



**FRONTLINE  
NEGOTIATIONS**

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON  
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

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LISTENING TOUR ON PRESSURE MANAGEMENT

# Negotiating Under Pressure

Thematic Research Report



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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) and the Doctors Without Borders Switzerland (MSF).

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

As funds decrease and humanitarian needs increase, the pressure negotiators are facing is only growing. No matter the context, the counterpart, or the negotiation objective, humanitarian professionals operate under a constant hum of pressure. Some days, that hum can increase to a pounding scream; however, negotiators cannot predict when the pressure will reach this level.

To complement research conducted five years ago, the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) decided to conduct a second survey and series of interviews to update its understanding of how humanitarian negotiators manage pressure. The research provides insights into the evolution of the humanitarian sector, as well as the unique coping mechanisms developed by frontline negotiators to deal with pressure and identifies gaps in the overlap between pressure management and humanitarian negotiations.

Some key findings include:

- Practitioners feel equipped to manage pressure before negotiations when using the CCHN negotiation methodology. Preparing and having a plan in place helps them remain focused and be ready to face most scenarios during heated negotiation moments.
- In the past five years, internal pressure caused by team dynamics, organisational hierarchies, and structural barriers within the sector has increased and is the leading source of pressure for negotiators.
- New technology and constant communication are increasing demands on negotiators and decreasing their negotiation space. This makes counterparts more entrenched, negotiators more cautious, managers more burnt out, headquarters antsy, and donors more demanding – as perceived by negotiators.
- The sector values rational responses, emphasising coping mechanisms that address mental awareness often at the expense of emotional regulation and bodily responses. This response diminishes the value of local practices for managing pressure that may provide a more holistic approach.
- The “after” stage of the negotiation process is ripe for development within the Naivasha grid and the CCHN community of practice at all levels – be it community, practice, or domain. Pressure coping mechanisms are key in the “after” stage, as they allow practitioners to hone their craft and improve the domain through peer-to-peer support.

The report covers the methodology and distribution of the research, and reviews the data in detail, including the sources of pressure, the impact of pressure on negotiators and negotiations, negotiators’ coping mechanisms, and the needs identified regarding pressure management.

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# Introduction

Unlike negotiators in other fields, humanitarian frontline negotiators are often exposed to extremely stressful environments over prolonged periods of time.

Experiential work and research conducted by the CCHN within its community of practice since 2016 has shown that frontline negotiators can be exposed to multiple layers of pressure.

To negotiate well, negotiators need to be physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy. To support their well-being, negotiators can use tools to strengthen their mental and emotional acumen before and during the negotiation to recognise and manage pressure – both their own and their counterparts'.

Undeniably, pressure experienced before and during a negotiation can lead to mid- or long-term altered mental or emotional states and even trauma, which should be addressed before future negotiations.

Considering the above, the CCHN developed a Pressure Management programme to build negotiators' capacities, providing them with tools to prepare for, manage, and cope with pressure on the physical, mental, and emotional levels.

Given the increasing demand from communities and agencies, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and other partners' declaration that their staff's and beneficiaries' mental health is a key priority, the CCHN reassessed the challenges, dilemmas, and best practices of those negotiating under pressure.

The CCHN evaluated the program in the 5 years since it was launched while considering additional sources of stress including the impact of prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns, changing negotiation environments, the nuances of remote and face-to-face negotiations and potentially other factors to be identified.

# 1 Methodology and distribution

## Methodology

This thematic research utilised a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews, an online survey, and focus group discussions with CCHN's humanitarian partners, practitioners, and key informants. All conversations took place virtually via Microsoft Teams. Respondents were invited to complete a 30-minute survey and/or discuss their negotiation experiences during an hour-long semi-structured conversation with one or both researchers.

Results of both the survey and interviews are anonymous, allowing participants to reflect on sensitive issues such as experiences of violence, inter-agency dynamics, the effects of violence on themselves and their environments, and their efforts to mitigate and cope with the effects of conflict. This qualitative and investigative approach enabled the researchers to explore pressure management learning questions, test assumptions, and generate data-driven insights for organisational learning. Through interviews, critical reflections, and thoughtful deliberations among partners, the researchers documented and consolidated lessons learned to highlight key challenges, achievements and changes made throughout the five-year Pressure Management programme.

Unlike traditional CCHN thematic research where interviewees are identified via desk research and conversations with key CCHN members, participants in this research self-identified to participate in the survey and interviews. Calls for participants were solicited via CCHN Connect, the CCHN community forum, and the Pressure Management network. The Terms of Reference were published, and many participants reviewed them prior to interviews.

The appetite for this project within the humanitarian sector was deemed high, with more than 100 expressions of interest to participate in the research. After only 48 hours, the research team had to close the registrations for interviews due to overwhelming demand. Initially, the aim for the thematic research was to receive 64 survey responses and conduct 8-10 qualitative interviews. Instead, the survey received 190 responses, and the research team conducted 32 interviews from October 27 to December 15, 2023. During that time, the research team presented the initial findings of the survey to the Pressure Management working group and facilitated focus group conversations to test and hone findings in early December 2023. The research team also spoke with various professionals in the field of Pressure Management, including an independent coach focusing on women leaders in the sector and a Learning and Development specialist at the ICRC.

## Survey

The online survey was conducted via Qualtrics and designed based on the Cynefin methodology.

The Cynefin framework, created by Dave Snowden, is a sense-making model based on complexity theory. Its objective is to help people understand and navigate relationships, dynamic projects, and multifaceted challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities. The Cynefin framework is a qualitative method of data collection that centres on respondents' narratives and requires subjects, rather than researchers, to analyse their experiences, reducing researcher bias and centring on storytelling as a collaborative and integral part of research.

The survey consisted of 42 questions that sought to understand acute instances of pressure and the effects of pressure on humanitarian negotiators' careers. The survey received 362 impressions and 190 responses. Out of the 190 responses, 36 respondents had completed a CCHN Pressure Management workshop.

Survey questions fell into three main categories:

- **sources** of pressure,
- **impact** of pressure on humanitarian negotiations and negotiators, and
- **coping** mechanisms of negotiators to manage pressure both acutely (in the moment) and over time.

The final portion of the survey evaluated the CCHN Pressure Management programme and assessed the sector's and individuals' **needs** for pressure management tools and programming.

## Interviews

Given the content and sensitivity of this research, the research team determined areas of enquiry before conducting interviews. While these areas of inquiry guided conversations, the researchers remained responsive to interviewees' experiences and delved more critically into respondents' practices and assumptions when appropriate. This semi-structured approach allowed for deeper conversations, leading to critical insights as well as further questions.

The investigative and conversational nature of the interviews resulted in a rich data set that highlighted unique practices around pressure management and humanitarian negotiation. 32 interviews were conducted, where 18 interviewees were national staff while 14 were international staff, 23 men and 9 women in total from 17 organisations (including practitioners with experience working for donors and as independent consultants). The average years of experience of those interviewed was 12 years. The majority of interviewees had not completed a CCHN Pressure Management workshop but were members of the CCHN community of practice and had completed a Peer Workshop on Humanitarian Negotiation.

