

SHORT REPORT**Negotiating in disaster contexts:
Experiences of first negotiators
and first responders in Asia, the
Middle East and North Africa**

April 2024



The efficiency of humanitarian response following a disaster depends on how fast coordination structures are established, supply chains are enabled, and human and financial resources are mobilised.

Negotiating in disaster contexts becomes challenging because of the many parties involved. Often, survivors are turned into first responders until traditional humanitarian response mechanisms are set up. Then, when humanitarian actors step in, it's necessary to negotiate and coordinate the response among the multiple people involved.

In 2023, the CCHN launched its research on negotiating in the context of disasters. Since then, we have conducted a series of interviews to understand field practices, produced a report and developed a thematic session with the project to expand this topic in the future.

Background and methodology**Research objective:**

To develop an understanding of the nature and specificities of humanitarian negotiations that take place in the aftermath of disasters, sudden escalation, or eruption of armed conflicts.

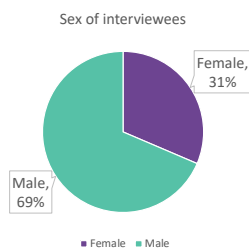
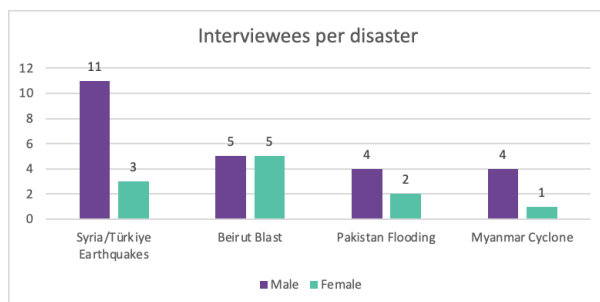
Primary research questions:

1. The role of the interviewee and the disasters they responded to.
2. Negotiation story: What was the negotiation about? What was the disagreement about? What was the challenge in negotiating this? How did the negotiation(s) evolve from the onset of the disaster?
3. Who are the first ones to negotiate and are they the same ones to respond?

Main disasters analysed and interviewee allocations

The interviewees were humanitarian professionals who had responded to or negotiated in the context of one of the following four disasters in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or Asia regions:

- Beirut port explosion (August 2020)
- Earthquakes in Syria / Turkey (February 2023)
- Floodings in Pakistan (June 2022)
- Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar (May 2023)



I. General findings

First responders and first negotiators

The local impacted communities are the first responders and negotiators. They don't need to wait for permission from their management.

Immediate negotiations took place locally (impacted areas) and remotely (HQ).

The 'need' to negotiate depends on how 'life-saving' the role is:

- Being the only responder, the largest and most capable, or closest to and most trusted by communities minimises the need to negotiate (e.g. the White Helmets for earthquakes or the Lebanese Red Cross for Beirut port explosions)

Local actors as the first ones to respond

Local actors are the fastest and most flexible responders.

They are closest to the disaster zone and the impacted communities.

Additionally, local actors have a high sense of responsibility and solidarity.

Disaster response is ignited from the grassroots.

Preparedness, adaptability and flexibility

When working in a disaster context, the most important aspect is **adopting a flexible approach** in the response and negotiations that follow.

Having contingency planning is not sufficient; there will always be a **need to adapt** to the circumstances.

Pre-established (and pre-negotiated) **emergency protocols**, especially on compliance and support services, can make negotiations easier.

It is good practice to **reflect** on the disaster before the response (deep breath before diving in!).

It's recommended to leverage the **existing partnerships** instead of establishing new ones.

II. Findings – Challenges to humanitarian negotiations following a disaster

Local staff as victims

Many local staff responding to disasters lost families and friends.

During the interviews, they shared how they felt the pressure to prioritise between their families and their obligation to respond and help.

This was a strong reminder of how ‘human-focused’ negotiations are.



I had a colleague who lost 9 family members. Can you imagine? How could this person do any work?

Lack of coordination in the response

Nobody is prepared for a large-scale disaster, even the larger international non-governmental organisations or authorities.

When a disaster hits, numerous initiatives start to pop up – many led by locals.

In the research, we identified a "respond first, coordinate later" mentality.

This means negotiations risk being unplanned due to the urgency and carried out by those without the expertise.

It should also be noted that not all negotiators are familiar with coordination structures.

Trust-building

When it comes to **organisational** and **personal trust**, the latter seemed to have more impact in disaster contexts.

Trust can **facilitate or complicate** a humanitarian response and the ensuing negotiations.

Ultimately, it is easier to trust those you know from before.

However, trust can be built when the organisation offers **relevant services in a timely manner**.



Some things were only discussed with the organisations and some files only with the persons. For example, more sensitive info would come only to the person, not the organisation.

III. Findings – Types of negotiations after a disaster

Negotiating compliance and finances, negotiating with donors

Donors become one of the crucial counterparts in disaster response particularly for (local) non-governmental organisations.

There's a need to **compromise** on compliance procedures.

However, many still mentioned **bureaucratic challenges** and delays when collaborating with their partners and/or donors.

Clearly, there is a need to negotiate **alternate ways of funding** for an immediate response.

Negotiations between local and international organisations, and national and local governments

Local organisations would often have to negotiate **financial support** from international non-governmental organisations (INGO).

On the other hand, INGOs negotiated at **higher political levels** to request permissions to operate.

It should be noted that both local and international NGOs need to negotiate with the **local governments for access and permits**.

The usual consensus is that authorities **ease** some of the **bureaucratic impediments** following a disaster to allow international aid operations.

Internal organisational negotiations

Internal negotiations tended to focus on **compliance** and **emergency response policies**.

Some mentioned negotiating with **senior management** to change the ways of working.

Negotiations between humanitarian organisations

Inter-organisational negotiations focused on avoiding the **duplication of efforts**, especially between different organisations with similar projects and outcomes who serve the same populations.

Some organisations tended to **'monopolise' the response** and compete instead of collaborating with others.

Keeping the focus on the common shared values, and if necessary, engaging in technical negotiations to accommodate the different views, helped to navigate these challenges.

Negotiations with local communities

There were no major negotiations the **first few days** after the disaster between organisations and local communities.

Some humanitarians highlighted the importance of understanding the socio-cultural norms of local communities. When interventions aren't culturally adapted, communities can pose a challenge in the **recovery stage**.

For instance, there were some negotiations with women under the rubble who refused to be helped by a male.

Negotiators need to engage with the communities and communicate with them using networks of influence.

IV. Findings – Practices and opportunities

Solidary response

- Disasters unite people; it's easy to forget about disagreements.
- A sense of solidarity can bring negotiators and counterparts closer.

Importance of trust

- A pre-established trustful relationship makes negotiations easier.
- Disasters can foster trust for future engagement.

- Cooperating with local communities can be helpful for organisations because communities already trust them.

Localisation

- Crisis demonstrates the value of a localised response.
- Usually, there's a bottom-up approach to the humanitarian response because **local actors** are the first to respond and negotiate.
- Existing **local networks** are mobilised for coordination and support.

Relevance to victims and counterparts

- Being adaptable and able to provide relevant services can make negotiations easier and build trust.



The collaboration is good but needs to start with grassroots initiatives and move to bigger ones, as they have the resources to respond. One cannot substitute the other.

CONTACT

Domaine "La Pastorale"
106 Route de Ferney
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
 info@frontline-negotiations.org
 www.frontline-negotiations.org

@CCHN
 @frontline_nego
 @FrontlineNegotiations
 @Frontline Negotiations

**FRONTLINE
NEGOTIATIONS**

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION