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# Humanitarian and Beyond States Diplomacy: Society as an Emerging Global Actor

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### Abstract:

*The evolution of global interaction in the 21st century reveals a widening gap between the complexity of contemporary crises and the capacity of traditional political diplomacy to address them. Geopolitical rivalries, institutional stagnation, and resource-extractive economic models have created a climate of diplomatic fatigue, where state-centered responses often fall short of delivering timely or humane solutions. Within this vacuum, civil society has emerged as a dynamic and influential actor capable of reshaping global engagement. Humanitarian organizations, volunteer networks, faith-based groups, and transnational advocacy coalitions now mobilize across borders to address urgent human needs, challenge injustices, and promote shared ethical norms. This paper conceptualizes “humanitarian and beyond-states diplomacy” as an alternative paradigm in which diplomatic influence is exercised not only through formal institutions but through societal initiative, moral persuasion, and collective action. It examines how civil society has moved from the periphery to the center of global affairs by negotiating humanitarian access, advocating for vulnerable populations, and generating new norms of solidarity and responsibility. Rather than operating within the limits of state sovereignty or economic interest, these actors draw legitimacy from empathy, global citizenship, and the moral urgency of human protection. The study argues that humanitarian diplomacy from below offers a transformative approach to international cooperation, one capable of renewing compassion, rebuilding trust, and addressing crises that have outpaced traditional diplomatic mechanisms. By analyzing this shift, the paper underscores the rising significance of society as an emerging global actor and highlights the potential of humanitarian engagement to redefine the future of diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** civil society, non-state actors, humanitarian diplomacy, ethical advocacy, global governance

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## 1. Introduction

Diplomacy has long been associated with the authority of states, formal representation, and the protection of sovereignty within an international system built on borders and hierarchy (Berridge, 2022). The traditional Westphalian model viewed diplomacy as an exclusive function of statecraft, with ambassadors, ministries, and treaties serving as the principal tools of international communication. However, this view is increasingly outdated. As globalization, humanitarian crises, and digital interconnectivity redefine the boundaries of power, diplomacy is no longer the monopoly of states but a shared practice that includes diverse non-state actors as important players.

The evolution of international relations since the late twentieth century reflects a growing pluralism of actors. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational advocacy networks, and social movements now operate in diplomatic spaces once dominated by governments (Hocking, Melissen, Riordan, & Sharp, 2012). These actors negotiate humanitarian access, broker ceasefires, influence policy, and mobilize resources across borders, often achieving outcomes that formal institutions struggle to deliver. Such transformations demonstrate that diplomacy has become not only multi-level but also multi-actor, characterized by flexibility, moral agency, and civic legitimacy (Afifi, 2024; Riordan, 2008).

This broader form of engagement, which scholars increasingly refer to as “beyond state diplomacy”, signals a paradigm shift. It is driven not by territorial sovereignty or economic interest, but by empathy, civic initiative, and moral responsibility. Civil society actors like humanitarian networks, advocacy coalitions, and community organizations have emerged as indispensable participants in addressing global crises. Soft power and public diplomacy now depend heavily on non-state legitimacy, persuasion, and ethical communication rather than coercion or material capacity (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004).

The roots of this transformation lie in the recognition that global challenges like climate change, population displacement, pandemics, and wars cannot be solved by states alone. The proliferation of humanitarian emergencies since the 1990s, from Bosnia to Syria, has demonstrated both the inadequacy of formal diplomacy and the agility of citizen-led responses (Mulalic, 2014; Smith & Minear, 2007). Civil society fills the gaps left by

bureaucratic inertia, using transnational networks and digital connectivity to act where states cannot (or decide not to) intervene.

The 21st century, therefore, has exposed the limits of traditional diplomacy. Power politics, institutional rivalries, and strategic competition have drained the energy of international cooperation (Weiss, 2013). At the same time, the dominance of market logic and excessive economic competition has deepened inequality, depleted natural resources, and reduced collective capacity to act ethically. The state-centric system, focused on national interest, often reacts to crises rather than preventing them, leaving humanity trapped in cycles of conflict and scarcity (Afifi, Adrian, Azami, & Farid, 2024; Held & McGrew, 2007).