Like the survey, the interviews moved through the same three main categories (**sources** of pressure, **impact** of pressure, and **coping** mechanisms). Depending on the interviewees' years of humanitarian negotiation experience, some conversations covered pressure and how to manage it throughout their careers, while others focused on a specific negotiation or context.

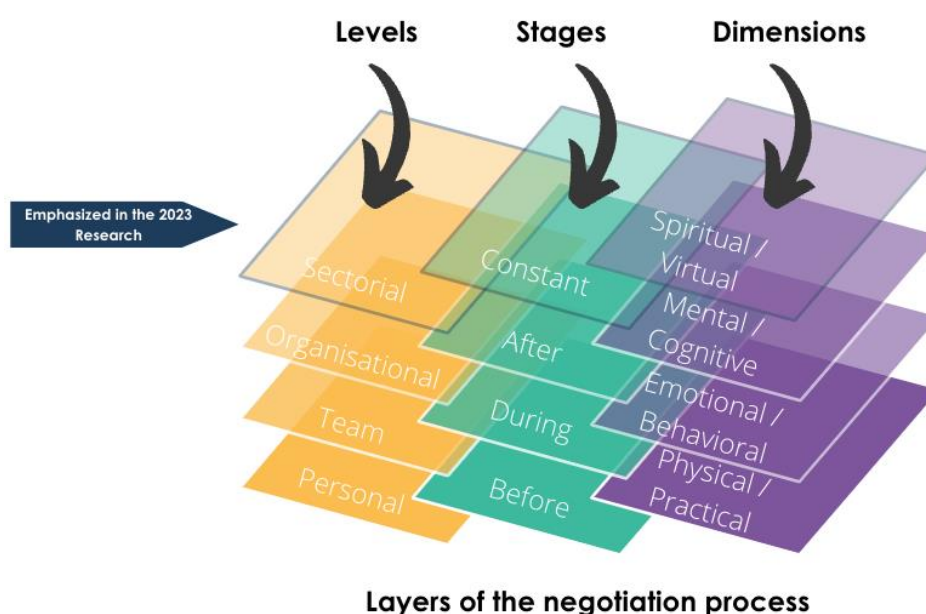
## Limitations

Qualtrics presented some challenges as a survey provider as the research team tried to adapt it to the qualitative Cynefin method. Qualtrics is not designed to accept multiple entries to a survey over a period of time. This limitation somewhat explains the discrepancy between the number of impressions (362) and responses (190). As with any survey, participants do not always finish the survey. In this case, by the end of the complexity questions, the response rate dropped to 146, with a 77% completion rate. Moreover, due to challenges with the Qualtrics system, which led to mishandling of data collection, the missing values were filled by extrapolating based on the available data.

## 2 Data analysis

The following section outlines the survey and interview data analysis. Both the data and ensuing analysis reflect the **sources** of pressure, the **impact** of pressure on humanitarian negotiations and negotiators, negotiators' **coping** mechanisms to manage pressure both acutely (in the moment) and over time, and the sector's and individuals' **needs** for pressure management tools and programming. The results validated the thematic research **hypothesis**, that is, when humanitarian negotiators face pressure, they have coping mechanisms to handle said pressure, and need more tools and support to manage it throughout their careers.

Figure 1. The layers of the negotiation process



The series of interviews conducted in 2023 provides insights into the evolution of the sector over the past 5 years. In 2019, 3 layers were identified in the negotiation process. Then, in 2023, a fourth layer was added, which includes the sectorial level, the constant stage and the spiritual/virtual dimension in negotiations, which will be discussed throughout the report (see Figure 1).

**Key findings** indicate how pressure management within the sector has evolved since the first CCHN survey on the topic was conducted five years ago.

- **Internal and sectorial challenges often outweigh contextual pressures.** Coordination, team dynamics, budget uncertainty, shrinking humanitarian space, and understanding between managers and local staff as well as between field and headquarters offices cause pressure on negotiators. Many of those interviewed indicated that they are equipped to handle adversarial counterparts or dangerous contexts but felt more pressure negotiating within their organisation to communicate new ideas or advance programmatic objectives.
- **New technology** and the ability to “remain in contact”, or **constant communication, limit negotiators’ autonomy**, making them feel under constant observation. Communication between field teams and headquarters can happen within seconds. This limits negotiators’ decision-making power, forces them to



justify all decisions and relationships, and leaves them feeling demotivated and powerless while on the ground responding in real-time.

- Analysis of findings indicates that the “after” stage of negotiation is often ill-defined and neglected. This impacts each level of the negotiation process (personal, team, and organisational) and dimensions (practical, emotional, and mental). In the five years since the first CCHN survey on pressure management, it has become clear that negotiators use the CCHN Field Manual to curb the impact of pressure on the “before” and “during” negotiation stages, particularly at the “personal” and “team” levels. **However, tools to identify and mitigate the impact of pressure on the “after” stage are lacking.** This corresponds with weak support at the organisational level and long-lasting impacts on negotiators’ mental well-being.

The findings will be expanded below. What the data reflects is that over the past five years, negotiators have begun to recognise the importance of pressure management and individual habits to curb the effects of pressure on themselves. While there is a greater acceptance of self-care and the need to identify coping mechanisms at the personal level, negotiators often find themselves ill-equipped to handle pressure within their teams, organisations, and the humanitarian system. These findings reflect the critical role of the CCHN community of practice to better integrate pressure management into the domain of humanitarian negotiation.

## Source

In evaluating the sources of pressure, the researchers hoped to update the CCHN’s understanding of the specific challenges and dilemmas causing pressure on negotiations, particularly linked to the evolution of the humanitarian sector in the last five years.

To fully evaluate the impact of pressure on negotiators, it was important for the researchers to understand the environment in which humanitarians work and how humanitarians perceive of sources of pressure.

Most humanitarians do not see their environment as a source of pressure despite the fragile places they often work in. Instead, humanitarians rank counterparts and organisational hierarchy as higher sources of pressure. This does not mean that humanitarians’ surroundings are not a source of pressure; rather, humanitarians do not always perceive environmental dangers as having an impact on their pressure levels. Often, it’s not until much later in their career or personal lives that they see the effects of the environments in which they have worked, for instance, in involuntary physical responses like lack of sleep, intrusive thoughts, sensitivity to explosive noises or anxiety. Again, these results reflect humanitarian negotiators’ perceptions.

Despite the limited scope of this research, participants also shared sources of pressure outside of their humanitarian negotiation practice. In its analysis and response, the CCHN can only take note that challenges pertaining to the broader sector are perceived as having a potential impact on the negotiation process and can support the community of practice to develop skills and tools to manage pressure, no matter the source.

As results indicate, sources of pressure are most acute at the personal level, while teams and organisations can be sources of pressure, as well as coping mechanisms. When humanitarians are supported and well-resourced, having an abundance of support can be a coping mechanism, but when resources are scarce and teams are toxic due to organisational culture, these same resources can become a source of pressure.

