



The ICRC Yemen spokesperson gives an interview to one of the media channels at Sanaa's airport.

Photo: O. Alasi/ICRC

REPORT

The role of communication professionals in humanitarian negotiations

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation

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THE CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) is a joint initiative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD).

It was established in 2016 to provide concrete opportunities for frontline humanitarian negotiators to share and analyse their negotiation practices, to build practitioners' capacity to address recurring challenges and dilemmas in humanitarian negotiation, and to foster peer-to-peer exchange across agencies and regions in a safe environment. Its core objectives are:

- To foster a community of professionals engaged in frontline humanitarian negotiations.
- To promote critical reflection, learning and exchanges among peers within this community.
- To develop a stronger analytical framework and greater capacity for effective practice.

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Executive Summary

Over the course of 2022, a growing number of communication professionals working for humanitarian organisations have shown an interest in joining the workshops on frontline humanitarian negotiation organised by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN).

To better understand why communication professionals are increasingly seeking capacity-building workshops focused on humanitarian negotiation, the CCHN decided to conduct a series of interviews with humanitarian practitioners in communication roles.

Results show that communication professionals face many challenges related to humanitarian negotiation, including:

- A lack of understanding of how communication influences the dynamics of operational humanitarian work
- An unclear role within the negotiation process
- Handling the immediacy of modern communication and social media

After these discussions, the CCHN identified some needs among operational communication professionals and proposed to organise a peer workshop on frontline humanitarian negotiation focused on the needs of communication professionals.

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Introduction

Over the course of 2022, an increasing number of communication professionals working for humanitarian organisations have shown an interest in joining the workshops on frontline humanitarian negotiation organised by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN).

The main audience of these workshops, however, are usually humanitarian professionals working in field positions with over three years of field experience and who carry out negotiations in their day-to-day work.

To better understand why communication professionals are seeking out capacity-building workshops focused on humanitarian negotiation, we decided to conduct some informal consultations.

Methodology

Eight people were interviewed for the purpose of this study. They hold the following positions within humanitarian organisations:

- Two heads of Communications
- Five communication specialist and managers
- One former war correspondent

The interviews were carried out remotely and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The sample size is too small to make any conclusive statements. The **aim of this study is therefore to obtain an overview of the situation and not to provide a detailed analysis of the topic.**

What is the role of communication professionals working for humanitarian organisations?

According to the external communication doctrine of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and several job descriptions for communication roles at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the role of communication professionals working for humanitarian organisations is:

- To raise “the public profile of the ICRC—and more generally that of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement” and to manage their reputation in order to help them “mobilise political and public support” for their activities, as well as “influence attitudes and behaviour, build and deepen trust, and secure human and financial resources.”
- To support “the operations department at both the HQ and mission-levels with strategic communications and advocacy intended to catalyse a change to benefit the people we assist.”
- To increase “visibility and building credibility of MSF as an international, independent, medical humanitarian organisation.”
- To “implement country specific communication work plans designed to maintain and enhance the visibility and reputation of WFP, as well as support fundraising activities, ensuring alignment with overall communications and WFP strategies.”

We can see that across organisations, the objective of communication professionals is to increase the visibility of their organisation and build its credibility in order to mobilise support, build and deepen trust and acceptance and, ultimately, benefit people in need by facilitating access to them.

Where do communication professionals fit in the negotiation process?

One of our interviewees noted: “The foundation of humanitarian assistance is access.” To gain access to people in need, humanitarian personnel working in the field must negotiate at military checkpoints, with local authorities, with parties to the conflict, armed groups or even the people they are trying to help.

Communication professionals also work towards this objective because, as one of the interviewees said, “access can’t happen if people don’t feel comfortable with an organisation.” They are the “face and voice” of their organisation and are asked to “increase visibility” or “raise the public profile” with the explicit objective of gaining acceptance, influencing behaviours and facilitating access for humanitarians working in the field.

However, a common challenge among our interviewees was a lack of understanding of how their role as communication professionals fits into the negotiation process carried out by their colleagues in the field.

Usually, communication officers work from headquarters and sometimes don’t have extensive field experience, nor have they received capacity building in humanitarian negotiation. This means they don’t always understand how the process works and how their work can influence the result, be it in a negative or positive way.

