

Teaching Humanitarian Diplomacy in an Age of Politicised Aid

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Abstract

Humanitarian diplomacy has matured into a central field of international relations positioned between ethical principle and pragmatic negotiation. This paper integrates a conceptual and historical review of the field with a qualitative documentary review of the politicisation of aid and the ethics of neutrality during the Gaza conflict from 2023 to 2025. Six dominant models are assessed, namely the neutrality framework of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the humanitarian, development and peace nexus, state-centric diplomacy, nonstate advocacy, principled pragmatism, and hybrid cooperation. None proves individually sufficient, and effective practice requires context-sensitive hybridity. The Gaza evidence indicates that neutrality has shifted from a fixed principle into a negotiated and digitally mediated ethical practice shaped by asymmetrical power, donor conditionality and information warfare. The paper argues that this shift exposes a capability deficit rather than merely a doctrinal one, since hybridity and reflexivity cannot be improvised under fire but must be taught, assessed and institutionally supported. It therefore advances humanitarian education development as the missing infrastructure of humanitarian diplomacy, proposing a competency framework, a tiered curriculum architecture and a localisation-first delivery model, while treating education itself as a protected humanitarian object whose destruction eliminates the local capacity on which future humanitarian diplomacy depends.

Keywords: humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian education, international humanitarian law, humanitarian principles, politicisation of aid, neutrality, principled pragmatism, localisation, Gaza

1. Introduction

Humanitarian diplomacy has become an increasingly prominent field in both theory and practice, situated at the intersection of international relations, humanitarian action and applied ethics. Régnier (2011) describes it as the art of persuading decision-makers to act in the interests of the most vulnerable in full respect of humanitarian principles, a formulation that captures its dual character as an operational instrument for overcoming practical barriers and an ethical commitment binding action to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Its relevance has grown as crises have multiplied. Armed conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza demonstrate the centrality of negotiation to humanitarian access; climate-driven emergencies have compelled aid actors to engage states, corporations and multilateral bodies in new configurations; and the coronavirus pandemic underscored the importance of diplomatic negotiation for cross-border aid flows and equitable distribution of medical countermeasures (Alsukhni, 2024). Much of this work is now conducted by nongovernmental organisations, civil society bodies, faith-based groups and specialised United Nations agencies, a transprofessional character that distinguishes the field from classical diplomacy (Minear & Smith, 2007). Turunen (2022) shows that the everyday practice of United Nations humanitarian diplomats consists of a constant balancing act between principle and political compromise.

The field has nevertheless developed a conspicuous asymmetry. Its conceptual literature is rich, and its empirical literature is growing, yet its educational literature remains thin. Scholars have theorised negotiation, persuasion and principled compromise, but comparatively little attention has been paid to how the competencies these theories presuppose are formed, transmitted, assessed and institutionally sustained, and still less to where and by whom. Humanitarian negotiation is frequently described as an art or a craft (Minear & Smith, 2007), a formulation that is descriptively apt yet pedagogically evasive, since crafts are apprenticed and arts are trained. If humanitarian diplomacy is to be more than the accumulated intuition of a small and largely internationally recruited elite, it must be built into deliberate systems of professional formation.

The Gaza conflict makes this problem acute. Following the escalation of October 2023, sustained military operations destroyed much of the enclave's critical infrastructure, displaced the overwhelming majority of the population and produced conditions of famine risk (Al Jazeera, 2024; BBC News, 2024; Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF], 2024; Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2024; World Food Programme [WFP], 2024). Blockades, restricted access and the alleged instrumentalisation of assistance deepened civilian suffering (Amnesty International, 2024a; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Oxfam, 2024), while the intensity of bombardment (Middle East Monitor, 2024) unfolded within a hyper-mediated environment in which convoy movements, casualty figures and organisational statements were tracked, contested and algorithmically amplified in real time. Established frameworks were not designed for conditions in which access is not merely restricted but actively manipulated as a strategic instrument subject to real-time bargaining, surveillance and disinformation, nor for a context in which agencies face existential threats less from physical blockade than from donor suspension and reputational attack (United Nations News, 2024).