What emerges from this reality is a crisis of legitimacy and capacity. The traditional instruments of diplomacy, such as summits, sanctions, and treaties, are increasingly inadequate in addressing humanitarian imperatives. Political actors act reactively, often prioritizing power retention over problem-solving (Afifi, Andriyaldi, & Adrian, 2024). Meanwhile, economic systems driven by extractive growth models erode sustainability and human well-being. The result is a moral vacuum in international and public affairs, where compassion is subordinated to calculation and human lives are measured in political value. This is shown by the complexity of state bureaucracy today (Boisot, 2006; Fassin, 2011).

In this context, civil society reclaims the ethical center of global engagement. Humanitarian organizations, local volunteer groups, and faith-based initiatives mobilize moral resources that states do not have the capacity to command. They bypass bureaucratic obstacles and move directly toward the alleviation of human suffering. This shift represents not only an operational alternative but also a moral correction, a return to the principle that compassion, solidarity, and cooperation can serve as tools of diplomacy beyond power structures (Barnett, 2011; Fitri, Afifi, & Abbas, 2022).

A crucial theoretical foundation for this transformation through the concept of transnational advocacy networks. These networks consist of NGOs, activists, scholars, and journalists who collaborate across borders to promote shared values and norms. Their power lies in persuasion and visibility rather than coercion, using information, moral framing, and symbolic action to influence policy and behavior (Clark, 1995; Keck & Sikkink, 2014). They illustrate how non-state actors can

create and institutionalize global norms, from human rights to climate justice, independent of state authority.

Building on this, advanced the notion of global civil society as an emergent space of moral and political innovation. In this view, civil society operates as a parallel diplomatic arena where individuals and organizations interact across borders, generating alternative forms of governance rooted in ethics rather than power. Global civil society not only challenges state dominance but also generates new norms and practices that redefine legitimacy and accountability in world politics (Afifi & Abbas, 2023; Kaldor, 2020).

This new diplomatic paradigm has a practical expression in humanitarianism. When citizens coordinate relief operations for refugees, advocate for ceasefires, or campaign against war crimes, they perform acts of diplomacy grounded in moral authority. These actions demonstrate that negotiation, advocacy, and norm creation are no longer the exclusive tools of professional diplomats but can be exercised by ordinary people with extraordinary purpose (Slim, 2016).

Recent global movements further demonstrate the efficacy of such diplomacy. The Gaza Freedom Flotilla, for example, was organized by citizens and activists from multiple countries, was both a humanitarian and diplomatic intervention, challenging political blockades through moral legitimacy. Similarly, European civic groups responding to the Syrian refugee crisis transcended national divisions to embody a diplomacy of conscience. Their efforts illustrate what terms the power of communication, where information and solidarity replace formal authority as sources of influence (Castells, 2013).

This goes beyond state diplomacy, thus redefining global authority in relational and ethical terms. It operates through persuasion, visibility, and legitimacy rather than coercion. It transforms citizens into norm entrepreneurs who articulate and advance universal values through global networks (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In doing so, it extends the concept of diplomacy from a state function to a shared human responsibility, democratizing international relations through moral participation.

Yet, this shift also raises important questions of legitimacy and accountability. Without the procedural safeguards of formal diplomacy, civil actors risk politicization or co-optation by powerful interests (Barnett & Weiss, 2018). Moreover, the uneven distribution of resources within global civil

society can reproduce hierarchies, privileging certain voices while marginalizing others. These tensions reveal the need for ethical reflexivity and institutional frameworks that preserve the autonomy and inclusivity of humanitarian diplomacy (Douzinas, 2007).

