FRONTLINE NEGOTIATIONS

CENTRE OF COMPETENCE ON HUMANITARIAN NEGOTIATION

THEMATIC RESEARCH

Communities at the table: Insights from the field

Negotiating with, through and by communities in humanitarian action

Publication September 2025

Authors Stéphanie Ferland, CCHN Operations Manager for Europe and West Africa
Inès Lahlil, CCHN Operations Associate for Europe, Protection and Health

Cover photo Jonglei State, KoloPach (South Sudan). Local community members are going where the ICRC airdropped food. Credits: ICRC / Albert GONZALEZ FARRAN

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 Médecins Sans Frontières 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.

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

CONFIDENTIALITY

DISCLAIMER

Executive Summary

This report examines how humanitarian negotiations unfold at the community level and how affected people shape access, protection, and assistance in crisis contexts.

Drawing on field research, practitioner exchanges, and CCHN initiatives, it analyses three distinct but connected forms of negotiation: with, by, and through communities.

Together, they show that communities are not secondary to humanitarian action but central actors whose agency and relationships directly influence outcomes.

Negotiation with communities explores how humanitarian actors engage directly with affected populations as counterparts. These exchanges are often informal, emotional, and embedded in local power dynamics. Trust, empathy, and sustained presence matter more than formal authority. Effective practice requires time, cultural fluency, and institutional support to navigate diverse community structures and ensure inclusive, respectful dialogue.

Community-led negotiation highlights how communities act independently to secure their safety, rights, and access to assistance. These negotiations arise from necessity and rely on courage, organisation, and social cohesion. Communities use varied tactics, from moral appeals to strategic compromise, while facing real personal risks. Humanitarian actors can best assist by recognising communities' roles, offering context-specific support, and creating safe spaces for peer exchange.

Negotiation through communities describes situations where humanitarians rely on community intermediaries when direct engagement with power holders is not possible. While this can enable access, it also raises ethical and protection concerns, especially when risk is transferred to civilians. It requires careful analysis and safeguards.

CCHN's experience and its global community of practice provide unique expertise in understanding and strengthening these negotiation practices, ensuring that humanitarian action remains principled, inclusive, and grounded in the realities of the people it serves.

Contents

Introduction

Humanitarian negotiations are a constant feature in crisis contexts and involve multiple counterparts. The object of these negotiations is to secure access, address protection concerns, and reduce tensions.

While traditionally humanitarian negotiations are considered the domain exclusively of humanitarian organisations and with Governments, armed groups, etc. However, practice shows that in many instances, they are also undertaken with community members, are conducted by community members on their own behalf and at times occur via community members when humanitarians cannot or choose not to engage certain actors directly.

Communities are not passive recipients of aid. They actively negotiate with authorities, armed actors, and other counterparts to protect their lives, livelihoods, and dignity. These efforts often start before humanitarian actors arrive and can play a critical role in securing protection and access. When successful, community-led negotiations can prevent violence, build trust, outrightly remove the need for humanitarian assistance or in other instances facilitate delivery; when they fail, they may lead to insecurity, mistrust, and blocked access.

There are also instances where humanitarian actors cannot or are unwilling to engage directly with certain groups either due to counter-terrorism legislation and/or sanctions regimes, risk averness or lack of perceived access to such groups. In such instances, communities are frequently enlisted to serve as intermediaries, negotiating behind the scenes to facilitate access on behalf of humanitarians. Hailed by many a successful approach, analysis of practice shows that often ethical and security concerns are ignored when employing this approach, particularly regarding transference of risk.

Since 2017, the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) has explored these dynamics through research, peer exchanges, and operational initiatives. Specifically, the scope of inquiry has been:

- Negotiation with communities: The practices, challenges, and strategies humanitarians use to engage directly with affected populations.
- Community-led negotiations: How communities negotiate with external actors for their protection and access to aid.
- Negotiation through communities: Using communities as intermediaries/proxies in contexts where direct negotiation by humanitarian actors is not possible or allowed.

The CCHN deployed various processes for sense making and collecting information, including but not limited to commissioning two research pieces (with Salt Meadow Consulting and ODI/HPG), thematic workshops, and initiatives, such as the CCHN's work to support families of the missing, in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross' Central Tracing Agency (CTA-ICRC). Leveraging the expertise of the community of practice of frontline negotiators, the CCHN also conducted a range of online initiatives, including thematic sessions, webinars, and peer circle discussions, to better understand community negotiation practices and identify common patterns across contexts. The CCHN has also conducted two in-person workshops, in Colombia and Ukraine, with communities negotiating for their own protection and access at the frontlines.

This report combines the key insights from CCHN's work, synthesizing field experiences, community engagement, and negotiation practices. It reflects the CCHN's expertise in this area and is intended to inform and support the broader humanitarian community in strengthening community-centered negotiation approaches.

Conceptual framework

The CCHN's work on negotiation and communities distinguishes between three interrelated, yet distinct, forms of negotiation that arise in humanitarian settings.

1. Negotiation with communities

Negotiation with communities refers to the direct engagement of humanitarian actors with affected, host or other communities in the operating environment as counterparts. These negotiations occur in diverse contexts, including:

- When humanitarians seek agreement on a range of issues from acceptance of their presence to specific technical agreement on the modalities of assistance delivery.
- When tensions arise, for example, in response to perceived inequalities in aid distribution, or incidents that erode trust in humanitarian actors.
- When communities block or resist humanitarian operations, as seen in situations where communities not targeted for assistance obstruct access to distribution sites, or families of victims protest at humanitarian offices.

