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Humanitarianism without a Donor Label: A Critical Review and Three-Tier Typology of State-Led Humanitarian Diplomacy

Humanitarianism without a Donor Label: A Critical Review and Three-Tier Typology of State-Led Humanitarian Diplomacy

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to ask why scholarship on state-led humanitarian diplomacy attends closely to states that fund humanitarian action and barely at all to those shaping outcomes by other means. Humanitarian diplomacy is treated here as deliberate conduct, in which a government uses positional, political or normative leverage to alter what relief reaches whom, rather than the incidental effect of policy adopted for other ends. In design, the article is a critical narrative review of literature published between 2000 and 2026 in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and publisher platforms, read through Global International Relations, postcolonial IR, practice theory and critical humanitarian studies. Items were retained where a sovereign state was the acting subject, non-governmental practice was treated as context, and the search ran in English. The findings establish that the organising assumption of the field, that humanitarian influence follows financial capacity, was inherited from OECD-DAC measurement rather than argued for. A three-tier typology follows, sorting states by structural position and mode of engagement: established Western donors, emerging non-Western donors, and positional actors, whose humanitarian diplomacy runs through hosting, mediation, peacekeeping, access facilitation and advocacy. The third tier is thinly represented in the corpus, the pattern pointing to measurement conventions rather than insignificance. The limitations are that a narrative design yields an analytical frame rather than systematic evidence, that case selection is disputable, and that an English-language search understates relevant regional outlets. The practical implication is that burden-sharing recognising only financial transfers misstates who carries the system.

Introduction
Humanitarian diplomacy (HD) is the strategic use of diplomatic instruments to protect and assist people in crisis while advancing an actor's foreign policy aims. It has drawn steady attention since Minear and Smith (2007) gave the field its founding volume, with Régnier (2011) describing an emerging community of practice and De Lauri (2018) setting an agenda for the decade that followed. Yet the literature turns on a tension few contributors have remarked upon. Its working vocabulary is one of donor fatigue, conditionality, aid effectiveness and the new humanitarians (Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2015; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022), and it takes for granted that humanitarian influence comes down

to money moved. The states worth attention are then those whose contributions can be counted (Barnett & Weiss, 2008).

The assumption was absorbed rather than argued for, and it came from an accounting system. Khakee and Callus (2025) show that the rules by which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development counts official development assistance carry the sediment of the colonial order in which they were drafted, so that transfers from former colonial powers to their remaining overseas territories still register as aid. What a measurement system admits is therefore no technical matter. It fixes who appears in the ledger, and that ledger has become the field's working map of who counts, an instance of the process by which governance machinery constitutes the categories through which states are recognised (Chimni, 2017). Hosting, peacekeeping, mediation and the negotiation of access leave no mark on it, and states engaging through those channels leave little mark on the scholarship.

That the financial and conceptual architectures should fit so neatly was no accident. Western states dominated the humanitarian system for decades and underwrote the disciplines that took it as their object (Barnett, 2011). The donor, besides, is a contested identity rather than a neutral description. Mawdsley (2012) records Southern providers who decline the label along with the hierarchy it implies, and Gómez (2021) argues that a Western-centred framing understates the South's part in shaping humanitarian norms.

None of this means the conduct at issue has gone unrecorded. It has been recorded under other labels. Migration diplomacy shows how host states convert displacement into bargaining power (Tsourapas, 2019), and work on refugee rentierism traces its diffusion across the Global South (Freier et al., 2021; Salehyan & Savun, 2024). Small-state International Relations establishes how materially constrained states earn standing in international organisations through the competent performance of vulnerability (Corbett et al., 2019). Peace operations scholarship reads troop contribution as statecraft with domestic and regional payoffs (Banini et al., 2020; Goulart, 2025), and South-South cooperation research documents horizontal assistance among providers who decline the donor identity outright (Mawdsley, 2012; Gómez, 2019). What none of these literatures does is read such conduct as diplomacy. Each holds its object inside its own subfield, as migration policy, as force generation, as development cooperation, so no cumulative account of the state as a humanitarian diplomatic agent has formed. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto (2015) call the wider pattern an erasure of non-Northern humanitarianisms from the archive of knowledge, but leave the mechanism open.

