

Humanitarian negotiations and communities

Centre of Competence
on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN)



Communities as humanitarian negotiators

Communities are at the front and centre of humanitarian action. They are the first impacted by humanitarian crises and the best placed to define what will truly help them. Their participation, acceptance, and trust are crucial for the success of any humanitarian response. Yet, negotiating with and alongside communities is often overlooked or under-prioritised compared to negotiations with authorities or armed actors. These local dialogues are just as critical: they shape whether aid is accepted, services are delivered, and protection is ensured.

Recognising this, since 2021 the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) has placed a strategic focus on exploring how humanitarian actors can engage more effectively with communities through negotiation – conducting research, gathering field experiences, and developing learning activities specifically dedicated to negotiations *with* and *by* communities.

Negotiations *with* communities: A key to effective humanitarian aid

Having an open dialogue with communities is essential to humanitarian work, yet these

interactions can be fraught with tensions and difficult to manage.

Challenges arise for different reasons – including difficulties in identifying the right interlocutor or dealing with a group rather than a single individual, making it harder to steer the conversation and keep tensions under control. Humanitarian staff and their organisation can also be misperceived due to rumours and misinformation, leading to a lack of trust and acceptance. Negotiating with communities unsuccessfully carries risks in the long term. Failed negotiations can lead to a lack of access, operational discontinuity, resistance to aid, and, in the worst case, security incidents.

To effectively work with communities, humanitarian actors must be equipped to lead these conversations effectively.

Negotiations *by* communities: Strengthening local action

As humanitarian operations become increasingly decentralised and community-led, investing in their negotiation capacities is not optional. It is essential to safeguarding humanitarian principles, ensuring aid effectiveness, and reinforcing local resilience in crisis settings.

As communities interact with authorities, armed groups, religious leaders and other communities, they require solid negotiation skills and plenty of support in navigating emotionally charged situations.

The CCHN response

The CCHN started working on the topic of communities and humanitarian negotiation in 2021. Together with humanitarian practitioners and experts, the CCHN conducted research and led focus group discussions to review field practices and develop learning material. Since then, the CCHN has supported humanitarian field staff by providing advice, guidance, and negotiation capacity-building on the topic. Additionally, in late 2024, the CCHN commissioned a research group to conduct interviews to better define what it means to negotiate with communities and identify emerging practices.

Capacity-building for humanitarian staff

The CCHN has developed negotiation workshops and thematic sessions that aim to improve the negotiation outcomes of frontline negotiators and communities. A first negotiation workshop focused on negotiating with communities was delivered in Iran in 2022 in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Iranian Red Crescent. Participants learned to apply the CCHN negotiation methodology and tested their newly acquired skills in a tailored negotiation simulation.

Capacity-building for members of communities

The CCHN organised its first negotiation workshop for community leaders in Colombia in 2024. Some 20 women from different communities were trained to plan and conduct negotiations in a systematic manner, not only equipping participants with strategic negotiation tools and methods but also providing a safe space to exchange experiences and share learnings.

In December 2024, a similar workshop was organised in Ukraine to support civil society organisations and community leaders in their negotiations. 19 participants gained skills to prepare a negotiation strategy and exchanged with other local partners about their current negotiation challenges and solutions.

Partnering with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency

Established in 2023, the CCHN's ongoing collaboration with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency – the entity providing services around missing people –

has yielded five negotiation workshops catering specifically to the families of people who went missing. These one-of-a-kind workshops were held online in English and Spanish, with interpretation provided in Arabic, Bosnian, Georgian, Hausa, Sinhala and Tagalog. A Training of Trainers additionally allowed 28 families (notably from Nigeria, Nepal, Lebanon, Mexico and Honduras) to share their learning with others. The first in-person workshop was then delivered in early 2025 in Yerevan, Armenia, catering to the families of those who disappeared in the 1990s and 2020s. CCHN workshops trained nearly 100 family members from over 20 contexts globally.

Operational research

The CCHN begun researching around this topic in 2021 and is now focusing on community-led negotiations. Research aims to explore how communities take the lead in negotiation processes and on which forms of negotiation support they require. As part of this effort, in 2023 the CCHN embarked on a series of interviews with families of the missing to better understand their specific challenges, identify their needs, and assess how to support their engagement.

Tailored guidance and learning materials

Throughout 2024, the CCHN facilitated discussions among humanitarians on their experiences negotiating with communities across regions, including a dedicated thematic session on negotiating with communities in the West Bank and Gaza in August 2024. Based on the learnings collected through these events and its research, the CCHN develops technical guidance, tools, and other didactic materials that enable negotiators to negotiate with communities at the frontlines effectively.

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