The conventional response to such conditions is doctrinal, involving revised models and refined principles. This paper argues that doctrinal revision is necessary but insufficient, because the models already point towards adaptive hybridity while the capability infrastructure required to enact hybridity ethically and consistently remains absent. Four questions structure the analysis. How has humanitarian diplomacy developed conceptually and institutionally? What do the dominant models offer, and where do they fail under extreme politicisation? What does the Gaza case reveal about the competencies humanitarian actors actually require? What curricular, institutional and policy architecture would produce those competencies, and what risks attend its pursuit? The term humanitarian education development is used in a deliberately two-track sense, denoting both the professional formation of practitioners and the protection, continuity and reconstruction of educational systems in conflict.

2. Literature Review

The review proceeds in three movements: it establishes the definitional and historical consensus, identifies what that consensus leaves unexamined, and then assesses the dominant models against the capability demands each imposes. Humanitarian diplomacy may be defined as the set of diplomatic practices, including negotiation, persuasion, advocacy and strategic engagement, employed to advance humanitarian objectives in crisis and armed conflict (Cahill, 2013). Kirecci (2015) stresses its character as strategic action directed at political and military actors, which distinguishes it from generalised advocacy by foregrounding the task of convincing those who hold power to permit humanitarian outcomes. Unlike classical diplomacy, it encompasses nongovernmental organisations, international agencies and community-based groups, and its negotiators are frequently logisticians, physicians, engineers or lawyers rather than career diplomats (Minear & Smith, 2007). This is precisely why the educational question is unavoidable, since the field systematically recruits people trained for something else and then requires them to perform diplomacy.

The humanitarian principles remain the normative backbone of the field (Dunant, 1862/2010; International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2023), and Bogatyreva (2022) underlines that they are vital for establishing trust with belligerents. Their application is rarely straightforward, since impartiality can be compromised when donor restrictions or counter-terrorism regulations prevent aid from reaching certain populations, while neutrality is routinely contested in polarised conflicts. In practice, the field operates across scales, from special envoys and Security Council sessions (Kavak, 2025) to the daily micro negotiations that determine whether a truck passes a checkpoint or a clinic is respected (Belloni, 2007; Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation [CCHN], 2019). The ICRC represents the archetype of discreet engagement, whereas MSF exemplifies an outspoken tradition of *témoignage* that denounces atrocities when access is denied (Chin et al., 2023; MSF, 2024). Practitioner-facing resources codify this method in considerable detail (CCHN, 2019; Egeland et al., 2011; Mancini-Griffoli & Picot, 2004), yet they do so as manuals and reference tools rather than as curricula, documenting technique without specifying sequence, progression, assessment or the conditions under which competence might be certified.

The origins of the field are conventionally traced to Dunant's response to the Battle of Solferino, which led to the founding of the ICRC and the first Geneva Convention (Dunant, 1862/2010). His contribution was as much pedagogical as diplomatic, since it reshaped elite understanding of what war permitted. The post-1945 era institutionalised the field through the United Nations, its specialised agencies and the Geneva Conventions of 1949 (Belloni, 2007). The late twentieth century brought new humanitarianism, as relief became entangled with peacebuilding, democratisation and, in some theatres, counterinsurgency, raising concerns that neutrality was being structurally undermined (Barnett, 2011). Anderson (1999) made explicit that aid is never neutral in its effects, whatever the intentions of its providers, while organisations such as MSF resisted politicisation through

independence and confrontational advocacy (Chin et al., 2023). Globalisation subsequently empowered nonstate actors to engage directly in diplomacy (Kirecci, 2015); the nexus agenda reflected recognition that protracted crises cannot be addressed by relief alone (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2019); and digital platforms expanded advocacy while introducing risks of misinformation and surveillance (Bogatyreva, 2022). Institutional promotion followed through training and policy work (Minear & Smith, 2007) and through negotiation-specific initiatives (CCHN, 2019), while scholarship situated the field within debates on global governance and resilience (Alsukhni, 2024; Turunen, 2024). Institutionalisation in this account is legal, organisational and doctrinal; educational institutionalisation, in the sense of accredited programmes, progression standards and portable credentials, is not treated as belonging to the same history.

