people who come of age.102 Fifteen years later, the same practices described above persist and the situation has only been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.103 Migrants’ rights have been limited beyond what is established in the regulations governing the state of alarm. While they were housed in temporary facilities subject to unworthy living conditions (e.g., food and water shortages and lack of health care), the policy of minimising their transfer from Melilla to the mainland was maintained without justification.104

The SJM-Southern Border team is formed of two full-time professionals in Melilla: a lawyer and an Arabic interpreter.105 The SJM lawyer accompanies and provides legal guidance to migrants and applicants for international protection during their stay in Melilla. This person advances the interests of the most vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers, acting as an everyday ambassador and mediator with the public administration. Sometimes migrants reach the SJM office on advice from CEAR in the CETI or are informed by other migrants or referred by the UNHCR.106 The daily work of the SJM ‘has a lot to do with listening, providing reliable information on migrants’ legal and administrative situation and the resources to assert a right or claim on their behalf, as well as accompanying them in carrying out the relevant procedures with the administrative bodies involved’.107 SJM’s everyday work:

102 For a detailed analysis of the different areas, see SJM-E 2018, 9-12, 17-18.
103 Buades Fuster et al. 2020.
105 It has the full-time professional support of another lawyer in Madrid, a person in charge of projects and another person for the coordination of the team. The team also includes the occasional collaboration of volunteers and interns.
106 SJM-E, 2018, 9-12, 17-18.
107 The Government Delegation in Melilla has an Employment and Immigration Department that includes an information office and an office for foreign nationals. There is an Asylum and Refuge Office (OAR) at the Beni Enzar border post, managed by the Spanish Ministry for Internal Affairs; and a police station that also operates as an OAR. SJM-E 2018, 13.
is based on a routine that includes welcoming people to the SJM office; checking if they are registered in the database; interviewing them to answer their questions and demands; examining the documentation they provide; informing them about the legal and administrative conditions necessary for the enjoyment of a right (helping to determine to what extent they comply or not); guiding them on the documentation to be prepared, procedures to be carried out, administrations to be contacted; help them fill out forms and any documentation necessary for the administrative procedures in question; identifying possible cases of vulnerability, such as signs of needing international protection, victims of gender violence and/or trafficking, among others.\footnote{SJM -E 2020, 12.}

SJM accompaniment of the most vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers has revealed the political roots of a number of poor administrative practices: unreliability, lack of motivation, arbitrariness in certain actions; lack of information on the criteria for interpreting and applying the appropriate standards; lack of access to the documentation contained in their files; and deficiencies in \emph{ex officio} legal aid.\footnote{JMS 2018, 18.} Analysing the situation can help improve the actions taken on behalf of people, that is, it facilitates better ‘diplomacy for the people’.\footnote{Fernández Pasarín, 2016, 165.}

The SJM officer performs a range of tasks that are similar to those of diplomats: negotiating, reporting, communicating as migrants’ representatives, speaking on their behalf, and also acting to defend their rights. This humanitarian work, which is different from classic humanitarian diplomacy, does not aim to be apolitical. SJM staff do not see themselves as diplomats, although when describing their job they acknowledge that it is diplomatic in character. The SJM officer uses tact and empathetic communication, identifying with migrants’ problems. Then, as an emissary, the officer represents their cause by engaging in dialogue with officials representing the state. In this sense, the SJM emissary could be regarded as an ‘emissary of humanity’, as mediation by the SJM recognises migrants as part of a common humanity. These state representatives (the Department of Justice official, the police officer at the border, the person in charge of the reception centre) recognise the SJM officer as the migrants’ representative. This mission is accredited and judged by how useful their actions are and by the quality of their work mediating the migrants’ cause.
As a diplomatic agent, the SJM officer knows that it is important to gauge the demands and negotiate diplomatically, considering the interests of the migrants but also demonstrating appreciation of the Spanish state representatives’ interests and concerns. Negotiation is a fundamental part of everyday diplomacy. It is about ‘the recognition of difference, management of friction, and the perpetuation of lines of communication’. This means being able to identify the red flags and being aware of how far they can go because the same state agent will meet them on future occasions. In many cases, such diplomatic practices are often seen as an exchange of favours or concessions. Humanitarian border diplomacy, like diplomacy in general, is not a ‘one-off game but an iterative business’ where developing long-term and sustainable relationships with others is crucial. It is an everyday practice that refers to the daily activities and tactics that humanitarian NGO representatives (in this case the SJM) use to advance the interests of migrants in the midst of the violence and conflict at borders. As humanitarian ambassadors, they employ tact and indirectness, coded gestures, as well as empathetic communication and dialogic conversations to create the conditions for collaboration in everyday encounters with the state representatives.

When looking into the structural conditions in which humanitarian diplomatic practices emerge and evolve, Ole Jacob Sending notes that another dimension of diplomacy emerges: ‘as an infrastructure in which humanitarian actors work as they engage in advocacy, negotiations’. Following James Der Derian, this not only refers to how diplomacy is conceptualised as ‘the mediation of the estrangement’ but also to ‘how humanitarian actors go diplomatic as they seek to do their work’. The SJM professional, together with other humanitarian actors in Melilla, must adopt the style of a diplomat to succeed in their advocacy work once the process of advancing migrants’ rights is brought into the remit of diplomacy.