Despite these challenges, the impact of society-led diplomacy cannot be overstated. It brings flexibility, innovation, and moral energy to an international system paralyzed by competing sovereignties. Through digital activism, humanitarian coordination, and faith-based advocacy, civil society provides solutions that transcend geopolitical divisions. Civil society now serves as the connective tissue of global governance, mediating between citizens and institutions in pursuit of collective well-being (Afifi & Abbas, 2023; Anheier & Toepler, 2009).

The contemporary crisis of political legitimacy and economic exhaustion has opened a new diplomatic frontier. Civil society (acting through humanitarianism, advocacy, and moral institutions) has emerged as an alternative source of global leadership. This goes beyond states' diplomacy, transforms empathy into influence, and moral conviction into global cooperation. It reflects a profound truth: that in a world where states falter, humanity itself becomes the new ambassador of peace and justice (Chirzin, 2000; Fuad, 2002).

This paper highlights how global crises have propelled the emergence of alternative solutions driven by civil society and humanitarian action. It explores the theoretical transition from state-centered diplomacy to the expanding role of global civil society, analyzing how non-state actors engage in humanitarian initiatives that function as alternative forms of diplomacy and advocacy.

## 2. State diplomacy to civil society

### 2.1. *Global diplomacy exhaustion*

The global crisis today is not only about conflict or inequality, but it is also about the exhaustion of systems. Political solutions are locked in power rivalries, corruptions, economic systems drain environmental and moral capital, and multilateral institutions struggle to reach consensus (Anwar et al., 2006; Dix, Hussmann, & Walton, 2012).

In this context, civil society offers a direct and adaptive alternative that goes beyond limits, acts across borders, faiths, and ideologies. Civil society is also far beyond bureaucracy, moves swiftly and empathetically, whereas governments are slow. Civil society, for more reasons, is beyond interest

and mobilizes moral power rather than material incentives. Humanitarian and beyond states' diplomacy represents a straight alternative to deadlocked political action. It channels collective energy toward renewal, building cooperation, trust, and moral solidarity where traditional mechanisms have failed.

Traditional diplomacy (Track One) focuses on state-to-state negotiation (Berridge, 2022). Yet, Multi-Track Diplomacy Theory (Diamond & McDonald, 1996; Montville, 2006) acknowledges the contribution of citizens (Track Two) and other non-government entities or civil society. In this expanded view, diplomacy is no longer a state monopoly but a network of societal interactions seeking peace and mutual understanding.

Transnational relations, arguing that international politics involves both state and non-state actors who interact across borders (Keohane & Nye Jr, 1972). Later, this was described as governance without government, in which order arises through multiple actors and norms (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). Humanitarian actors (like the Red Crescent, Red Cross, or Médecins Sans Frontières) embody this logic by negotiating access, resources, and protection across sovereign boundaries (Smith & Minear, 2007).

## 2.2. *Civil society and hopes*

At the heart of this transformation and crisis lies civil society's power to create and become the last defence of ethical norms. Civil society presents as a space of collective action where citizens mobilize across borders to promote universal values: peace, justice, and human rights (Kaldor, 2020). Civil society, through its moral legitimacy and networked activism, operates beyond national limits, creating a shared normative order that neither markets nor states can sustain alone. This theoretical synthesis explains how humanitarian movements today act diplomatically by advocating, negotiating, and norm-setting on the global stage.

Global citizens today, NGOs, faith-based philanthropies (zakat, waqf, foundations, or trusts), and advocacy groups can reshape the global agenda by constructing new norms, such as environmental justice, gender equality, moral ethics, and humanitarian protection (Abdul Aziz et al., 2019; Afifi, 2024). Civil society does not merely respond to state failure. It creates alternative systems of meaning and action which unsolved, establishing new norms of solidarity and accountability. Civil society becomes both a moral defender and a diplomatic innovator, transforming compassion into

a form of political power. Through advocacy, humanitarian aid, and global campaigns, citizens set new standards of justice and redefine how legitimacy is constructed in world politics.