Read against the grain, this trajectory reveals persistent under-institutionalisation of learning. Walker and Russ (2010) documented fragmented training provision, weak certification, limited mutual recognition of qualifications and heavy reliance on learning by doing. Standards initiatives codified quality expectations without creating a system capable of delivering them (CHS Alliance et al., 2014; Sphere Association, 2018), and negotiation-specific resources emerged comparatively late (Egeland et al., 2011; Mancini-Griffoli & Picot, 2004). Each new demand, whether legal literacy after 1949, political analysis after 1990 or digital literacy after 2010, was absorbed by practitioners individually rather than curricularly. Where the sector has codified quality, it has done so generically, addressing humanitarian action as a whole rather than disaggregating diplomatic and negotiating competence into domains with observable performance criteria against which progression could be assessed. The consequence is that there is nothing specific to accredit, nothing to recognise across agencies and nothing to evaluate.

Four established rationales justify studying humanitarian diplomacy. It enhances understanding of crises that extend well beyond battlefields to displacement, pandemics, environmental disaster and protracted urban siege, providing analytical tools for examining how actors negotiate access and secure adherence to international humanitarian law (Régner, 2011). It bridges divides in a fragmented arena where national interests, organisational mandates and law collide, since quiet negotiation and multilateral coordination remain crucial to mobilising resources in protracted conflict (Bogatyreva, 2022). It exposes ethical challenges, since Chin et al. (2023) note that the field is simultaneously a practice and a dilemma concerning how far actors may compromise without forfeiting the neutrality that makes them useful, and whether aid can be delivered without servicing military objectives (Anderson, 1999; Slim, 2015). Finally, it offers practical guidance for policy (Cahill, 2013).

Each rationale is, on inspection, a statement about what practitioners need to know and be able to do. Understanding crises is a knowledge objective, bridging divides a skills objective, interrogating ethics a disposition objective and guiding policy an application objective. The literature has produced, without quite saying so, the outline of a professional curriculum, yet it has not produced the machinery to deliver it in the form of accredited programmes, progressive competency standards, assessment methods, faculty development or funding models treating education as a core humanitarian cost. This omission has distributional consequences. Where expertise is transmitted informally through career-long apprenticeship inside international organisations, access to that expertise tracks access to those organisations. Localisation commitments made under the World Humanitarian Summit (2016) presuppose that national actors can assume diplomatic and negotiating roles, yet the pathways that would make this feasible remain concentrated in the global North and priced accordingly. Education is therefore not a peripheral implementation detail of localisation but its precondition.

Taken together, the strands reviewed above converge on three settled propositions: that humanitarian diplomacy consists of principled persuasion of those who control access (Cahill, 2013; Kirecci, 2015; Régner, 2011); that practice is unavoidably hybrid and compromised, neutrality functioning as an aspiration negotiated in situ rather than a condition attained (Anderson, 1999; Slim, 2015; Turunen, 2024); and that diplomatic agency now extends well beyond states (Chin et al., 2023; Minear & Smith, 2007). Each settlement rests on an unexamined premise, namely that practitioners possess the capabilities it requires. Two further silences follow. First, the literature on professionalisation documents fragmented and largely Northern provision (Walker & Russ, 2010) without connecting this to the localisation commitments that such provision determines the feasibility of. Second, scholarship on education in emergencies and scholarship on humanitarian diplomacy have developed as separate literatures, the former treating education as a sector requiring protection and the latter treating diplomacy as a capability requiring practitioners, so that neither observes that the destruction of schools and universities in crisis-affected societies is simultaneously the destruction of the pipeline through which future negotiators, lawyers and clinicians would be produced.

The ICRC model represents the classical approach, grounded in strict neutrality, impartiality and independence and operationalised through confidential bilateral engagement with all parties. Its strength lies in the trust it

generates among belligerents who perceive it as nonpolitical, enabling access to detainees and the negotiation of corridors (ICRC, 2023; Régnier, 2011), yet its insistence on discretion has been criticised as limiting in protracted crises where silence may read as complicity (Belloni, 2007). Educationally, it presupposes deep legal literacy, discretion, long-horizon relationship management and interlocutor mapping, and it depends on sustained doctrinal education and institutional memory transfer.

The humanitarian, development and peace nexus seeks to connect relief with development and peacebuilding, as in responses to Rohingya displacement (SIPRI, 2019). Its holistic vision addresses structural drivers, but aligning aid with stabilisation objectives erodes neutrality, a dynamic visible where assistance became coupled to counterinsurgency (Kirecci, 2015), and coordination costs further limit effectiveness (Chin et al., 2023). It presupposes systems thinking, conflict sensitivity and multisector programme design, and therefore demands interdisciplinary curricula and joint training across sectors.