The SJM works in a network with Association Geum Doudou, CEAR, Save the Children, Doctors of the World, the Association for the Rights of Children (Prodein) and other civil society entities established in Melilla. They are in

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111 Adler-Nissen, looking at how diplomatic agents are entangled in their everyday practice, identifies three types of diplomatic agency: communication, negotiation and advocacy; Adler-Nissen 2016, 96-98.
112 Sending 2015, 262.
113 Constantinou and Sharp 2016, 15.
114 Sending 2015, 271.
115 Sending 2015, 273.
116 Outside Melilla the JMS participates in the JRS network and Network Migrants with Rights. SJM-E 2020, 4.
permanent communication and meet periodically to share information about the different situations that occur following the entry of a large group in the CETI after the fence has been jumped, landings after rescue operations or different cases related to the migrant population in the reception centres. For example, when a group of people from Mali arrive on the Spanish coast, the moment they get off the rescue boats they are handed over to the national police. While other NGOs communicate with the authorities and the media, the SJM tries to negotiate with the national police officers in charge to try to prevent the rescued people from signing an expulsion order without adequate legal assistance, and by doing so, to avert their immediate deportation. This requires diplomacy.

Together with these organisations, the SJM focuses, as diplomats do, on the broader public and attempts to achieve change through persuasion (i.e., through advocacy). With this aim, it negotiates texts and press releases, coordinates mobilisations around certain issues and establish alliances with other organisations. For instance, following the lockdown of the CETI, and together with the Association Geum Dodou, Doctors of the World, Save the Children, CEAR and the Migrants with Rights Network, the SJM sent a report to the Spanish Ombudsman denouncing the living conditions of migrants, asylum seekers, minors and young people in custody during the state of alarm. They demanded migration management based on the principles of solidarity and responsibility and centred on the dignity of the person and respect for human rights. Moreover, advocacy can also be promoted through strategic partnerships or public diplomacy. A good example is how the SJM networks with different associations and individuals through digital applications, such as Twitter feeds and hashtags, to change immigration regulations to help all children and unaccompanied migrant adolescents make their transition to adult life.

5 Conclusion

Humanitarian diplomacy is usually framed as distinct from other diplomatic practices because of its focus on humanitarianism and humanitarian aims. Approaches to humanitarian diplomacy usually centre on the study of diplomatic practices related to conflict and emergencies, emphasising the technical, logistical and material dimensions of diplomacy and give no attention to diplomacy as a social practice. This article suggests that, if diplomacy needs to be understood by its practice, it is necessary to look at the everyday humanitarian

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117 SJM-E 4 June 2021.
diplomatic practices that have emerged in other spaces as a manifestation of the pluralisation of diplomacy and of changes in humanitarianism and in world politics. In addition, it proposes to recover the meaning of diplomacy as an art of persuasion.

In the context of global migration there is a need to rethink the meaning of humanitarianism and of humanitarian diplomacy. A number of humanitarian organisations accept a wider interpretation of humanitarian action that includes addressing the root causes of crises, as well as their effects. Many NGOs embrace a more ‘solidaristic’ approach that combines material support with removing the structural causes of suffering and poverty, and active engagement in improving rights. Thus, humanitarian diplomacy can be defined as a way to advance humanitarian interests and aims by diplomatic means. It is a key component of humanitarian action and, by definition, a fundamental expression of the universal value of solidarity between people.

Today’s migrant management and border-control policies present a fundamental new challenge to humanitarian action. Although forced migrants are entitled to the protection of their fundamental rights, the increase in mixed migration flows has triggered the building of fences, push backs, detention and deportation practices and general violence against migrants and asylum seekers. This is particularly the case at borders of the Global North, where violations of migrants’ rights and guarantees or omissions occur with impunity while humanitarian actors use diplomacy to defend their interests. In accompaniment, NGOs act on behalf of migrants vis-à-vis the representatives of the state concerned. Accompaniment diplomacy has a ‘universalistic tone’, as authority becomes tied to a symbolic global governance system of migration. It is driven by the humanitarian imperative but also by a political commitment that is not at odds with solidarity and compassion. The representatives of humanitarian NGOs working on accompaniment make the cause of migrants a diplomatic mission.

These diplomatic practices are unravelled through SJM’s work on Spain’s southern border. Melilla, as part of a European policy of externalisation and border management, is a place where human rights obligations are largely disclaimed and access to protection ultimately denied. The case of Melilla offers in microcosm an example of the complex intersection of politics of alienation with politics of care, as well as a tactic of objection and one of reception that are found at humanitarian borders. The SJM’s everyday diplomacy can sometimes involve simply mediating to obtain access to legal aid for an international protection applicant, presenting the case of an asylum seeker, advocating for the interests of unaccompanied minors or attempting to persuade and influence
the immigration authorities to reconsider their decisions. Everyday humanitarian border diplomacy involves working in partnership and networks with different organisations to focus, as diplomats do, on the broader public and attempt to achieve change through persuasion (i.e., advocacy).

Humanitarian actors at borders perform a range of tasks that are similar to those of diplomats: they negotiate, report and communicate as representatives of migrants; speak on their behalf; and act to defend their rights. They use tact and empathetic communication, identifying with migrants’ problems. At the border, as an alternative space for resistance, difference and otherness, the need for diplomatic culture as the symbolic mediation of estrangement is revealed.

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Cristina Churruca Muguruza is Associate Professor of International Relations and Senior Researcher at the University of Deusto Human Rights Institute where she leads the research group on protection and humanitarian action. She is also Co-ordinator of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Programme in International Humanitarian Action (NOHA), Director of the Master’s Programme at the University of Deusto and Co-director of the NOHA Advanced School on Humanitarian Protection. Her main areas of research are human security, in particular the protection of forced displaced people and current trends and challenges in humanitarian action and peacebuilding, as well as the common foreign and security policy of the European Union in these fields. Dr Churruca Muguruza is an expert evaluator of international projects and has participated in the UNHCR Protection Dialogues and the UN negotiation process for the global compact for migration.