We therefore interpret this conduct as diplomacy, and the definition needs care. A state that opens or closes a corridor, admits or encamps a displaced population, offers or withholds a mediator, or holds a line at a multilateral forum exercises leverage over humanitarian outcomes (Tsourapas, 2019; Duursma, 2020). It does so through instruments the field recognises as diplomatic, operational activity, multilateral advocacy and norm promotion (Şeyşane & Tanrıverdi-Şeyşane, 2022). Conduct of that kind warrants the same scrutiny as the signing of a cheque. Two qualifications hold the claim in place. Deliberateness is already in the founding definition (Minear & Smith, 2007), so the object here is a strategy for shaping humanitarian outcomes, not the side effects of policy adopted for other reasons. The instruments must also be diplomatic, so sitting astride a corridor becomes humanitarian diplomacy only when a government acts on it.

Why the gap matters is a fair question, and the consequences are not confined to the academy. Burden-sharing negotiations proceed from an account of who contributes, and one registering only transfers will keep understating the states carrying the largest protection loads (Chimni, 2017). Humanitarian access is negotiated with governments rather than purchased from them, so a field studying funders more closely than gatekeepers understands the point of delivery least well (Geremedhn & Gebrihet,

2024). Reform proposals inherit the omission, since a revised ledger counts only what its categories admit (Khakee & Callus, 2025).

This article widens the scope. It reads the donor-centric paradigm through Global International Relations (Acharya & Buzan, 2019), postcolonial International Relations (Chimni, 2017), practice theory and critical humanitarian studies, and builds from that reading a three-tier typology. Tier I holds the established Western donors and Tier II the emerging non-Western donors. Tier III holds positional actors, meaning states whose humanitarian diplomacy works through refugee hosting, mediation, peacekeeping, access facilitation and multilateral advocacy rather than registered giving. The tier is named for what these states do, not for what they lack. Tanzania shows what it looks like in practice, a state absent from every donor table that has sustained hosting, mediation and multilateral advocacy across six decades (Kajerero & Nguyahambi, 2026). We are not claiming that these states make better humanitarians, since their records carry coercion, calculation and reversal in much the same proportion as anyone else's (Tsourapas, 2019; Fellesson, 2021). The narrower claim is that a field which cannot see them has no adequate account of the system it studies.

Method

This section sets out how the review was conducted and how the typology was built. It covers the design and what it can support, the rules by which states were sorted, the sources, criteria for retaining them, and the manner in which the corpus was read.

Design

This is a critical narrative review of scholarship on state-led humanitarian diplomacy. The question it puts is not what the evidence shows but what the field has taken for granted. An assumption of that kind is not a finding any single study reports. It has to be read out of the vocabulary a literature uses, the actors it treats as worth attention, and the questions it never gets round to asking. A critical narrative review works interpretively across debates that will not reduce to a common metric, and so suits an object of analysis that is the frame itself (Torraco, 2005). Exhaustive coverage is given up for the capacity to interrogate premises.

Typology construction

Typologies are analytical instruments with construction rules of their own rather than informal groupings (Collier et al., 2012), so the procedure warrants setting out. States were sorted on two dimensions. The first is structural position in the financing system, meaning presence in or absence from OECD-DAC reporting. The second is primary mode of engagement, meaning the instruments through which a state acts on humanitarian outcomes. The two do different work, and it is worth saying what each is for. Mode of engagement accounts for what a state does. Structural position accounts for whether it is recorded at all, since the reporting framework decides who enters the ledger and so who enters the literature built on it. Drop the first and the typology collapses into the donor binary it was built to escape; drop the second and the omission this review explains has no explanation. Each dimension was read independently, following the ideal-type procedure in which categories are specified first and cases matched against them (Stapley et al., 2022).

