



**FRONTLINE  
NEGOTIATIONS**

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON  
HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

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LISTENING TOUR ON PRESSURE MANAGEMENT

# Negotiating Under Pressure

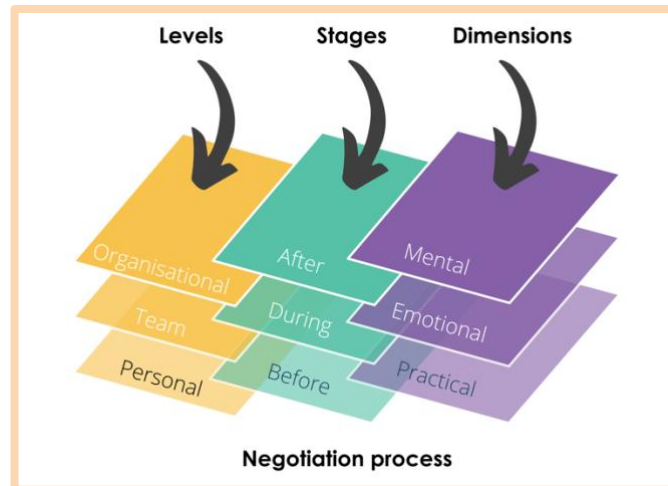
Summary report



# Negotiating Under Pressure

## Key findings from the 2023 research

Being a frontline negotiator can be stressful regardless of the context, the counterpart, or the negotiation objective. Given this reality, the CCHN conducted research in 2019, which led to the development of a **Pressure Management programme** to support negotiators in building their capacities and providing them with tools to prepare for, manage, and cope with pressure on the **physical, mental, and emotional dimensions at personal and team levels** (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Layers of Frontline Humanitarian Negotiations in 2019**

As funds decrease and humanitarian needs increase, the pressure negotiators are facing is only growing. For this reason, the CCHN decided to conduct a second study on the topic in 2023.

The new research conducted by the CCHN provides insights into the evolution of the humanitarian sector over the past five years, as well as the coping mechanisms developed by frontline negotiators to deal with pressure and identifies gaps in the overlap between pressure management and humanitarian negotiations.

This thematic research used a **qualitative methodology** based on semi-structured interviews, an online survey, and focus group discussions with CCHN’s humanitarian partners, practitioners, and key informants. The survey received 190 responses, and the research team conducted 32 interviews between October and December 2023.

### 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 scenario 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.
- **Overall, an additional layer is mentioned by negotiators in their negotiation process (see Figure 2).** Moreover, as each layer is part of a whole system, they can either be a source of pressure, affected by pressure or a way of coping with pressure.

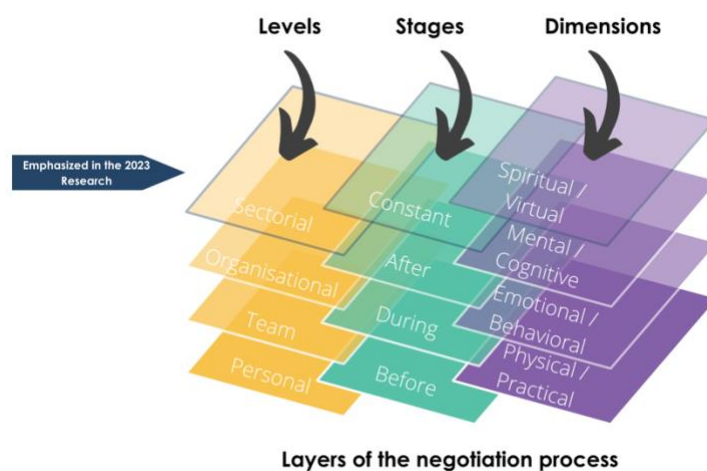


Figure 2: Pressure Sources, Impacts & Coping layers of Frontline Humanitarian Negotiations in 2023

## Detailed findings

The core of the research analysis focuses on the **sources** and the **impact** of pressure on humanitarian professionals and their negotiations, as well as their **coping mechanisms** to manage pressure (in the moment and over time) and their **need** for pressure management programmes and tools.

The answers collected through the survey and the interviews both confirmed our **research hypotheses**: when humanitarian negotiators face pressure, they have coping mechanisms to handle it during a negotiation (in the short term), but they need more tools and support to manage pressure throughout their careers (in the long term).

### 1) Sources of pressure

The research shows most humanitarians do not see their environment as a source of pressure despite the fragile places they often work in. Instead, humanitarians pointed to **counterparts and organisational hierarchy as a higher source 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.

When contextualising sources of pressure according to different levels, stages, and dimensions (see Figure 1), results indicate that negotiators perceive the **most intense source of pressure as coming**

from themselves (personal level), while teams and organisations can function as sources of pressure as well as coping mechanisms.

The heatmap on sources of pressure (Figure 3) indicates that the working environment, counterparts, and the object of the negotiation are stressful, yet the first two seem to generate slightly more stress than the object of the negotiation, as the emphasis has fallen to the centre-left of the triangle. These findings strongly show that **humanitarian negotiators face more pressure from internal challenges than contextual complexity.**



Figure 3. Sources of pressure

## 2) Impact of pressure

The impact of pressure is where researchers identified the greatest change in the humanitarian negotiation domain since the initial study conducted in 2019.