One of the main reasons behind this is that communication professionals aren’t always aware of the strategic objectives that guide a negotiation, meaning their work isn’t consistently aligned with them.

There are some exceptions, of course: in a publicly available job description published by Médecins Sans Frontières, communication professionals are described as the “sparring partners” of programme managers in charge of field operations when it comes to “strategic communications and advocacy strategies, particularly those involving critical humanitarian stakes.”

Nonetheless, many organisations don’t create solid links or information flows between their communications department and their personnel in the field.

This disconnection between departments and a lack of awareness from communication professionals about field processes creates a variety of challenges when it comes to communication around humanitarian organisations and their work on the ground.



An important rule for communication officers is to understand humanitarian negotiations on the ground. If the officer doesn’t understand what the implications of a negotiation are for an organisation, especially when the communication officer is the image and voice of the organisation, there is a risk for the humanitarian negotiation process to fail. Why? Because a single image or word can topple this effort. The foundation of humanitarian assistance is access. And access can’t happen if people don’t feel comfortable with the organisation.



Head of Communications

Findings

1.1 A lack of understanding of how communication can influence the dynamics of operational humanitarian work.

A former operational communication officer mentioned, as common challenge, that communication professionals lack an understanding of how their work influences the dynamics of operational humanitarian work. Because of their different background, they have a “sensitivity as communicators” but they are sometimes missing the “humanitarian perspective.”

Humanitarian organisations must follow humanitarian principles—neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence—at all times, including when they communicate about their activities or humanitarian crises.

When communication professionals don’t interpret humanitarian principles the same way as operational staff, because their work is removed from the reality of the field or they have competing priorities, it may lead to extremely dangerous situations for field aid workers.

For example, if the neutrality of an organisation is questioned because of a communication misstep, field practitioners can lose access to people

in need. This could also cause the communities receiving assistance to distrust an organisation. Lastly, humanitarian field workers can be perceived as ‘spies’ or ‘enemies,’ putting them at risk of attacks.

It’s precisely because their actions have a direct impact on how humanitarian operations unfold that communication professionals have great power—and great responsibility—and absolutely need to understand what humanitarian principles are and how they are applied.



“Digital communicators can feel frustrated because an image must be thought through a thousand times. They don’t always understand the consequences of publishing an image and how it will affect the reality on the field, including an ongoing negotiation. For example, if an image is published where humanitarian staff appear with local authorities, it can give the impression that the organisation is close to the authorities.”

Communication specialist

Example

In Myanmar, communicators have been struggling with humanitarian principles, especially neutrality. After the coup in 2021, humanitarian organisations have engaged with the new authorities as little as possible, but as much as necessary to get permissions and visas for humanitarian staff. Yet, communication teams are concerned when there are information leaks linking humanitarian organisations with the authorities. When this happens, humanitarian practitioners working in Myanmar are singled out on social media and publicly shamed for working for non-government organisations or United Nations agencies who are in touch with the authorities. Some have had to justify themselves or even quit their job.

1.2 A lack of training or capacity-building in humanitarian negotiation.

Four of our interviewees agreed that a lack of awareness of how a negotiation process is carried out means that communication professionals’ work can have a negative impact on ongoing humanitarian negotiations in the field. For this reason, receiving capacity-building on the topic of humanitarian negotiations is essential.

“Communication teams need to make sure they aren’t working against the goals of their own organisation. They need to understand where their organisation stands and figure out what they will say, how they will do it and with whom they are communicating”, said one of the interviewees.

“Communication professionals need to develop negotiation skills”, shared another. “It’s important that they systematically analyse the context they are communicating about. Some communicators who studied journalism do this, but most don’t. The rotation of staff and the knowledge of local context depends on the length of people’s stay in the location. There’s also a big clash between theory and practice: when communication professionals are deployed to the field, they are faced with the dilemma of maintaining humanitarian principles and the reality of the field. They need to know how to operationalise humanitarian principles.”

Example

A few years back, a humanitarian organisation developed an art project for young people affected by violence. The project participants used art to illustrate their experiences and help them improve their mental health. The organisation was interested in communicating about this project and an article was produced. When the article was published, the community of young people realised they were described in a very negative light, even as being ‘emotionally damaged.’ They reacted badly and thought their experience had been misconstrued. There was a complete disconnection between how the younger people saw themselves and how they were portrayed in the article. This damaged the organisation’s relationship with the local community and a lot of work had to be put into repairing the relationship.