The naming of the third tier follows from this. Absence from DAC reporting is a descriptive criterion and does real sorting work, but it cannot also serve as the tier's name without reinstating the measurement convention this review questions. Tier III is therefore designated positional actors, meaning states whose humanitarian influence derives from where they stand and from what they are recognised to be rather than from what they disburse. The tier is named for the conduct it contains and not for a ledger it is absent from. Mutual exclusivity was tested against two borderline classes: states reporting some assistance while acting mainly through non-financial channels, and states whose

position has shifted across the period. The tiers are ideal types rather than empirical containers, their boundaries porous by construction (Höppner, 2025).

Materials and Analysis

Literature was retrieved for 2000 to 2026 from Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and publisher platforms, with specialist journals searched directly, including the *International Review of the Red Cross* and *Third World Quarterly*. The search paired the exact phrase 'humanitarian diplomacy' in the title, abstract or keywords with terms for state actors and instruments: state, government, foreign policy, donor, non-donor, sovereignty, refugee hosting, peacekeeping and mediation. Measurement frameworks and the displacement and deployment figures came from OCHA, the OECD Development Assistance Committee, UNHCR and the UN Department of Peace Operations, cited as data rather than scholarship. Selection turned on conceptual relevance and peer review status. Two items sit outside peer review and carry descriptive matters of public record rather than analytical claims.

No screening cascade is reported and no selection flow diagram presented. Both belong to protocol-driven designs claiming exhaustive coverage, and importing them would misstate what an interpretive synthesis can support. The window opens in 2000 because humanitarian diplomacy became a self-designating field only with Minear and Smith (2007), so a shorter window would omit the works in which its concepts were formed. Those works are read as objects of analysis rather than current evidence, and empirical claims rest on sources published from 2019 onward. Sources were read for the definition in use, the actors treated as subjects, the theoretical vocabulary applied and the geography of the cases. Strands emerged from recurrence rather than from categories fixed in advance. One feature of the corpus belongs here as a result rather than a limitation. Sub-Saharan positional states seldom appear as named subjects, and that absence is treated below as substantive.

Results

The findings move from the conceptual to the empirical and then to the gap: what the literature takes humanitarian diplomacy to be, what it has established about the two tiers it recognises, and what it leaves unexamined.

Conceptual findings: three traditions and a working definition

Defining humanitarian diplomacy is never innocent, since definitions carry the priorities of whoever offers them. Three traditions are in circulation, and each answers a different question.

The international humanitarian law tradition, carried by the ICRC and the IFRC, treats humanitarian diplomacy as persuading those in power to act in the interest of vulnerable people while honouring humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence (Régnier, 2011). It answers what makes conduct humanitarian. Its subject, though, is the principled non-state organisation standing apart from state interest, so the definition cannot transfer whole to states. States cannot be neutral in the ICRC sense (Barnett, 2011). The foreign policy tradition answers who may be a subject. It treats humanitarian diplomacy as the deliberate pairing of humanitarian engagement with national interest, and so admits state agency from the outset (Minear & Smith, 2007). Its fullest statement assesses state practice against three pillars: operational activities, advocacy at multilateral forums, and norm-setting with capacity-building (Şeyşane & Tanrıverdi-Şeyşane, 2022). None of those pillars requires donor status, a point the framework establishes without pursuing. Its risk is that the concept dissolves into politically motivated assistance.

The critical tradition answers neither question, and its position should be stated accurately. De Lauri (2016) and Chimni (2017) do not argue that hybridity disqualifies state conduct, nor that states lack agency. Their claim is that humanitarianism is constitutively bound up with structural power, hegemony and the governance of borders, so aid and statecraft are not two things that merely happen

to have been joined. We accept it, and the account of OECD measurement above depends on it. Our disagreement is with a consequence sometimes drawn from it, that conduct inside such structures needs no separate study because its meaning is settled in advance by the structure. Structures condition practice without exhausting it, and the states conditioning humanitarian outcomes on the ground still have to be described. These traditions are not commensurable, and no definition can merge them. What follows takes one element from each at a different level rather than fusing three epistemologies. The purposive test comes from the first and the agential claim from the second. The third supplies no definitional component at all. It operates as a standing methodological caution applied to the analysis, and governs the reading of every tier.