State-centric models emphasise how governments use aid to pursue foreign policy objectives, mobilising substantial resources and leverage while eroding trust through politicisation (Belloni, 2007; Régnier, 2011). They presuppose statecraft literacy and an understanding of donor politics, sanctions and compliance regimes, competencies rarely taught to operational personnel. Nonstate models exemplify flexibility and advocacy, since public denunciation confers influence on actors unconstrained by state relationships (Chin et al., 2023; MSF, 2024), yet such actors lack diplomatic weight and frequently face access denial (Alsukhni, 2024). They presuppose strategic communication, evidence-based advocacy and a considered assessment of the risks of speaking out.

Principled pragmatism blends firm principles with flexible engagement, acknowledging that pure neutrality is unattainable in highly politicised contexts (Turunen, 2024). Its weakness is ambiguity, since without operational guidance it risks rationalised compromise, and it presupposes structured ethical reasoning, red line setting and documented deliberation. Hybrid models combining state resources with operational expertise have proven effective at scale in large displacement responses (Bogatyreva, 2022) while remaining prone to bureaucratic drag and politicisation (SIPRI, 2019), and they presuppose partnership brokerage and negotiation across institutional cultures.

Comparative assessment confirms that none offers a complete answer. Neutrality builds trust yet may appear as passivity, the nexus integrates yet politicises, state-centric approaches resource yet compromise, advocacy clarifies yet lacks leverage, principled pragmatism adapts yet remains ambiguous, and hybridity scales yet slows. Case evidence supports this reading, since neutrality proved insufficient in Yemen when politicisation obstructed aid, nexus approaches in the Sahel resist operationalisation, state-driven aid in South Sudan exposed partisan agendas, and hybrid arrangements in the Rohingya response both enabled and delayed action. The crucial observation for the present argument is that hybridity is not a lighter demand than purism but a heavier one. A practitioner operating a single model masters one repertoire, whereas one operating context-sensitive hybridity must master several, know when to switch, and justify the switch ethically. The move from doctrinal purity to adaptive hybridity therefore constitutes a substantial escalation of required competence, and the sector has made the doctrinal move without the corresponding educational investment. The present study responds by reinterpreting the acknowledged insufficiency of these models as a deficit of professional formation rather than of doctrine, by specifying competency domains and a delivery architecture in which Southern curricular authority and credential portability are design requirements rather than desirable additions, and by joining the two separated literatures so that education is treated simultaneously as the infrastructure of humanitarian diplomacy and as a protected object of it.

3. Method

The empirical component employs qualitative documentary analysis grounded in critical perspectives that treat documents as active sites of knowledge production and power negotiation rather than neutral repositories of fact (Bowen, 2009; Fairclough, 1992; Prior, 2003). Analysing the discursive practices embedded in humanitarian communication reveals how neutrality and access are constructed, contested and transformed under extreme politicisation (Belloni, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2013). Documentary review was selected because direct fieldwork was largely impossible for independent researchers owing to access restrictions, communications blackouts and severe security risks, and the method therefore represents a considered response to constraint rather than a default.

The corpus, assembled for the period October 2023 to 2025, comprises institutional documents including United Nations reports, ICRC field updates and donor policy statements (ICRC, 2023, 2024a; OCHA, 2024), civil society materials including field reports, human rights investigations and local bulletins (Al-Haq, 2024; Amnesty

International, 2024a, 2024b; MSF, 2024; Palestinian Medical Relief Society [PMRS], 2024), and digital communications including media monitoring outputs and algorithmically amplified content (BBC Monitoring, 2024). Documents were screened for provenance, authorship and institutional position. Because several categories of sources are themselves parties to an information contest, contested quantitative claims are reported as claims attributable to named sources rather than as independently verified findings.

Four analytical lenses were applied, namely structural analysis of how institutional position shapes genre and authority (Prior, 2003), critical content analysis identifying themes and power relations through iterative coding (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Krippendorff, 2018), discourse historical analysis tracing how neutrality, access and protection shift in meaning across time and speaker (Wodak & Meyer, 2016), and digital narrative mapping of how humanitarian narratives circulate and distort online (Rogers, 2013). Coding proceeded through open, axial and selective cycles, the last identifying the emergent competencies that constitute this paper's distinctive analytical layer.

The conceptual framework integrates politicisation of aid, ethics of neutrality and humanitarian diplomatic response in a cyclical relationship, to which the present study adds practitioner capability as a mediating element. Politicisation pressures ethics, ethics shape diplomacy, diplomacy determines credibility and access, and capability conditions the quality of every transition. Capability is in turn produced by education, which closes the loop and generates the paper's central argument. Quality assurance involved triangulation across document types (Denzin, 2012), reflexivity through positionality statements and peer debriefing (Finlay, 2002), expert review where feasible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), discursive counterweighting that foregrounds marginalised and local sources against institutionally dominant ones (Spivak, 1988), and silence mapping, treating omissions as analytically significant (Foucault, 1972). The study analyses publicly available documents, does not involve human participants, and does not adjudicate questions of criminal responsibility that fall to competent judicial bodies (Jacob, 2024).

4. Findings

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe is the most heavily documented theme. United Nations reporting records mass displacement affecting the overwhelming majority of the population and severe degradation of health infrastructure (OCHA, 2024), while medical organisations describe surgery conducted without anaesthesia or clean water (MSF, 2024) in conditions where palliative provision is minimal (World Health Organisation, 2018). These conditions are characterised by Amnesty International (2024a) and analysed by the ICRC (2024a) in relation to obligations under international humanitarian law, including the prohibition of collective punishment.

A second theme is the emergence of parallel information wars that reshape diplomatic practice. Official communications emphasise security threats while Palestinian narratives frame resistance as defence against occupation (Al-Haq, 2024), and both operate within longer traditions of digital public diplomacy and narrative weaponisation (Aouragh, 2016; Bar-Tal, 2023; Krieg, 2023). Social media platforms have become primary battlegrounds carrying very large monthly volumes of content (BBC Monitoring, 2024), producing what may be termed algorithmic humanitarianism, a condition in which visibility, and consequently political attention and sometimes access, becomes subject to viral outrage cycles rather than assessed need. A third theme concerns the reactivation of regional axes of confrontation and substantial economic spillovers (Kent, 2025; Monshipouri, 2025; Valbjørn, 2024; World Bank, 2024), embedding humanitarian negotiation within a wider geopolitical contest that is itself globally framed (Baroud, 2024; El-Shewy, Griffiths & Jones, 2024) and marked by widely criticised diplomatic asymmetries (Zakaria, 2024).

A fourth theme, less prominent in the diplomacy literature yet highly salient here, is the destruction of the education system. Monitoring documents extensive damage to schools and higher education institutions, displacement of teaching staff and interruption of schooling for an entire cohort (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack [GCPEA], 2024). Beyond immediate learning loss, this destroys the local pipeline through which future humanitarian professionals, negotiators, lawyers and clinicians would be produced, so that localisation of humanitarian diplomacy is not merely difficult but has its human infrastructure actively eliminated.

The analysis further exposes four problematic assumptions in policy responses. State centrism directs the overwhelming majority of formal diplomatic activity towards state-level negotiation despite abundant evidence of nonstate influence over access (Bogatyreva, 2022). Humanitarian exceptionalism frames assistance as apolitical while deploying funding conditionality as leverage, producing a neutrality paradox in which the actors most insistent on the apolitical character of aid are those instrumentalising it. Security primacy subordinates

humanitarian considerations to border security objectives across most of the enclave's perimeter (OCHA, 2024). Media determinism amplifies polarising narratives while under-reporting local de-escalation initiatives, a pattern Alsukhni (2024) associates with the commercial logic of conflict news production. Each assumption carries an educational deficit, since state centrism persists partly because diplomatic training is state-oriented, exceptionalism because the political economy of aid is poorly taught to operational staff, security primacy because practitioners often lack the legal fluency to contest it in the terms of the law, and media determinism because organisations lack communications and algorithmic literacy.

Three further patterns emerge. A sovereignty and humanitarian gap manifests in contradictory state behaviour, with broad multilateral support for ceasefire resolutions coexisting with continued arms transfers to parties to the conflict (SIPRI, 2024; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2024). This visible inconsistency, criticised by MSF (2024), erodes trust in the very normative frameworks that humanitarian educators teach, a demoralising experience that curricula must anticipate rather than ignore. Adaptive strategies are nevertheless developing, including forensic work that combines technical documentation with confidential diplomacy so that violations are recorded without forfeiting access (ICRC, 2024b), and decentralised supply and coordination networks with alternative financial mechanisms established by local organisations (PMRS, 2024). These constitute field-generated innovations produced without formal training, precisely the tacit knowledge that is lost unless systematically captured and taught. Alternative frameworks are also gaining traction, since transboundary environmental initiatives create limited diplomatic space (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2024) and women-led community councils model grassroots conflict resolution largely absent from formal tracks (UN Women, 2024), with documentation suggesting that locally embedded actors frequently achieved access outcomes where international agencies could not.