1.3 A lack of clarity about the role of communication professionals within the negotiation team.

Communication professionals aren’t always clear what their role is within the negotiation process. Some organisations consider them advisers to a negotiation, while others do not include them in the process at all and might only reach out to them for ad-hoc communication needs.

An interviewee explained that in their organisation, they usually negotiate to gain access or to evacuate people: they design the negotiation and the communication tactics in a way that preserves the relationships they have built in spite of ongoing tensions. To do this well, communication professionals need to be integrated in the negotiation team. Communicators can’t provide advice or voice their concerns if they don’t understand how a negotiation is conducted and what is at stake.

1.4 Difficulties managing the information flow between teams.

The disconnection between teams and communication professionals’ lack of awareness about field processes may constitute an information management challenge.

This points to a need to conduct internal negotiations, something corroborated by the communication professionals we talked to. The challenge is to find a compromise between operations and communication teams in order to meet the organisation’s objectives of visibility and credibility without risking an ongoing humanitarian operation.


One of the interviewees said that the language used by their organisation’s headquarters had been criticised by local populations, who started mocking the escalation of language and the use of terms such as “highly” concerned or just “extremely” concerned, instead of proposing concrete measures. It’s difficult to convey from a local office to headquarters what the effects of language will be in the local language, which shows how the disconnection between the field and headquarter offices can have a real effect on organisations’ missions on the ground.

1.5 Having to prove the added value of communications for the negotiation team.

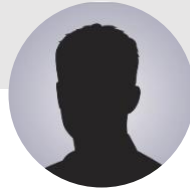
Often, communication professionals feel the need to negotiate internally - within their own agency - to prove their added value as part of a negotiation process.

According to our interviewees, communication is not 'traditional' anymore; a lot has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new remote and digital ways stakeholders are addressed needs to be considered when planning for a negotiation and negotiation teams often can't keep up.

In spite of the perception, their expertise can be extremely valuable to the process. Counting on the support of communication colleagues means the negotiation team can project a better image towards their counterparts and the public, build a sense of legitimacy or stronger relationships, and ultimately better achieve their negotiation outcome.



At our organisation's headquarters, the Communication team is in constant contact with the Operations team in the field. We advise them about strategy and tactics related to communications. Today, negotiators need to understand that not being in the public eye is not a choice; so, it's better to prepare a communication strategy in advance. Our communication team is there to support the negotiator.



Head of Communications

1.6 Managing the expectations of the people who receive humanitarian aid.

Communication officers are not usually part of the main negotiation team. When they do go to the field, however, they are considered representatives of their organisation. This can become a challenge when, in the frame of a communication project, they must interact with the people who are receiving assistance from their organisation. When communication professionals interact with beneficiaries, they have to manage expectations, for example, about the impact that they can produce with their work or the type of assistance they can provide.

An interviewee mentioned that they must be careful not to over-compromise when talking to people who are waiting for humanitarian assistance. In their experience, communication professionals often lacked knowledge on how to respond to recipients' demands with empathy.

1.7 Negotiating for the consent of the people appearing in the communication material.

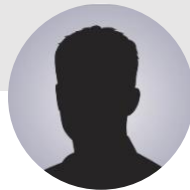
To increase their organisation's visibility and credibility, communication professionals must show the work of humanitarian organisations. To do this, they might travel to the field and produce content (written or audio-visual) that often involves the people who are receiving help from their organisations.

One of the interviewees mentioned that although communication professionals are representatives for their organisations, they don't come with support items or assistance, "they just 'take' stories." To do their work, they need to convince people that they are collecting stories for the right reasons and negotiate for their consent to appear in the pictures or videos. Especially for minors, it's crucial to get informed consent from their legal guardian. Lastly, communication professionals also need to make sure their work doesn't put people's safety at risk and portrays them with dignity.

1.8 Understanding what journalists want.

A recurring challenge for communication professionals working in public communication is negotiating with journalists. The challenge comes when journalists press for information and communication professionals need to respect the confidentiality of the negotiation. However, if both journalists and communication professionals are aware of what they want and need from each other, it's a lot easier to draw red lines and find a compromise that benefits both parties.