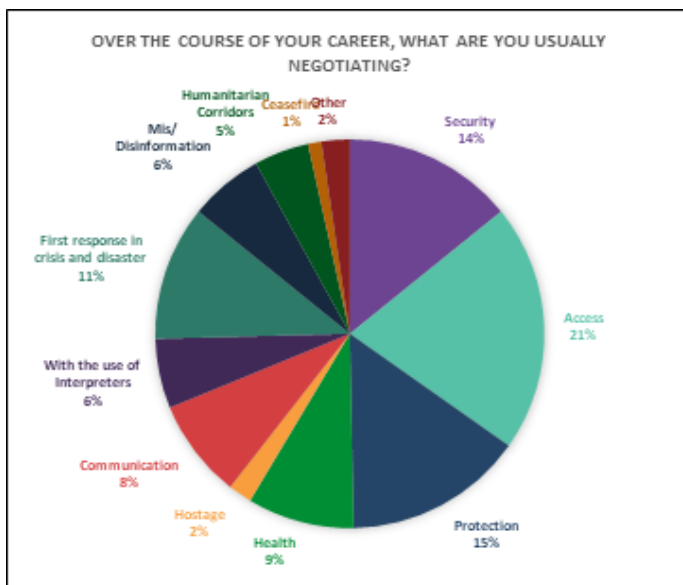
## Survey

Questions were designed to evaluate sources of pressure, including those found in humanitarians’ working contexts. Respondents were asked to answer each question by looking back over their career until now. When asked how often respondents were exposed to contexts considered ‘stable,’ ‘politically unstable,’

‘insecure,’ ‘violent’ and ‘unpredictable,’ and ‘dangerous (threatening personal safety)’ most respondents indicated they had worked in ‘politically unstable’ and ‘violent’ contexts, while ‘unpredictable’ contexts received a high number of responses (184 each) and the highest ranking<sup>1</sup> of 4 (‘most of the time’).

‘Stable’ contexts received the least responses (172) with a ranking of 2.8 (‘some of the time’). ‘Insecure’ contexts received the highest number of responses (187) with a ranking of 3.4 (‘nearly most of the time’). 56 respondents indicated ‘other’ as additional environmental factors which included road accidents, natural disasters or weather events, insect and wildlife injuries, and logistical challenges.

**Figure 2. Topics of negotiation**



When asked what humanitarians usually negotiated over the course of their career, most respondents (167) selected ‘access,’ followed by ‘protection’ (121 responses). Respondents were permitted to select multiple topics of negotiation; on average four topics were selected.

When asked about sources of pressure during negotiation processes, most respondents indicated the ‘complexity of environment’ and ‘context,’ which received the most responses (185) with the highest average ranking<sup>2</sup> of 3.5 (more than a moderate amount of pressure). This was followed closely by ‘difficult interlocutors’ (184) with an average ranking of 3.4. Both ‘organisation hierarchy’ and ‘team dynamics’ also received high response rates (181) with rankings of 2.5 and 2.4 respectively.

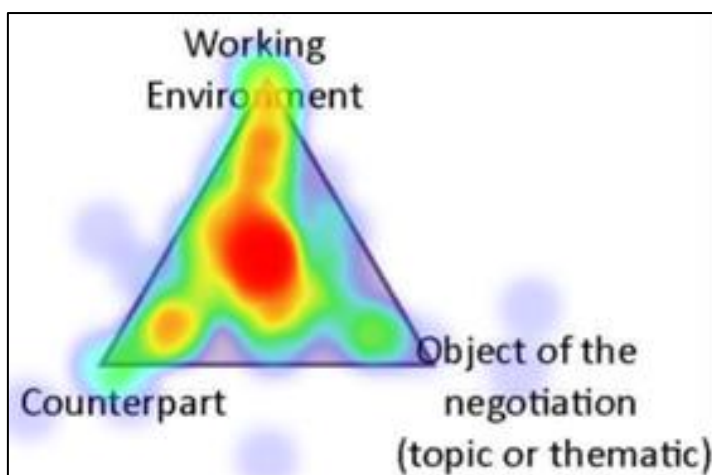
**Table 1: Survey on sources of pressure**

Reflecting on your career as a whole up to this point, to what extent have you experienced the following sources of pressure during negotiation processes? (0 - no pressure; 5 - a lot of pressure)	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Threat on life and safety	2.43	0.00	5.00	171
Personal performance	2.24	0.00	5.00	174
Organization hierarchy	2.57	0.00	5.00	181
Team dynamics	2.38	0.00	5.00	181
Object of the negotiation (topic or thematic)	2.68	0.00	5.00	115
Other (please specify)	1.47	0.00	5.00	34
Complexity of environment and context	3.48	1.00	5.00	185

<sup>1</sup> Rankings in this question indicate frequency. Respondents were asked to indicate frequency using a slider. 0 indicating “not at all” and 5 “all the time”.

<sup>2</sup> Rankings in this question indicated amount of pressure. Respondents were asked to indicate amount of pressure using a slider. 0 indicating “no pressure”, 5 indicating “a lot of pressure”.

Figure 3. Triad on stressful aspects during career



Finally, respondents were asked to complete a triad indicating the most stressful aspect of their work over the course of their career with the options 'working environment,' 'counterpart,' or 'object of the negotiation.'

The heatmap in figure 3 indicates that many respondents would agree that all three aspects are stressful, with many placing the slider in the triad's centre. Many clearly indicate 'working environment' and 'counterpart' to be more stressful than the object of the negotiation, as the emphasis has fallen to the centre-left of the triangle.

This triad, along with slider data from previous the question on sources of pressure, strongly

supports the finding that **humanitarian negotiators face more pressure from internal challenges than from the topic or object of the negotiation, or the contextual complexity.** These findings are consistent with CCHN's findings from the previous pressure management survey.

## Interviews

Interview data strongly supports the survey's findings and provides further insights as to why negotiators are less equipped to handle pressure from within their organisations than from their external environments. Interviewees agree with survey respondents that **counterparts**, particularly adversarial counterparts, are the biggest source of pressure followed closely by feeling pressured by **time**.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike organisational or managerial pressure, humanitarian negotiators feel well-equipped to deal with time constraints and adversarial counterparts. Many interviewees quoted that their coping mechanisms include preparing for negotiations by **using the CCHN methodology** to plan their negotiations, giving them the confidence to handle difficult counterparts and/or become prepared for various scenarios.

However, humanitarian negotiators often feel caught off-guard when it comes to navigating pressure from their team or organisation. The need to justify decisions while navigating principles and relationship building can put additional pressure on team dynamics. Pressure from management to "always get it right" and rigid managers regarding the chain of command and seeking validation from headquarters via simple and obvious decision matrices end up putting pressure on international and national staff who are doing their best to navigate complex environments. National staff are left to advocate for their ideas or insights even though they are often the most knowledgeable about the context while international staff hold the decision-making power and are unable to delegate even if they would like to. Pressure from the team or organisation impacts both national and international staff and their relationships with each other, causing pressure and, at times, friction in an already fraught environment. This increases pressure on the field team, diffuses accountability, and can result in international solutions to local problems.