Reading across these findings, the competencies that determined humanitarian effectiveness in Gaza differ substantially from those for which most humanitarian staff are formally prepared. Effective actors demonstrated rapid political and actor analysis under extreme information contestation, forensic skills sufficient to document violations to a legally usable standard, digital literacy adequate to manage visibility and protect data on populations at risk, ethical reasoning capable of sustaining defensible decisions when every option involved harm, negotiating relationships built on local trust and social embeddedness rather than institutional badge, and moral resilience sufficient to continue functioning amid bereavement. Almost none of this constellation appears in standard job descriptions or core curricula. The Gaza case therefore functions as a diagnostic, revealing not only the collapse of traditional neutrality models but the obsolescence of the training regime that supported them.

5. Discussion

Three theoretical propositions follow. First, the findings extend Belloni's (2007) account of instrumental politicisation by showing that manipulation operates through infrastructural politicisation, whereby the mechanisms of humanitarian governance, including clearances, funding flows, deconfliction systems and digital surveillance, themselves become instruments of political control (ICRC, 2024a; OCHA, 2024). Nonstate actors similarly weaponise humanitarian visibility through media campaigns (BBC Monitoring, 2024), producing a hybrid ecosystem that transcends state and nonstate binaries (Kent, 2025). The educational corollary is that teaching neutrality as abstention teaches a fiction, and curricula must instead develop the capacity to recognise, map and navigate political embeddedness.

Second, neutrality is evolving from a static principle into what Turunen (2024) terms a repertoire of situated ethics. Where classical discretion emphasises confidentiality (ICRC, 2023), public *témoignage* and legal advocacy represent strategic adaptations to a mediatised environment, and neutrality claims are increasingly constructed performatively through algorithmic visibility management, forensic documentation (Al-Haq, 2024; ICRC, 2024b) and counter-narratives contesting dominant war discourse. This extends the digital diplomacy thesis of Bogatyreva (2022), since neutrality has become in part an informational practice mediated by code, metadata and platform logic. It follows that neutrality can no longer be taught only as doctrine in a law seminar but must also be taught as a communicative and technical practice requiring instruction in verification, open-source investigation, platform dynamics and data protection.

Third, hybridity generates a legitimacy and access paradox, since humanitarian actors gain operational access through political compliance yet risk losing moral legitimacy among affected populations (MSF, 2024; PMRS, 2024). This challenges optimistic assumptions embedded in the nexus (SIPRI, 2019) and points instead towards humanitarian triage between immediate survival needs and structural justice claims (Alsukhni, 2024). The paradox is not resolvable by rule, since it is a domain of practical judgement, and practical judgement is developed through structured, repeated and supervised exposure to hard cases in the pedagogical manner of

clinical medicine and law.

Taken together, these propositions refine principled pragmatism into grounded principled pragmatism, which holds that ethical humanitarian diplomacy must be contextually attuned to political and digital ecosystems, reflexive about its own positionality and incentives, measured by concrete impacts on civilian protection rather than abstract commitment, distributed in recognition that meaningful diplomatic agency exists in local and informal channels (UNEP, 2024; UN Women, 2024), and learnable in the sense of being specifiable as competencies that can be taught, practised and assessed. The final criterion converts a descriptive theory into a programme of action, since a doctrine that cannot be taught cannot be scaled, and a doctrine that cannot be scaled remains the property of gifted individuals.