In this sense, humanitarian and beyond-state diplomacy builds a common network based on values and an ethical mission. They mobilize using networks, informatuin use information, symbolic politics, and moral authority to influence policy and public opinion. At some point, they build a transnational advocacy networks that enable non-state actors to influence international behavior through information exchange, moral framing, and norm diffusion (Keck & Sikkink, 2014).

This emerging paradigm marks the transition from hierarchical to networked diplomacy (Castells, 2013). Influence no longer flows only from governments downward, but through horizontal webs of citizens, digital activists, and humanitarian actors. Constructivist IR theory (Wendt, 1992) helps explain this shift. Global politics is socially constructed by norms and shared meanings. Civil society, through sustained advocacy, becomes a norm and a last hope, redefining what counts as legitimate global action (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Thus, humanitarian and beyond-state diplomacy appears in crisis and an important period of humanity, which is not an anomaly. Today, it is a manifestation of evolving global norms shaped by societal agency, ethics, and moral hopes for a better world.

## 3. **Humanitarianism to global diplomacy**

Today's situation pushes humanitarianism to alter beyond state diplomacy, indicating a broader transformation in how legitimacy operates in international affairs. Non-state actors are increasingly recognized as vital agents in global peacebuilding, environmental protection, and social justice (Weiss, 2013). Faith-based humanitarian networks, for example, integrate religious ethics into diplomatic practice, promoting universal compassion while fostering interreligious understanding. Similarly, youth-led climate diplomacy and global humanitarian volunteerism illustrate how civic participation now constitutes a new form of global soft power (Abbas, Eliza, & Afifi, 2024; Anheier & Toepler, 2009). In this sense, beyond states, diplomacy is not simply a moral alternative; it represents a reconfiguration of global authority where citizens act as agents of global change through humanitarian engagement.

Humanitarian diplomacy involves negotiating access, influencing policy, and mobilizing empathy to protect human life (Slim, 2016). In the 20th century, this was mostly the domain of international organizations like the Red Crescent, Red Cross, or UN agencies. Today, however, citizen-led humanitarian action (from volunteer medical missions, digital advocacy to aid for refugees) operates as *de facto* diplomacy, something factual happens in the field, and reality today.

This shift reflects a new understanding of authority: moral ethics based rather than institutional, global rather than territorial. Humanitarianism represents a moral consciousness that exceeds borders (Barnett, 2011; Fassin, 2011). When citizens mobilize to respond to war, disaster, or injustice, they practice diplomacy grounded in moral ethics rather than interest.

#### 4. Society as an emerging actor

Civil society and social networks represent an emerging layer of global governance. Humanitarian diplomacy involves negotiating access, mobilizing aid, and influencing decision-makers for the benefit of vulnerable populations (Slim, 2016). While governments often pursue strategic or security-oriented goals, humanitarian diplomacy seeks moral legitimacy through empathy and global responsibility. These civil actors coordinate across borders to influence state and intergovernmental behavior.

Governments often face political constraints, conflicting interests, or strategic hesitations that delay or weaken their interventions during emergencies. In contrast, civil society organizations frequently respond with greater agility, proximity, and moral urgency. Civil society's role becomes particularly vital in crises where states are either unwilling or unable to act. Non-governmental organizations, volunteer networks, faith-based groups, and community-led coalitions often provide the first and most sustained forms of assistance. These actors not only deliver relief but also negotiate access, gather information, and advocate for victims in ways that parallel traditional diplomatic functions (Smith & Minear, 2007). Their proximity to affected populations enables them to articulate humanitarian needs with credibility, while their independence from governmental constraints allows them to mobilize resources and pressure authorities more effectively.

The emergence of global civil society has redefined humanitarian engagement as a form of transnational advocacy. Civil society movements no

longer confine themselves to humanitarian relief; they increasingly challenge structural violence, discriminatory policies, and geopolitical blockades that perpetuate suffering. Humanitarianism thus becomes intertwined with global advocacy, transforming compassion into a form of political agency. This dynamic is evident in international campaigns for refugee rights, anti-war mobilizations, and digital activism addressing crises such as Syria, Palestine, and Myanmar. These movements demonstrate that civil society does not simply respond to crises but actively reshapes global narratives surrounding responsibility and justice.