Researchers heard repeatedly from managers that they try to shield their staff as much as possible from organisation and donor blowback, seeking to create the space for negotiators to continue to deliver assistance to beneficiaries. They recalled their own experience as negotiators and how important managerial support was for their success. Negotiators and junior staff also indicated how important managerial support

<sup>3</sup> 'Time' is also a factor indicated in the survey and will be discussed in the 'Impact' section of the report. Time pressure can have the greatest impact on individual negotiators, especially given increased visibility and need to respond to organisational hierarchy.

was for them in their role. These conversations highlighted the finding that building relationships with line managers, teams, and within the organisation is just as important and building relationships with counterparts.

While the CCHN has created a set of tools for negotiators to use to analyse counterparts and develop relationships, the domain of humanitarian negotiation lacks tools for negotiators to navigate organisational and donor complexity. The CCHN community of practice will benefit from the collection of pressure management practices within humanitarian negotiation as well as input from other sectors.

## Impact

Compared to the results of the first survey on pressure management conducted by the CCHN in 2019, institutional and systems as sources of pressure have increased. These findings are particularly relevant for the CCHN Pressure Management programme.

As researchers observed, regardless of the source, humanitarians felt the impact of pressure within their organisations. Team dynamics also play a role in mitigating or accentuating the impact of pressure within organisations and on the individual. Researchers noticed that the more complex an environment is, the more difficult it is for negotiators to assess sources of pressure and anticipate their impact.

The impact of pressure is where researchers identified the greatest change in the humanitarian negotiation domain since the initial study five years ago. Respondents feel the impact from managers, organisations, and the sector more than from adversarial counterparts and difficult living conditions. Even if pressure is greater from the operational environment, the impact of pressure to respond to donor demands and implement partner ideologies is greater on negotiators. They feel ill-equipped to mitigate these internal pressures and demands.

The impacts of pressure are felt at nearly all levels, stages, and dimensions of the negotiation process. Negotiators perceive the impacts of pressure at all levels, before and during negotiations more than they perceive the impacts after the negotiations and across the dimensions. Negotiators generally do not take time to reflect on the dimensions of the negotiation process (see Figure 1) outside of the reflective space created by the CCHN community of practice.

This indicates that pressure management can play an active role in CCHN programming currently focused on the stages of the negotiation process as outlined in the Naivasha grid. The CCHN and the Pressure Management programme also provides space for humanitarian negotiators to explore the impacts of pressure on the dimensions of the negotiation process. It is not up to the CCHN community of practice to tackle the sources of pressure, but it is up to the community to develop tools and methods to mitigate the impact of pressure on individuals and the negotiation process.

## Survey

Figure 4. Triad on the impact of pressure



Questions were designed to evaluate the impact that stress and pressure have on the negotiation process. Respondents were asked to share a specific negotiation story from their career to illustrate how pressure impacted their negotiation process. It is important to note here that it is an indicator of negotiators' own perceptions of when they feel the most pressure. Respondents were asked to reflect on a specific experience they shared and place a dot in the triangle at the point in the negotiation process where they felt the most pressure. They were then asked a series of triad and dyad questions to evaluate their own experience. These stories

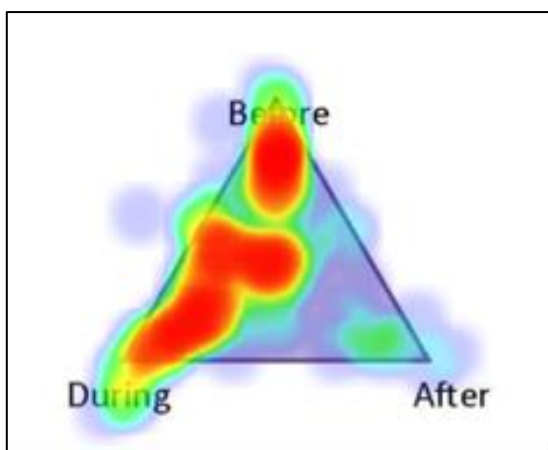
vary in detail and in the normative perceptions of the impact of pressure on negotiations. Some respondents found feeling pressure motivating, while others found it affected them and their negotiation process negatively.

Respondents were asked to reflect on the specific experience they shared and indicate what was most impacted by pressure – their team, their organisation, or them personally. Most respondents indicated that all three were equally impacted but that the organisation was impacted the most, followed by themselves, then their team. Comparing this heat map with the reflection on the sources of pressure, organisations are not only a source of pressure but are also impacted by humanitarian negotiation pressures.

When asked about the impact of pressure on team dynamics, the majority of respondents found that pressure negatively impacted team dynamics. There is a variance of 1.15 degrees, thus many respondents

indicated that pressure impacts team dynamics very negatively. In assessing how pressure impacted both the counterpart and the negotiation in the experience they shared, negotiators had less agreement. They still indicated, on average, that both counterparts and negotiations benefit from pressure more than team dynamics do.

Figure 5. Triad on the impact of pressure



Negotiators indicated that pressure has more impact before and during<sup>4</sup> negotiations than after.

<sup>4</sup> "Before" meaning when you are preparing for the negotiation, with your team, donors, and others. "During" meaning when you are in front of your counterpart, either external or internal. "After" meaning time when you are reflecting on the negotiation.

The results mirror the Naivasha grid methodology, which places a focus on the processes of planning (“before) and conducting (“during”) negotiations and recognises that humanitarian negotiations have both relational and transactional components. Researchers highlight that it is difficult for humanitarian negotiators to identify the “after”-stage the relational aspect happens over the course of multiple negotiations. Additionally, as researchers observed in interviews, negotiators often cannot identify the post-

**Figure 6. Triad on the impact of pressure**



negotiation phase (“after) and do not have time to reflect, but sometimes notice the physical effects of pressure days, months, or years after a particularly high-pressure negotiation.

Respondents were asked to assess where they personally felt the impact of pressure regarding the specific experience they shared. Again, the largest concentration of responses is in the middle, indicating that negotiators’ mental, emotional, and physical states<sup>5</sup> were equally impacted by pressure. As researchers uncovered in the narratives shared through the survey and interviews, respondents perceived effects on their mental and emotional state more than physical, at least during the negotiation. These findings are

corroborated by responses to questions on coping mechanisms and will be explored in the ‘Coping’ section of the report.

Finally, respondents were asked to rank how personal traits (health, leadership, ability to communicate, think creatively, evaluate risk, make decisions and non-verbal communication) were impacted by stress. Nearly all 148 respondents indicated that personal traits were impacted by stress, even if minimally. Most interestingly, respondents perceive their ability to making decisions to be the most or somewhat impacted by stress. This corresponds with heat map data regarding coping mechanisms which we will be explored in the next section.