There's a misunderstanding about expectations and needs, from both sides. What journalists want is a 30 second soundbite from the location where humanitarian workers are working, but communication professionals feel like they need to offer something 'new.' This isn't true. Communication teams can give just one line, even if it's not a concrete answer, and a good journalist will know how to work with this.



Former war correspondent

1.9 Dealing with the immediacy of digital communications.

Communication professionals who work as digital officers are faced with the immediacy of social media. Should they respond or mention a crisis as it develops and be perceived as a reactive organisation, at the risk of saying something inappropriate? Or should they wait and think strategically about their communication, at the risk of being perceived as passive and not involved enough?

One small mistake can be blasted out to thousands of people in an instant. If communication professionals aren't aware of how a negotiation process works, how they fit into this process and how their actions can directly impact a negotiation, it increases the risk of a failed negotiation process.

In addition, social media allows direct interaction with an organisation in an easier and quicker way. Digital communication professionals must be ready to evaluate risks and respond to a communication crisis. The question again is: how much will this impact an ongoing negotiation? How do they take into account these consequences if they aren't aware of how a negotiation process takes place?

Example

On the first anniversary of the military coup that took place in Myanmar in 2021, the United Nations got criticised on social media for not saying enough against the new authorities. Someone commented on social media asking why the United Nations were silent about the military coup. The United Nations office in Geneva had just put up a statement so they used their Facebook page to answer and say they just had published something. The page got bombarded with negative comments saying the United Nations weren't doing anything to help the people of Myanmar.

1.10 A note on misinformation and disinformation

While communication professionals interviewed for this report did not mention misinformation and disinformation by name, they shared several challenges that can be classified under these categories.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, misinformation can be defined as "incorrect or misleading information" while disinformation is "false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumours) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth."

Misinformation and disinformation are not new phenomena in humanitarian contexts, despite the innovative and evolving tools by which they are spread. The reputation of humanitarian organisations and the ability of humanitarians to build relationships with local communities has always influenced the success of humanitarian negotiations.

Communication professionals are charged with increasing the visibility of their organisation and building its credibility in order to mobilise support, build and deepen trust and acceptance and, ultimately, benefit people in need by facilitating access to them. In this sense, communications officers often influence information flows in local communities through their work.

However, communication professionals—especially those who work from main country or regional offices—are often alienated from field work and therefore unaware of the context or even of the misinformation itself, which limits their capacity to combat them.

Misinformation and disinformation are extremely dependent on the local context; for this reason, recognising, understanding, and combating them is part of a good context analysis. It's about understanding how communication work taking place at Headquarters affects networks of communication locally—the same networks that propagate misinformation and disinformation. This is particularly relevant for digital officers who are faced with the immediacy of social media.

Understanding the sources, transmitters, and consumers of information in the local context in which negotiators work is crucial. Communications professionals play an integral role in the negotiation team. Working with colleagues in the context, communication officers not only better align global messaging with local interest, they also can anticipate messaging that resonates with communities and supports the transmission of facts.

It is not the role of humanitarian negotiators to interrupt or combat misinformation or disinformation. Research conducted by the CCHN indicates that understanding how and who influences communication in local communities can support the work of negotiators and that communications officers can play a key role in mapping local information networks and crafting effective messaging.

Conclusion

After conducting these interviews and listening to the negotiation challenges faced by communication professionals, the CCHN team established that there was an interest and need for capacity-building activities responding to the challenges faced by communication professionals working for humanitarian organisations.

In summary, we identified three roles that communication professionals can play:

1. Adviser to the negotiation team.
2. Negotiator for communication purposes (negotiating internally about what information can be published, capturing the work of humanitarian organisations in the field and negotiating for consent, or negotiating with journalists about what information can be shared with them).
3. Influencer of perception.

These roles will guide how we present the CCHN negotiation tools that are used during an upcoming peer workshop. In some cases, participants will analyse and apply the tools as negotiators themselves, and in other cases they will analyse and apply them as members of the support team to a negotiation.

Resources

International Committee of the Red Cross. “The ICRC’s external communication doctrine.” Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-external-communication-doctrine> (last visited: 1 June 2022)

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