The proposed Humanitarian Diplomacy Competency Framework specifies six domains derived from the model comparison and the Gaza findings. Normative and legal literacy encompasses international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law together with protection frameworks, assessed through legal problem questions and drafting of advocacy notes. Political and conflict analysis encompasses actor and interest mapping, political economy of aid, conflict sensitivity and compliance regimes, assessed through analytical briefs and scenario planning. Negotiation and persuasion encompasses frontline methods, interest-based bargaining, coalition building and red line management (CCHN, 2019; Mancini-Griffoli & Picot, 2004), assessed through observed simulation. Ethical reasoning under constraint encompasses moral triage, the do no harm framework, complicity, reflexivity and moral injury (Anderson, 1999; Slim, 2015), assessed through structured decision journals and case defence. Digital, data and information competence encompasses verification, platform literacy, disinformation resilience and data protection for populations at risk, assessed through verification exercises and digital risk assessment. Localisation, inclusion and duty of care encompasses equitable partnership, language and cultural competence, gender responsive and disability inclusive practice, accountability to affected populations, security management and psychosocial support, assessed through partnership audits and participatory evaluation. Two design principles underpin the framework. The final three domains are treated as core rather than supplementary, because the Gaza evidence indicates that ethics, digital literacy and localisation are determinative. Each domain terminates in an observable performance, so that progression is assessed rather than assumed.

Delivery requires a tiered architecture. A foundation tier offers short, mandatory, multilingual and offline-capable provision in principles, legal essentials, do no harm, safeguarding, basic negotiation and digital hygiene, released as open educational resources to remove cost barriers. A practitioner tier offers modular microcredentials mapped to the competency domains and stackable towards postgraduate qualification, relying heavily on simulation and cases and deliberately mixing cohorts across international and national lines and across United Nations, nongovernmental and local lines. A strategic tier addresses multitrack diplomacy, donor and Security Council engagement, media strategy and organisational ethics governance. A scholarly tier produces the evidence base the field lacks, with funded pathways for researchers from crisis-affected regions. Across tiers, five pedagogical commitments follow from the analysis, namely the primacy of cases and simulation because judgement is developed by rehearsal (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983), reflective practice as assessed work through decision journals and supervised debriefing (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983), dialogical and co produced curriculum design in which learners from affected communities shape content rather than merely receive it (Freire, 1970), ethics taught through irreducible dilemmas rather than codes alone (Slim, 2015), and duty of care embedded within the curriculum rather than appended to it.

The finding that locally embedded actors frequently outperformed international agencies in securing access carries a direct implication, namely that investment should flow towards building diplomatic capability within crisis-affected societies rather than towards deploying additional expatriate expertise. This entails regional centres of humanitarian education hosted by universities in affected and neighbouring regions with genuine curricular authority, recognition and accreditation architecture enabling qualifications earned in the Global South to carry global currency, language justice through core materials produced in the working languages of crisis response, funding of education as a protected core cost rather than a compressed overhead, and systematic codification of field-generated innovation such as the decentralised networks developed in Gaza (PMRS, 2024) into teaching cases authored by the practitioners who developed them.

The argument has a necessary counterpart, since humanitarian education development is impossible where educational systems are themselves destroyed. The systematic degradation of schools and universities removes the institutional basis for reproducing local professional capacity across medicine, law, engineering and humanitarian practice, a compounding harm unfolding over decades. Education must therefore be treated as a protection priority rather than a recovery afterthought, with existing normative and technical anchors invoked systematically in access negotiations (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2010; Safe

Schools Declaration, 2015). Higher education continuity requires explicit diplomatic advocacy concerning emergency accreditation, remote examination, scholarship corridors and equipment access, items that rarely feature on negotiation agendas. Attacks on education should be documented with the same evidentiary rigour applied to attacks on medical facilities (GCPEA, 2024; ICRC, 2024b). The two tracks converge, since protecting education preserves the capacity to produce humanitarian professionals, and producing humanitarian professionals strengthens the diplomacy that protects education.

6. Implications, Limitations and Further Study

Six implications follow. Sector-wide bodies should establish humanitarian diplomacy as a recognised professional competency area by incorporating the proposed domains into existing quality frameworks with progressive levels and mutual recognition across agencies (CHS Alliance et al., 2014; Sphere Association, 2018). Donors should classify professional education as a core and nondiscretionary humanitarian cost and commit a defined minimum share of humanitarian budgets to capability development, with a majority allocated to national and local actors as an operational specification of localisation commitments (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016). Funders should build accredited educational infrastructure based in the Global South with degree-granting or credentialing authority, faculty development and research capacity rather than short course delivery alone. Agencies should institutionalise digital and information competence through protocols that protect operational communications from manipulation while preserving transparency, ensuring that verification and data protection training become standard for field staff. Independent monitoring of humanitarian access and protective funding mechanisms that limit the use of aid as leverage should be pursued alongside the training that enables practitioners to use such mechanisms effectively. Finally, success metrics should be reformed so that legitimacy as judged by affected communities is measured alongside tonnage delivered, and so that educational programmes are evaluated against protection outcomes rather than participant satisfaction.

Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging that an education agenda carries hazards. Framing political problems as skills gaps can obscure structural causes, since better trained negotiators will not remedy state obstruction or arms transfers, and the response is not to abandon education but to ensure curricula are explicitly political, teaching the political economy of aid and the limits of humanitarian action rather than reducing diplomacy to technique. Training is moreover a well-funded activity with weak evidence of impact, so expansion must be accompanied by rigorous evaluation of transfer to practice and willingness to discontinue ineffective provision. Formal certification risks becoming a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges those able to afford it, which mitigation requires free foundational provision, recognition of prior experiential learning and assessment designed around demonstrated capability. Curricula designed in the Global North and delivered globally reproduce epistemic inequality, so co-production, Southern curricular authority and multilingual materials constitute tests of the agenda's sincerity rather than adjuncts to it. The apparent competition with immediate life-saving expenditure is largely false over any horizon longer than a single response cycle, given that protracted crises dominate the caseload.

Several constraints qualify the findings. The study relies on publicly available documents, so confidential and backchannel negotiations, precisely the domain of classical humanitarian diplomacy, remain undocumented by design. Quantitative claims circulating in the corpus originate with participants in an information contest and are reported here as attributable claims requiring independent verification. Communications blackouts meant the study could not adequately capture the perspectives of Gaza's civilian population, a critical gap given the argument for legitimacy as judged by affected communities. The intensity and specificity of the case may limit direct generalisability; digital tactics evolve rapidly, so findings on algorithmic dynamics may have a short shelf life, and the competency framework is theoretically derived and offered as a testable proposition rather than a validated standard.

Five priorities emerge. Comparative studies should examine how organisations balance legitimacy and access across Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine and Gaza in order to identify both universal patterns and context-specific adaptations. Ethnographic research on grassroots negotiation networks should document alternative models developed by local actors under extreme constraint with a view to converting tacit knowledge into teaching material. Evaluation research using quasi-experimental and longitudinal designs should test whether specific curricular interventions improve negotiation and protection outcomes, which constitutes the single largest evidence gap in the present argument. Computational research should analyse how disinformation driven by artificial intelligence affects humanitarian operations and beneficiary safety. Legal scholarship should address gaps concerning digital warfare, siege tactics and attacks on educational institutions, with attention to the enforceability of existing protections (Jacob, 2024).

7. Conclusions

Humanitarian diplomacy has travelled from the battlefield of Solferino to the mediatised siege conditions of Gaza, developing from discreet bilateral negotiation into a diverse, multilevel and digitally saturated practice now recognised as a field within international relations. Its history reflects continuity through adherence to the humanitarian principles and transformation through integration, hybridisation and pragmatism. The comparative review demonstrates that each dominant model possesses partial validity and none offers a universal solution, so that effective practice must be hybrid, context-sensitive and adaptive. The Gaza evidence sharpens this conclusion in two respects. It shows neutrality shifting from fixed principle into negotiated and digitally mediated ethical practice shaped by asymmetrical power, donor conditionality and information warfare, a shift captured here as grounded principled pragmatism. More decisively, it shows that the competencies this shift demands are not those for which the sector currently prepares its people, since the most effective actors combined legal fluency, political analysis, forensic documentation, digital literacy, ethical judgement under duress and deep local embeddedness, a constellation that is almost nowhere systematically taught.

The future of humanitarian diplomacy therefore depends less on the refinement of doctrine than on the development of education. Hybridity cannot be improvised, reflexivity cannot be assumed, localisation cannot occur without locally accessible professional formation, and none of it is possible where the educational systems of crisis-affected societies are themselves destroyed. Politicisation is not an aberration to be escaped but an embedded structural condition of contemporary humanitarian governance, so that effective diplomacy depends not on disengagement from politics but on the capacity to negotiate moral space within it and to uphold human dignity there. That capacity is learned, and building the institutions that teach it inclusively, affordably, multilingually and above all within the societies that bear the cost of crisis is the most consequential investment the humanitarian sector can now make.

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