## Interviews

Interviewees seemed to have a good understanding of pressure and its impact on themselves and other staff. Managers explained they try to anticipate and mitigate the impacts of pressure on staff coming from their organisation and the working context, while frontliners were often reluctant to discuss the impact of pressure, brushing it off as part of the job. They do not see anything exceptional about their circumstances.

In the interviews, the impact of new technologies and communication on negotiations and negotiators was very apparent.

The impact of these technologies on the pressure perceived by negotiators is two-fold. Not only is it an additional element that infringes on the previously privileged space reserved for the humanitarian negotiator and counterpart, but it also makes humanitarians accessible at all times. Researchers uncovered a dark side to organisations and organisational hierarchy linked to new technologies.

<sup>5</sup> "Mental" meaning effects on the brain, ability to think clearly. "Emotional" meaning effects on managing emotions, ability to keep calm and regulate relations with others and yourself. "Physical" meaning effects on the body.

Moreover, time is always a source of pressure in humanitarian negotiations, but counterparts and context are not the only sources of this kind of pressure. Many interviewees indicated how negotiations were prolonged due to managerial or organisational delays or lack of trust. At times, it was easier for interviewees to get their counterparts to trust them than their managers. This was true for both national and international staff. While mobile staff found this to be a source of pressure (as discussed above), national staff found this to be demotivating and made coping with pressure more difficult. Both junior and senior, national and international staff, including managers, indicated how much impact team dynamics had on their ability to identify and manage pressure. One interviewee spoke of betrayal of values and went from feeling “proud to ashamed to be part of the organisation.” Others indicated that they would have negotiated differently or “more forcefully” if they felt they would be backed by their organisation.

On the other hand, when working in a supportive team, negotiators were more resilient and felt they were more prepared to deal with adversarial counterparts and difficult operating environments. Even when negotiators did not feel assisted by their organisation, they believed they could be successful if they were supported by their team and manager, despite the challenging environment, political negotiations, headquarters mistrust, or donor pressure.

Finally, interviewees emphasised that their counterparts alone do not exert the most pressure, even adversarial counterparts. Rather, pressure is perceived to come from a combination of counterparts and environments (external and internal). Indeed, negotiators must navigate multiple sources of pressure in complex environments. While this is not new, we now understand that the success of a negotiation no longer depends solely on building relationships with counterparts but also requires navigating team dynamics, organisational hierarchies, donor demands, and implementing partner ideologies.

## Coping

Humanitarian negotiators have developed unique practices to manage pressure. Data from both the survey and interviews demonstrates the strength of humanitarian negotiators to mitigate pressure, build

**Table 2: The impact of stress on personal traits**

Q18 - Reflecting on the experience you shared, how were the following personal ca...					
Field	Min	Max	Median	Variance	Responses
Health	0.00	5.00	2.00	1.75	142
Leadership	0.00	5.00	2.00	2.13	141
Ability to communicate	0.00	5.00	2.00	1.83	142
Think creatively	0.00	5.00	2.00	2.02	144
Evaluate risk	0.00	5.00	2.00	2.03	142
Make decisions	0.00	5.00	3.00	1.99	142
Nonverbal communication	0.00	5.00	2.00	1.90	135

relationships with adversaries and drive forward programming for affected populations.

Unsurprisingly in some of the most challenging operating environments, negotiators thrive off the support of their families and communities. Those closest to the frontlines often see results more quickly and can focus on day-to-day wins while managers and those working in field hubs are often squeezed between the demands of operating partners and headquarters.

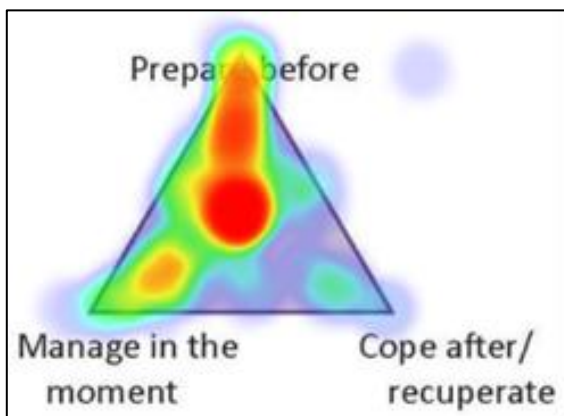
Practitioners have coping mechanisms to help them relieve pressure. Given the sector’s emphasis on rationality, negotiators have developed mental tools to overcome pressure, especially ‘during’ the negotiation process. However, there is room for improvement in developing skills, tools, and methods to deal with pressure. For instance, when it comes to the stages, levels, and dimensions of a negotiation process, findings indicate the CCHN can fill gaps in practice in identifying and coping ‘after’ the negotiation process and at the emotional and practical levels. This is articulated in the survey findings and explained in the ‘Needs’ section of the report (see below).

A key finding is that CCHN community members use the CCHN methodology to cope with and minimise pressure before negotiations. They use it with their teams to feel prepared and confident, decreasing their pressure and stress before meeting with difficult counterparts. Having a deep understanding of the context and using tools to plan for several scenarios makes them feel ready for adversarial counterparts and difficult operating environments.

There is an opportunity for CCHN to add pressure management to each section of the Naivasha grid. It is already well articulated, and the Manual is a key element in diminishing pressure before negotiations. By developing tools for the “after” stage, the CCHN has an opportunity to continue developing the topic of pressure management in the domain of humanitarian negotiation.

## Survey

**Figure 7. Usefulness of pressure management tools**



Respondents feel that pressure management tools are most useful while preparing for and conducting negotiations. This corresponds with data from the ‘Impact’ section of the survey which indicates that pressure is highest before and during negotiations.

Researchers examined when the respondents use coping mechanisms, as well as what they do to lower the pressure (deescalate) and to build or maintain relationships in moments of intense pressure when the conversation heats up with their counterpart.

From the survey answers, we can conclude negotiators are well equipped to manage pressure in the moment of negotiation. They often can leverage tense moments and turn them into relationship-building opportunities. Negotiators will humanise themselves or their counterparts when they feel the pressure rising. In these moments negotiators often centre their counterparts, engage in active listening, and investigate their own bodily reactions.

**Figure 8. Regulation in moments of intense pressure**



After sharing specific practices, respondents were invited to indicate what personal element they regulate in moments of intense pressure. While most responses indicate negotiators perceive that they regulate their thought processes, emotions and physical responses simultaneously, the heat map does favour the regulation of

emotions. Clearly, humanitarian negotiation requires high emotional intelligence and the ability to manage

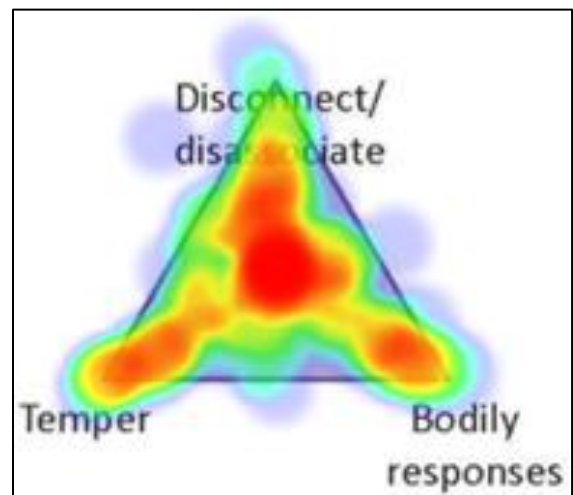


multiple internal processes at once. Negotiators indicated that they believe they regulate their emotional and mental responses more than bodily responses. This does not mean that respondents are not regulating their body. As interview findings suggest, negotiators are constantly regulating bodily responses and, at times, relying on bodily responses to build rapport with counterparts. Instead, this finding highlights where negotiators' awareness is in intense moments of pressure. They subconsciously regulate bodily responses and remain in their head, hyper-aware of their emotions and thought process. Additionally, based on survey responses and interviews, negotiators often leverage physical reactions to create relational space in negotiations. For instance, by asking for a glass of water, talking about the weather, sharing a cigarette or drinking tea as offered, together.