Taking only those two elements, humanitarian diplomacy is the deliberate use of diplomatic instruments, among them negotiation, advocacy, norm promotion, resource mobilisation and access facilitation, by state or non-state actors, to protect and assist people in crisis while advancing the actor's foreign policy aims and normative commitments. What keeps this from spreading is that the conduct must be deliberate, the instruments must be diplomatic, and protection must be an object of the conduct rather than a by-product. *Blocking a Security Council resolution to shield an ally fails the purposive test, whatever the consequences. Deploying peacekeepers to stabilise one's own border qualifies only where protection figures among the objects.* Resource mobilisation remains in the definition, since nothing here treats financial transfer as illegitimate, and mobilising resources is not the same as disbursing them: *appeals, convening and brokering are open to states that fund nothing.* What the article claims is the narrower thing, that financial transfer is not the test of influence.

Theoretical findings

The field's theoretical base draws largely on liberal institutionalism, rational choice and constructivism. Three moves are needed to widen it, and they operate at different levels rather than in parallel.

Global International Relations asks that non-Western humanitarian engagement be read on its own terms, through indigenous normative traditions, regional institutional logics and forms of diplomatic capital owing nothing to a donor budget (Acharya & Buzan, 2019). India's aid principle rests on dharma (Tekir, 2023), and Tanzania reads its obligations through Pan-Africanism. A ledger of disbursements cannot record vocabularies of this kind. Reading them as vocabularies of obligation is not, however, the same as reading them as disinterested; they are political resources as much as ethical ones, and Tanzania's framing of Madagascar's Covid-Organics through Nyerere's legacy was a claim to regional leadership as much as an expression of solidarity (Richey et al., 2021). They do explanatory work without being benign.

Postcolonial International Relations operates at the level above, supplying the structural account of how the category of the recognised humanitarian actor formed and how burden-sharing is settled through governance machinery binding states to rules they had no hand in making (Chimni, 2017). Practice theory operates at the level below, describing what states do inside that settlement: refugee management routines built over decades, mediation skill rooted in regional standing, and access negotiated through hard experience with the conflict parties (Turunen, 2020).

The two are not stacked. Macro-structures discipline these practices and often finance them. Hosting routines run on UNHCR budget cycles decided elsewhere (UNHCR, 2026), peacekeeping capability is sustained by reimbursement rates negotiated by others (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023), and mediation standing rests on contested regional norms (Duursma, 2020). Positional practice is conditioned rather than autonomous. Nor is it costless, since hosting and troop contribution are resource-intensive, and the resources are often drawn from outside. The accounting convention

registers the direction of flow rather than the weight of the burden, so states absorbing large protection loads with externally raised funds appear as recipients and never as contributors.

A caution about practice theory belongs here. It carries no preference for non-Western or positional actors, since it tracks habits wherever they occur. The asymmetry lies elsewhere: Western practice is well funded and thoroughly documented, while the practice of positional states is under-recorded. The lens is useful only because its unit of analysis, competent routinised performance, is not denominated in currency, so it makes conduct legible that a disbursement metric cannot register. The point concerns what the lens makes visible rather than whose side it is on.

Why positional states engage at all is a further question, and two strands answer it. Sociological work has commitment growing out of normative socialisation and role conception, and finds that materially constrained states win standing in international organisations through the competent performance of vulnerability (Corbett et al., 2019). A rational-utilitarian case runs alongside it, in which engagement pays in soft power and reputational credit, though Blair et al. (2022) find such returns uneven and, for Chinese aid in Africa, absent. We take no side, since no consolidated theory exists and the two logics run together in the cases.

The two established tiers

Scholarship on Tier I is where the field began, and it remains its most self-questioning strand. Barnett and Weiss (2008) conclude that Western donors advance norms through means that simultaneously project their influence, the two so entangled as to resist clean separation, and the later merging of humanitarian and security agendas sharpened that problem rather than resolving it. The most ambitious attempt at self-reform drew a sober assessment, since commitments to localisation and reduced earmarking fell short of target (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2022). Donor-centrism therefore looks structural rather than a preference goodwill might revise. Its limitation lies not in quality but in the quiet universalising of scope, fine-grained knowledge of one tier having installed itself as the general account of the field.