Respondents felt the impact of pressure coming **from managers, organisations, and the sector more than from adversarial counterparts and difficult living conditions.** Even if the pressure coming from the operational environment is significant, negotiators indicated that the impact of the pressure to respond to donor demands and implement partner ideologies is greater on them. Indeed, negotiators pointed they feel ill-equipped to mitigate internal pressures and demands.

The impacts of pressure are felt at nearly all levels, stages, and dimensions of the negotiation process. For example, organisations are not only a source of pressure but are also impacted by humanitarian negotiation pressures (see Figure 4). According to negotiators' perceptions, pressure affects them more before and during the negotiation than after (see Figure 5). However, this was counterbalanced by interviewees who mentioned the long-term impact of pressure and how often they only felt pressure having left the context. Moreover, results indicated mental, emotional, and physical states were similarly impacted by pressure, as the largest concentration of responses is in the middle of the heatmap (see Figure 6). Here again, although survey respondents' physical pressure is less apparent in the triad, interviewees shared they noticed it at a later stage.



Figure 4. Impact of pressure

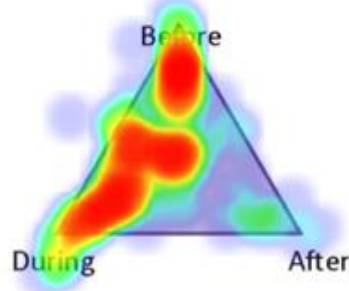


Figure 5. Impact of pressure

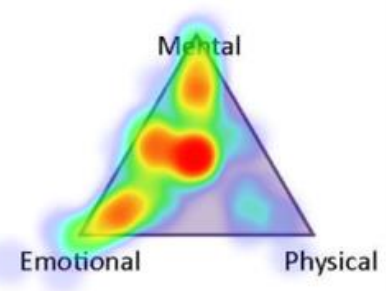


Figure 6. Impact of pressure

## 3) Coping mechanisms

Results demonstrate negotiators' strength in mitigating pressure by building relationships with adversaries and driving forward programming for affected populations. Negotiators **thrive off their families' support and through the impact they can provide to communities** in challenging environments.

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.

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. 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. This aligns with findings that negotiators do not perceive the impacts of pressure after negotiations as they are more able to suppress bodily responses before and during negotiations.

Negotiators shared different themes and practices that improved their ability to cope with pressure:

- **Organisational hierarchy.** Most negotiators feel well cared for in their organisation. Yet, they indicated feeling supported (with tools and resources) and safe (secure in their position) only a moderate amount of the time. At the field level, team dynamics, when positive, are a major coping mechanism for negotiators.
- **Meaningful connections.** Most highlighted the importance of a supportive partner, parent, sibling, or close friend. Sometimes, these supportive individuals were also peers. National staff relied on family or tribal connections to relieve pressure within the context. 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. In addition, connecting with the local communities and culture at a personal level was also mentioned as a coping mechanism.
- **Impact of work on communities.** Keeping in mind the populations they negotiate on behalf of and the times they manage to assist affected populations are ways humanitarians mitigate stress. This phenomenon was especially evident among national staff, as some claimed that it gives them even more motivation.
- **Time.** Those who felt they coped well with pressure noted strict schedules, such as disconnecting at a certain point each evening. While all recognised the importance of rest and recovery time to adequately cope with pressure, many national staff shared how difficult it was to take time off and escape the context.
- **Physical release.** Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of exercise as well as taking solace in nature, breathing, or focusing on pets or plants and realising their value to a life outside of work as important coping mechanisms.
- **Intangible support.** Many mentioned coping mechanisms linked to spiritual or religious practices and 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.

#### 4) Need for pressure management tools

The need for pressure management is increasing, particularly at the team, organisational, and sectorial levels. In the five years since the CCHN conducted its initial survey, negotiators have recognised the importance of developing coping mechanisms and developed 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;
- further diversifying the methodologies used to cope with pressure, notably leveraging more physical, emotional and wholistic approaches;
- how managers respond 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.

Moreover, practitioners requested more simulations and stress inoculation training, that is, repetitive simulations to support a change in an individual's default behaviour when under pressure.

### **Feedback on the CCHN Pressure Management Programme**

Most of those who had participated in a CCHN Pressure Management workshop or retreat found the activities, techniques and learnings useful and would recommend the programme to a colleague.

Most respondents indicated that they use the tools and resources from the workshop to cope with pressure in their work, when needed. Some tools include, for example, various breathing techniques, visualisation exercises, awareness of internal and external resources, awareness of triggers and values, or guided audio recordings.




## CONTACT





For further information, please contact:

### Maude Pittet Nazareno

Project Manager – Pressure Management and Mentoring

[mpittetnazareno@frontline-negotiations.org](mailto:mpittetnazareno@frontline-negotiations.org)

 Domaine “La Pastorale”  
106 Route de Ferney 1202 Geneva, Switzerland  
 [info@frontline-negotiations.org](mailto:info@frontline-negotiations.org)  
 [www.frontline-negotiations.org](http://www.frontline-negotiations.org)

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