Finally, respondents were asked to reflect on moments of intense pressure and indicate if they felt like they lost the ability to control or remain in tune with their reactions.<sup>6</sup> Responses concentrate in the middle of the triangle but also at its angles. We can interpret this to mean that respondents felt split – some feel an inability to control their body, emotions, and thoughts while others feel an acute loss of control over only one of these aspects. This triad presents several interesting findings:

- Respondents indicate a perceived loss of control of bodily responses, but in the previous triad (see Figure 8) indicated that they are not actively regulating stress in the body.
- While many indicate they lost control over their “temper”, all interviewees indicated that they have never lost their temper in a negotiation with a counterpart.
- Respondents perceived an inability to remain connected or to think strategically or clearly, which corresponds with data from the ‘Impact’ section of the survey where respondents pointed out that their ability to make decisions was the most impacted when they felt pressure.

**Figure 9. Reactions in the moments of pressure**



## Interviews

Interviewees expanded on survey findings by sharing specific stories and practices around coping with the impacts of pressure. Several themes were identified in the interviews around organisational hierarchy, family and/or personal support, outcomes on communities, time, physical release, and intangible support. Within each of these themes, interviewees identified distinct practices that improved their ability to cope with pressure and avoid burnout despite intense operational environments.

<sup>6</sup> "Disconnect" means unable to think strategically or clearly. "Temper" means your emotions get the better of you. "Bodily responses" means you have difficulty controlling physical tasks such as breathing or tensing muscles.

## Organisational hierarchy

**Table 3: Feelings within organisation**

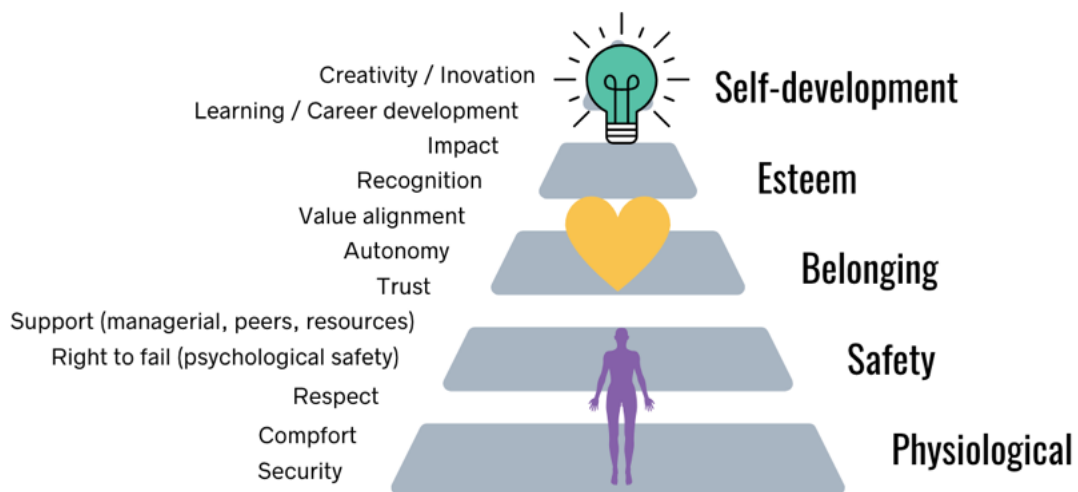
Q9 - Within my organization I feel... (0 - I never feel that way; 5 - I feel tha...						
Field	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	Responses
Safe - I feel secure in my position	0.00	5.00	3.12	1.21	1.45	184
Supported - I have the right tools and resources to do the job	0.00	5.00	3.03	1.15	1.33	186
Respected - I have the opportunity to offer input and be heard	0.00	5.00	3.41	1.14	1.30	186
Belonging - I have a sense of community and feel part of something bigger	0.00	5.00	3.62	1.18	1.38	185
Recognition - I am valued	0.00	5.00	3.37	1.18	1.40	186
Creative - I am encouraged to think big and dream	0.00	5.00	3.08	1.32	1.74	186

As already indicated in the 'Source' and 'Impact' sections, pressure from within organisations and the humanitarian system can have a profound impact on negotiators' perceptions and management of pressure.

Researchers used an organisational management tool based

on Maslow's needs hierarchy but applied it to individuals' needs within an organisation. Most survey respondents indicated feeling well cared for in their organisation, with nearly all 186 respondents indicating that they describe feeling all six levels of the hierarchy. Respondents placed more weight on the mid-section of the pyramid, indicating they feel respected, recognised and like they belong most of the time. Like Maslow's hierarchy, needs build on each other. Organisations can only achieve a creative workforce if they meet workers' needs at the bottom of the pyramid first. Therefore, although humanitarians perceive that they are generally supported by their organisations, they indicate feeling supported (with tools and resources) and safe (secure in their position) only(?) a moderate amount of the time.

**Figure 10. CCHN research: sources of pressure**



These findings were reiterated during interviews, particularly with senior management. Within the sector, job security is low, and competition is high. Managers feel a burden of responsibility to maintain staff budgets and keep staff in roles but often feel like this is underappreciated or unnoticed by subordinates. As humanitarians rise through the ranks, they notice fewer opportunities for promotion and growth. One senior leader discussed the "relentless cumulative stress" of constantly applying for roles and always looking for the next opportunity.

Given diminishing funding projections in the sector and organisations cannot offer job security,<sup>7</sup> it's expected that staff will continue to feel insecure and under-resourced. At the field level, team dynamics, when positive, are a major coping mechanism for negotiators, but team dynamics alone cannot create an organisational culture that fulfils workers' needs. Focusing on the pressure this causes and how to cope with it is imperative for negotiators on the frontlines. Feeling safe and supported is critical to building a professional workforce.

### **Family/Personal**

In every interview, interviewees saw their family as a source of stress relief. When asked about coping mechanisms, every participant highlighted the importance of a supportive partner, parent, sibling, or close friend. Sometimes these supportive individuals were also humanitarians. In these cases, interviewees noted how important it is to be stationed together. They felt more confident about the safety of their partner and/or family. At times, national staff relied on family or tribal connections to relieve pressure within the context or with particularly difficult counterparts. Other humanitarians relied on the ear of a sibling or friend in a completely different sector and felt freer to share decontextualised challenges with a trusted confidant. Often negotiators find it easier to relieve pressure with family and personal sources rather than with a therapist or psychologist provided by the organisation. Creating meaningful connections with people in the country they were posted in was also reported as a way to cope. All agreed that having an outlet during their darkest moments was critical to avoid burnout.

### **Impact of work on communities**

The majority of interviewees felt relatively motivated by successful outcomes. Even during particularly difficult negotiations or when searching for inspiration to carry their ideas forward with management they often remember specific moments when they were able to deliver on operational objectives for beneficiaries. Furthermore, in many remote and/or conflict-affected communities, negotiators are well known as people who deliver. Keeping in mind the populations they negotiate on behalf of and the times they could deliver assistance are ways humanitarians mitigate stress. They take great satisfaction from delivering for affected populations. This phenomenon was especially evident among national staff. Some claimed that a successful operation gives them even more motivation and satisfaction in their work precisely because they are from the region. They also mentioned they do not envision working on other missions abroad. As local staff, they felt more flexibility to interact with affected populations. For instance, they do not view an angry crowd as a threat but understand their frustrations, which motivates them to achieve something for affected populations.

### **Time**

Those who felt they coped well with pressure noted strict schedules. At a certain point each evening they disconnected. Managers mentioned setting this example for staff by not reviewing e-mails after a certain hour each night and closing the office after a certain time, making everyone go home or leave their desks.

While all recognised the importance of rest and relaxation time (R&R) to adequately cope with pressure, especially after particularly stressful negotiations, many national staff shared how difficult it was to take time off and escape the context. Even when they take leave, it is not always possible for national staff to get away from the operating environment. Instead, they take professional development opportunities to travel out of the country when possible.

Managers noted the importance of encouraging staff to take time off. While the volume of communication is overwhelming, they were committed to supporting staff to overcome their inboxes to take time off. Despite

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<sup>7</sup> According to The New Humanitarian, "For the first time in recent memory UN-backed appeals will ask for less in 2024 (\$46 billion) than they did the year before (\$51 billion)" (Loy and Worley. [What's Shaping Aid Policy in 2024](#), 4 Jan 2024).

these commitments, negotiators still feel pressure from the volume of e-mails and messages when they are away from their desks.

### **Physical release**

Many interviewees shared coping mechanisms that addressed nervous energy or impacts on the body. Several frontliners mentioned smoking as a coping mechanism, both after stressful situations and in the moment to diffuse particularly tense moments with counterparts. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of sport as well as taking solace in nature.

Some interviewees cited extreme sports, such as alpine rock climbing, to force their minds to completely disconnect from complex working environments. Focusing on pets or plants and realising their value to a life outside of work was also an important coping mechanism. Many interviewees discussed the importance of reading or trying to more deeply understand the context in which they were working to mitigate pressure.

Finally, interviewees all mentioned breathing. According to the survey, breathing was also the top skill participants of pressure management workshops recalled and used over and over again.

### **Intangible support**

Several interviewees mention coping mechanisms linked to spiritual or religious practices and to a strong belief they are fulfilling a mission in their current role. Such beliefs can grant a deep sense of confidence and trust even in the most difficult moments. When the pressure is at its highest and they are confronted with life-or-death dilemmas, some negotiators reported connecting to a state of “flow” that allows them to trust their intuition, feel backed up and stay confident.

## **Needs**

The CCHN evaluated the needs via survey and interview questions to increase the visibility, understanding and acceptance from the community of practice on the importance of pressure management.

It should be noted that most survey respondents as well as those interviewed had not completed a Pressure Management workshop, although most of them were part of the CCHN community. The need and interest on this topic demonstrated by CCHN members indicates an opportunity to imbue pressure management into the CCHN programming.

The thematic research found that need for pressure management skills is increasing, particularly at the team, organisational, and structural levels. In the five years since the CCHN conducted its initial survey on pressure management, negotiators pointed to the importance of developing coping mechanisms and unique practices to mitigate pressure before and during negotiations.

The current research identified gaps in:

- identifying and using coping mechanisms to manage pressure in the medium- and long-term after negotiation cycles or after particularly difficult deployments;
- how managers to acute moments of contextual pressure that result in demotivation of staff;
- how organisations respond to the impact of pressure on humanitarian negotiators; and
- recognition of pressure management beyond the individual and within the domain of humanitarian negotiation.

**Figure 11. Access to resources to manage pressure**



Most respondents claim to have resources to manage pressure and stress, but many indicated that they rely on personal resources.

These responses indicate a need at the team and organisational levels to better support negotiators to manage pressure.

**Figure 12. Further learning**



When asked what methods or practices related to pressure management they would like to learn more about to improve their negotiations, respondents selected all skills offered in the Pressure Management programme, including peer support or mentorship, soft skills, advanced and non-verbal communication skills, mental tools, and emotion and body

regulation.

The skill most often selected was “advanced and nonverbal communication skills,” followed closely by “emotion regulation”. Many respondents selected three or more responses.

Based on respondents’ responses, we can conclude there is clear demand for pressure management knowledge and skills.

In both interviews and the open answer portion of the survey, practitioners requested more simulations and stress inoculation trainings, that is, repetitive simulations to support a change of in an individual’s default behaviour under pressure.

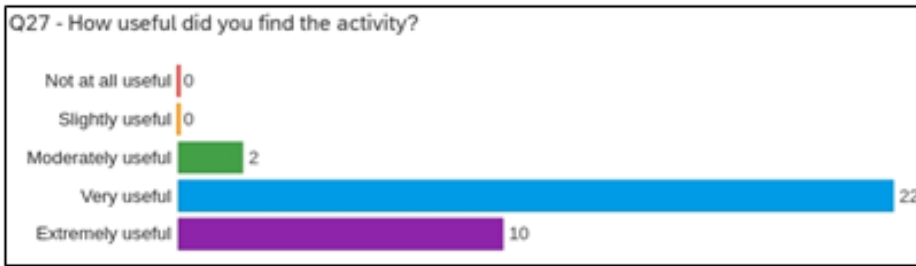
By both including pressure in its learning offer as well as providing pressure management in specific spaces, the CCHN can respond to these requests and strengthen the domain of humanitarian negotiation. While these findings may seem like sector-wide challenges, including pressure management more consistently has the potential to influence the sector from the ground up while also supporting organisational change through the CCHN’s advisory support services.