Tier II scholarship is the field's most consequential recent growth. Sezgin and Dijkzeul (2015) set the standard comparative frame, showing that emerging donors bring practices the Tier I literature was never built to register. Mawdsley (2012) traced how the passage from recipient to contributor rebalances the system, and recorded how many such providers decline the donor label outright. Gómez (2019) carries the point past the BRICS to Latin America, where crisis cooperation among Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico runs horizontally between line ministries. Barakat (2024) reads Qatar as a niche small-state actor turning limited size to advantage. Turkey has institutionalised a brand built on bilateral delivery, non-conditionality and cooperation with non-state actors (Şeyşane & Tanrıverdi-Şeyşane, 2022), and India pairs its aid principle with energy security, migrant protection and competition with China (Tekir, 2023). Its limit is that Tier II analysis still arranges itself around states with money to give, so the horizon ends at the financial transfer.

The third tier: positional actors

This tier gathers the states the first two cannot accommodate. Positional actors, as the Method defines them, are sovereign states that bear on humanitarian outcomes through hosting, mediation, peacekeeping, access facilitation and advocacy, and that stand outside the framework through which contribution is conventionally recorded (Khakee & Callus, 2025). The order is deliberate: the conduct defines the tier, and absence from the ledger merely locates it. The category is easily misread, so a few things need saying. It is structural and not moral, since nothing here suggests these states are the better humanitarians. A state outside DAC frameworks is also not a non-state actor, and running a government together with an NGO or a diaspora network blurs the agency at issue, since the

humanitarianisms of the South are not all governmental (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Pacitto, 2015). Membership says nothing about magnitude either, since what these states contribute is not smaller so much as differently organised, and measured by instruments built for something else (Chimni, 2017).

Hosting is the clearest instance. Host states in the Global South make refugee policy strategically, weighing domestic politics, security and bargaining position when deciding on admission, encampment and repatriation (Salehyan & Savun, 2024). Tsourapas (2019) shows how Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey converted displaced Syrians into foreign policy leverage, a practice since spread across the Global South into a recognisable form of rent-seeking (Freier et al., 2021). Hosting is therefore a position occupied rather than a cost absorbed, and its scale is not in doubt, since low- and middle-income countries shelter two-thirds of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2026).

Peacekeeping is the second instance, and the evidence cuts more than one way. Most UN peacekeepers come from states outside the donor tables, several carrying protection tasks out of proportion to what they contribute financially (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023). Goulart (2025) finds that intentions compatible with the mission's governance and endorsed at home move troops to perform demanding tasks, while particularistic ones do not. Rwanda illustrates the point, its deployments serving regime security and regional positioning as much as protection (Cannon & Donelli, 2023), while Ghana adds a domestic logic, sustained participation having helped manage the armed forces at home (Banini et al., 2020). This does not disqualify the third tier so much as put it on the footing the other two occupy.

That leaves mediation and access, where legitimacy counts as much as leverage. African third parties are weak by economic and military measures, yet conclude more durable settlements in African civil wars, which Duursma (2020) attributes to the standing the African solutions norm confers. Access is likewise negotiated rather than assumed. In Tigray, humanitarian actors were constrained less by the fighting than by the restrictions the Ethiopian government imposed (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024). Kenya makes the point from a different starting position, hosting close to half a million refugees (UNHCR, 2026) while mediating in South Sudan, Somalia and Burundi (Nyabicha, 2024). Tanzania brings the threads together, appearing on no donor table and yet sustaining hosting, mediation and multilateral advocacy across six decades under acknowledged material constraint (Kajerero & Nguyahambi, 2026). Idealising that record would be a mistake, since the withdrawal from the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework showed how quickly hosting commitments contract once security calculations shift (Fellesson, 2021).