As humanitarianism transitions into global advocacy, it simultaneously expands the concept of diplomacy itself. Civil society showed as an emerging actor, through negotiation, public campaigns, and moral framing, performs diplomatic roles that challenge the monopoly of states in international relations. Their advocacy transforms humanitarian imperatives into political demands for structural reform, rights protection, and international accountability. This evolution underscores a fundamental shift. In a world where traditional diplomacy faces gridlock and political fatigue, civil society emerges as an alternative diplomatic force capable of mobilizing global compassion and advancing transformative change. Thus, humanitarian crises become not only sites of suffering but also arenas where global civil society asserts agency, reshapes governance norms, and influences international decision-making.

#### 5. Challenges and tensions

Despite its potential, humanitarian and beyond-state diplomacy faces inherent dilemmas. Without formal accountability structures, such efforts risk moral authoritarianism or political co-optation (Azra et al., 2017; Douzinas, 2007; Kurniawan & Afifi, 2023). There is also the question of representational legitimacy and transparency. Civil society and humanitarian actors may unconsciously reproduce power hierarchies, privileging certain voices while silencing others (Barnett & Weiss, 2018). Thus, while society-led diplomacy is ethically appealing, it must evolve within frameworks that ensure inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. The transition from state-led to society-driven diplomacy marks a deeper reconfiguration of global authority. As governance becomes increasingly multi-actor and network-based, the legitimacy of moral action gains prominence (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992).

Beyond states, diplomacy is not anti-state, but post-Westphalian. It operates alongside, sometimes within, but often beyond formal structures. It emphasizes partnership, communication, and compassion as instruments of influence. In humanitarian crises, civil society actors negotiate access, broker trust, and mobilize global support faster and more credibly than many governments. This pluralistic model reflects a shift from hierarchical diplomacy to distributed moral power, where citizens, organizations, and communities act as agents of humanitarian governance (Afifi, Andriyaldi, et al., 2024).

This is an era where modernized civil society, well organized and can also provide transparency like a other formal entities. The presence of an organized moral society will become a solution for many crises globally, where it can offer solutions and values. To sustain their credibility, society-driven diplomacy must balance passion with principles, anchoring action in transparency, inclusivity, accountability, and maintaining relations and collaboration with the state. Despite its promise, humanitarian and beyond-state diplomacy faces key challenges. The tension between moral agency and political manipulation remains real. Even so, the balance between state and non-state actors has become beneficial to society and the nation in general.

## 6. Conclusion

The deadlock of political diplomacy and the exhaustion of economic systems have created a void in global governance. Into this void, civil society has entered as a creative, moral, and operational

actor, bridging the gap between humanity's ethical needs and institutional incapacity. Societies redefine the essence of international relations, not as competition for power, but as cooperation for survival.

This paper argues that civil society does not merely complement state action; it reconstructs the moral foundations and evolution of diplomacy. In the decades ahead, the vitality of global peace and justice may depend less on summits and treaties and more on the courage of communities that act across borders, sustain compassion, and practice diplomacy in the name of humanity itself. This article has argued that society has emerged as a global diplomatic actor, particularly through humanitarian action that transcends traditional state mechanisms.

The rise of beyond-state diplomacy reflects the democratization of global engagement, where moral conviction, empathy, and collective responsibility redefine international relations. Humanitarianism, once limited to the domain of aid and charity, now embodies a form of political communication and moral diplomacy that challenges power asymmetries in the global system. As crises of governance, inequality, and conflict continue to multiply, citizen-led humanitarian diplomacy will likely shape the moral and political fabric of the 21st century.

Future studies should explore how such diplomacy can be institutionalized without losing its ethical authenticity, ensuring that global compassion becomes a sustainable force for justice and peace.

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