## Evaluation of the CCHN Pressure Management Programme

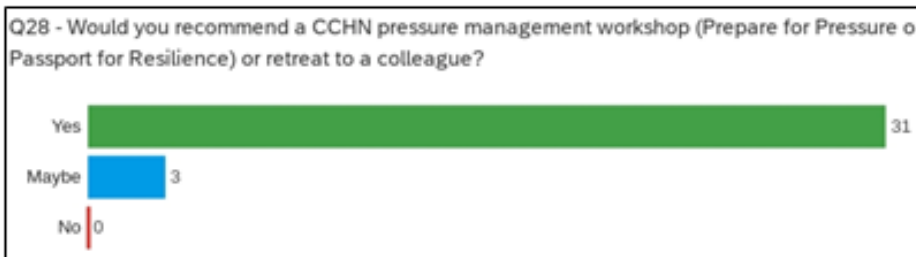
While only 19% of all survey respondents had previously participated in a CCHN Pressure Management workshop or retreat, most found the activity “very useful” (see figure 13) and would recommend the

programme to a colleague (see figure 14). Most respondents indicated that they “often” or “sometimes” use the tools and resources from the workshop (see figure 15).

**Figure 13. Usefulness of the activity**



**Figure 14. Recommendation of the programme to colleagues**



**Figure 15. Usage of tools and resources after the workshop**



Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the tools in the workshop were useful (see table 4). Respondents were able to select multiple tools.

**Table 4. Usefulness of the presented tools**

Q30 - To what extent have the tools presented in the workshop been useful for you...					
Field	Min	Max	Mean	Variance	Responses
Internal/external resources awareness	2.00	5.00	3.57	0.78	30
Triggers and values awareness	1.00	5.00	3.29	0.63	28
Breathing techniques in general	2.00	5.00	4.00	0.90	31
Fully body breathing (breathing with the four parts of the lungs)	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.85	28
Wimhof breathing	1.00	4.00	2.94	0.83	18
Recapitulation breaking (hooking internal emotions and breathing them out)	0.00	5.00	2.84	2.13	25
Emergency breathing (breath holds followed by forceful exhaling)	0.00	5.00	3.11	1.67	28
Visualization (safe space)	0.00	5.00	2.96	1.89	27
Guided audio recording from the programme	0.00	4.00	2.19	1.39	21
T.R.U.S.T. programme (Vincent's online platform/tool)	0.00	4.00	2.35	1.64	17
ASBB (free calls with professionals)	0.00	4.00	1.25	1.31	16

A few positive findings came out of this question:

- A majority of respondents recalled all tools.
- All tools were useful for the majority of respondents.
- Breathing techniques were the most useful for nearly all respondents.
- Most respondents selected six or more tools.

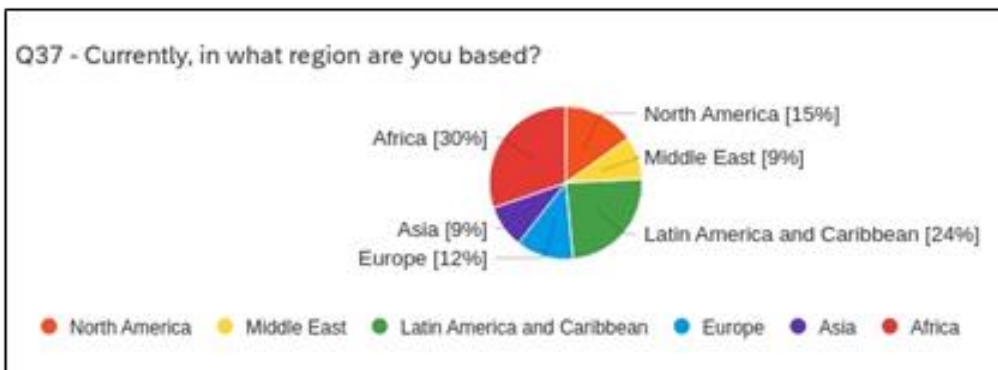
In addition to the survey findings, interviewees who had participated in the CCHN Pressure Management programme emphasized a request for more simulations. Many also indicated the mentorship programme as an opportunity to further develop pressure management within the domain. They either wished to take more advantage of or re-engage with peers through mentorship to deepen their pressure management practice and learn from others.

## Regional findings

Researchers uncovered regional variances in Africa and the Middle East. These findings are not surprising and are consistent with data from the Pressure Management programme.

For instance, appetite for pressure management programming in Africa remains high, while resiliency among practitioners in the Middle East is decreasing.

**Figure 16. Regional division**



## Resilience in Africa

Consistent with data gathered during Pressure Management workshops<sup>8</sup>, the highest number of respondents (30%) were based in Africa.

Additionally, when asked to indicate the level of pressure respondents experienced over the course of their career, people working in Africa were the most responsive (115 respondents out of 190). They indicated feeling a moderate amount of pressure while working in African countries.

Through interviews, it was clear that although there are many sources of pressure in contexts throughout Africa, coping mechanisms are also high. The region offers rich practices to mitigate the effects of pressure, particularly through strong social, communal and family systems as well as religious practices. Individuals working in this region also indicated an interest in learning more about pressure management and continuing to develop skills to mitigate and manage pressure.

This contrasts with responses from humanitarians working in the Middle East, the second region where respondents indicated having most experience in throughout their career with 95 responses. They indicated feeling slightly more pressure than those who worked in Africa.

However, unlike in Africa, resilience to pressure is low in humanitarians working in the Middle East. Practices are robust at the individual level but lack institutional and systemic support. Researchers also perceived a lower appetite for pressure management resources, mainly due to the lack of funding and time.

## The Gaza Effect

Researchers uncovered that humanitarians in the Middle East are prepared and equipped but reaching the limits of their coping mechanisms. 2023 began with earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria, affecting historically marginalised communities, thrusting humanitarians into politicised emergency response. In September, both Morocco and Libya were hit by earthquakes and floods, causing large scale destruction and

<sup>8</sup> On average, Africa represents 50% of participants in Pressure Management programming.



requiring emergency response. While humanitarians felt these natural disasters across the region, they believed themselves to be capable of responding until October 7, 2023. Israel's assault on Gaza and the subsequent man-made humanitarian catastrophe has shaken the resolve and resilience of humanitarian practitioners in the Middle East.

Many of the practitioners with whom the researchers spoke, regardless of nationality or current duty station, were affected by the information reported from Gaza. Many had personal connections with colleagues on the ground in Israel and in Gaza, and those working currently in the region were deeply affected. They reported feeling like their work had no purpose and they did not feel able to contribute positively to outcomes for affected populations, even those working outside of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian territories. The impact of Israel's assault on Gaza is affecting the ability of practitioners in the Middle East to overcome the daily pressures of the operating environment.

Although this example is very specific due to the period the research took place, it illustrates what has been reported by other practitioners during pressure management workshops regarding the exposure, professionally and personally, to a multiplicity of crisis, over time.

## Resilience in Latin America

It is worth mentioning that 75% of respondents from Latin America have found the CCHN Pressure Management programme "extremely useful" and 100% of respondents still use the tools when needed, often or even every day.

## Resilience in Europe

Respondents from Europe seem more reluctant to prioritise pressure management.

## Resilience in Asia

Asia is a region we have the least data about. This is also the region where respondents mention not having access to many resources nor support from their organisation, and where 100% of respondents have found the CCHN Pressure Management programme "very useful," with 100% of respondents still using the tools when needed or often.




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