Table 1: Reviewed literature by theme, geography, orientation and framing

Key sources	Thematic focus	Geography	Analytical orientation	Framed as HD
Minear & Smith (2007); Régnier (2011); Turunen (2020)	Field-building	ICRC	IHL; practice	Yes
Barnett (2011); Barnett & Weiss (2008); Metcalfe-Hough et al. (2022)	Power, ethics	Western	Structural critique	Yes
Sezgin & Dijkzeul (2015); Mawdsley (2012); Gómez (2019, 2021); Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Pacitto (2015)	Emerging donors	Global South	South-South	Partly
Barakat (2024); Şeyşane & Tanrıverdi-Şeyşane (2022); Tekir (2023)	State-led practice	Middle East	Small-state IR	Yes
Salehyan & Savun (2024); Tsourapas (2019); Freier et al. (2021)	Host-state policy	Middle East	Migration diplomacy	No
Goulart (2025); Cannon & Donelli (2023); Banini et al. (2020)	Troop contribution	Rwanda; Ghana	Peace operations	No
Duursma (2020); Geremedhn & Gebrihet (2024); Corbett et al. (2019)	Mediation; access	Africa	Wartime diplomacy	Partly
Kajerero & Nguyahambi (2026); Nyabicha (2024); Richey et al. (2021); Fellesson (2021)	Positional practice	East Africa	Foreign policy; refugee policy	Partly
Acharya & Buzan (2019); Chimni (2017); Khakee & Callus (2025)	Global IR; postcolonial; measurement	IR theory	Global IR	Not applicable

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026).

Table 1 records what each strand studies, and the final column how it frames it. Entries illustrate rather than exhaust each strand, and three stand out, all of them results. Scholarship placing humanitarian diplomacy at the centre of inquiry clusters around Turkey and the Gulf, thins into a smaller Asia-Pacific grouping, and offers only scattered African cases, reading the Global South through crisis-affected populations or emerging donors rather than states acting as diplomatic agents. The corpus also leans on qualitative case study and conceptual work, and the absence of a row for systematic study of positional practice is part of the result.

The final column carries the third feature. Host-state policy and troop contribution are well documented, and neither is framed as diplomacy. The pattern is not random: the point at which the framing lapses tracks the DAC boundary rather than the available evidence, which makes a paradigmatic explanation more plausible than coincidence. A narrative review cannot establish this across the field, and we do not claim it does. The proposition is offered as a hypothesis the typology renders testable, the test being a protocol-driven review of the indexed literature.

Discussion

Table 2 draws the three sets of findings together. What follows reads the typology as an argument rather than a classification, meets the two strongest objections to it, and states what it cannot do.

Table 2: A three-tier typology of state-led humanitarian diplomacy

Dimension	Tier I: Established Western donors	Tier II: Emerging non-Western donors	Tier III: Positional actors
Main actors	United States, EU states, UK, Canada	China, India, Turkey, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia	Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Jordan
Sources of influence	Financial power; leadership	South-South solidarity; weight	Structural position; liberation legitimacy
Primary instruments	Bilateral ODA; UN funding	Bilateral aid; infrastructure; religion	Hosting; peacekeeping; mediation
Structural limitations	Politicisation; securitisation	Selectivity; transparency	Resource constraint; invisibility
Explanatory anchor	Liberal internationalism; political realism; normative constructivism	Soft power theory; neoclassical realism; niche diplomacy; indigenous ethical ethos	Global IR; postcolonial critique; South-South solidarity; indigenous ethical ethos; pragmatic realism; sociological and rational-utilitarian explanation

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026).

Tier membership follows the two sorting dimensions set out in the Method. Indigenous ethical ethos refers to the local vocabularies of obligation, icnluding dharma, Ubuntu and Pan-African solidarity. The table is meant to be read across. Most sovereign states, as the first row shows, belong to neither Tier I nor Tier II. Hardly any state in sub-Saharan Africa or the Pacific counts as a recognised donor, though many take a consequential part through third tier channels. The second row shows influence taking a different form in each tier, financial in the first, solidarity-based in the second, positional and legitimacy-based in the third, with no obvious ground for ranking them (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Turunen, 2020).

The typology adds is a unit of analysis. Humanitarian influence will not reduce to financial capacity, so the field is best organised around structural position together with mode of engagement. The governance consequence is direct, since burden-sharing would then have to treat non-financial contributions as equal to transfers (Chimni, 2017). Burden-sharing complicates the picture. Uganda hosts close to two million refugees while Bangladesh and Tanzania carry protracted caseloads of their own (UNHCR, 2026). The fiscal, social and security costs fall on these states while the system meets only part of them, which is the postcolonial claim about distribution stated in practical terms (Chimni, 2017). The third tier earns no halo either. A positional contribution can be indispensable to protection while answering to a calculation having nothing to do with the protected, and all three tiers live with that tension.

Two objections are worth meeting directly. The first holds that if financial capacity determines outcomes, the third tier may be visible without being consequential. The evidence for that is not weak, since donor preferences more than institutional mandate explain much of where the refugee regime spends its money (Thorvaldsdottir et al., 2022). We do not dispute that finding, which is why the typology treats structural position as a question about visibility rather than a proxy for importance. The finding establishes that donors control allocation, which concerns the flow of funds and not the whole of influence. A state that closes a border, opens one, brokers a corridor or refuses a mediator alters humanitarian outcomes without moving a budget line (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024; Tsourapas, 2019).

The second objection is that porous boundaries drain the instrument of analytical utility, and that a typology whose members shift between tiers retrofits description rather than explaining anything. Two things can be said in reply. Typologies perform concept formation and measurement work and are not obliged to predict (Collier et al., 2012), so a case's distance from an ideal-type is information

rather than failure (Höppner, 2025). Turkey's passage from positional conduct to institutionalised donorship is what the instrument is for, since it dates the movement and names the dimensions along which it ran. Retrofitting would be a fair charge had the tiers been read off the cases; they were specified in advance (Stapley et al., 2022).

Limitations

Three things bound what the article can claim. The first is the design. A narrative review supplies an analytical frame rather than systematic evidence, so it can show that a category is missing from the corpus and specify what belongs in it, but cannot measure how far that absence extends across the field (Torraco, 2005). The typology is offered as an instrument to be tested rather than a settled taxonomy. The second is case selection, a matter of judgement readers may dispute, since Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Ghana illustrate the third tier without exhausting it. The third is language. Searching in English understates scholarship in other languages and in the regional outlets the major indexes miss, an uncomfortable concession for an article criticising the same bias, and one we prefer to state rather than manage.

Conclusion

The field has built its account of state practice on an assumption it inherited and never examined, that humanitarian influence follows the capacity to fund. This review traces the assumption to an accounting convention rather than a theoretical argument, and the cost of it is not small. A literature attentive to who disburses has produced fine-grained knowledge of two tiers and very little on a third and larger group, whose bearing on outcomes runs through hosting, mediation, peacekeeping, access facilitation and advocacy. The typology sorts states by structural position and mode of engagement rather than by the size of a contribution, so making the third tier available for study as a class rather than a scatter of exceptions.

A research programme with definite shape follows. The comparisons worth making are between positional states practising the same instrument under different constraints: hosting in Tanzania, Uganda and Bangladesh, mediation in East and West Africa, troop contribution across South Asia and the Great Lakes. The methods best suited register practice rather than expenditure: interviews with officials, observation of institutional routine, and process tracing. A protocol-driven review of the indexed literature would test the proposition about paradigmatic neglect that a design of this kind can only advance.

The policy implication is narrow but not for that reason small. So long as burden-sharing arrangements recognise only financial transfers, they will keep misstating who carries the humanitarian system, and reform of how contributions are counted has to begin with the ones that move no money. One caution belongs with it. Counting hosting, mediation and troop contribution improves on counting nothing, but it is no test of motive: Ghana's record would score well on any such measure while answering, in part, to a domestic civil-military problem (Banini et al., 2020). A revised ledger registers the contribution and not the reason for it.

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