These negotiations are distinct in that they require humanitarians to navigate:

- Complex and sometimes fragmented community structures with multiple interest groups and no single representative voice.
- Dynamics shaped by persistent grievances, misinformation, and community narratives.
- The need to build and maintain trust through sustained and respectful engagement.

2. Community-led negotiations

Community-led negotiations refer to the practices of communities acting as their own agents. In these cases, communities negotiate on their own behalf rather than for others, which can involve strong emotional dimensions, strain existing relations and impact local dynamics, and in some instances also put community negotiators under increased risk. Such negotiations may involve direct dialogue with local authorities, armed actors, or other power holders to secure safety, ensure access to basic services, or protect livelihoods.

These negotiations are often:

- Driven by necessity, strategic choice, or external pressure.
- Undertaken without external support, and sometimes with significant risks to those involved.
- Focused on tangible outcomes such as securing safe passage, stopping protection violations such as preventing forced recruitment, or establishing local ceasefires.

Community-led negotiation processes often mirror many of the elements familiar to humanitarian negotiators, such as context analysis, stakeholder mapping, and tactical planning, though they tend to be more organic and less formally structured.

3. Negotiation through communities

Negotiation through communities refers to situations where communities or their representatives act as intermediaries between humanitarian organisations and power holders at the request of humanitarians.

In such contexts:

- Communities may be asked, explicitly or implicitly, to convey messages, broker agreements, or facilitate humanitarian access.
- This form of negotiation raises critical ethical and operational concerns, particularly around risk transfer to communities, which may lack the leverage, protection, or resources that formal humanitarian actors often possess.

Common threads and challenges

Across these three forms of negotiation, several common threads emerge:

- The importance of trust, legitimacy, and sustained engagement in negotiation processes.
- The complex power dynamics and risk of unintended consequences, including the transfer of risk onto communities.
- Humanitarian actors need to recognise and respect communities' approaches and priorities, while ensuring that their own interventions do not inadvertently undermine these by imposing external agendas or rigid frameworks.

The CCHN's work aims to reflect what has been heard through our operations and engagements and make negotiation stories and good practices available to the wider community of practice. By sharing insights from different contexts, we help practitioners access information that can strengthen their own approaches and support more effective, ethical, and context-sensitive negotiations.

Negotiation with communities: findings and lessons learned

Negotiating with communities is a distinct but often under-recognised category of humanitarian negotiation. The notion of negotiating with the very communities which humanitarians are meant to serve causes some unease. However, the reality is that these are one form of negotiation that are a constant feature for every deep field practioner.

Based on the last ten years of practice collected by the CCHN, including curated work with agencies involved in large scale assistance and those conducting protection work and more recently testimonies shared by 29 interviewees working for international and local organisations in the CCHN's five operational regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa), the CCHN's research points to the specific features, emerging practices and critical challenges that define this form of negotiation. Unlike formal talks with authorities, these engagements are often informal, emotionally charged, and deeply embedded in local power dynamics.

> **"The community is different from more structured, say official, negotiations because of the informality of it. (…) With the communities, it has more feelings… it becomes emotional."**
>
> Humanitarian professional working for an INGO, Middle East

Defining "negotiation with communities". A shifting target

Humanitarian practitioners consistently struggled to define "negotiation with communities" clearly, though they recognised it as distinct from other forms of negotiation. Most practitioners defined it not by the object of negotiation (e.g. access or programme design) but by the **counterpart**: individuals or groups within communities who represent or claim to represent, formally or informally, a collective interest. In other words, the defining feature lies in engaging with those who perceptively hold legitimacy or influence within a community, rather than the specific issue being negotiated.

Many emphasised that these negotiations are not merely a subset of "community engagement" or "communication with communities", but involve **actual influence, compromise and mutual expectations**. They typically arise around tensions (over aid modalities, land use, community structures within refugees/IDPs camps, security incidents, or changing programme criteria), where humanitarians and community members must negotiate terms or resolve conflict.

The research and the thematic sessions hosted by the CCHN highlighted significant challenges in **defining who belongs to "the community."** Practitioners apply informal inclusion and exclusion criteria to decide whom to engage, often unconsciously.

These may include:

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Residing in a specific geography (camp, village)	Living outside the identified area
Holding recognised local ID or citnship	Holding different citizenship or IDs
Familiarity with local customs and behaviour	Upholding "outside" norms (e.g. international standards)
Personal ties (e.g. marriage into the community)	Affiliation with distrusted organisations
Shared behavioural practices targeted by the programme	Perceived as upholding foreign or imposed standards

These criteria can create unintended biases and reinforce existing hierarchies or exclusions. For example, certain displaced or minority groups may be excluded simply because they are not recognised as part of the 'legitimate' community. During the war in Ukraine, for instance, some non-Ukrainian refugees or migrants in the neighbouring countries were excluded from certain programmes precisely because they were not Ukrainian.

Practices: How negotiation with communities actually happens

The research identifies three operational areas where negotiation with communities differs significantly from other types of humanitarian negotiation.

1. Identifying the right counterpart

In community settings, leadership is often informal, complex, and diffuse. While practioners can, overtime and with significant effort, learn to distinguish between official gatekeepers and actual influencers, in practice such investment of time, attention and access is rare. Faced with competing priorities, institutional pressure to deliver and access constraints, particularly in complex hard to reach areas, humanitarians often default to engaging with the visible and convenient figures who may or may not hold actual influence.

Formal leaders, such as those elected or recognised by institutions, may not always hold sway over key decisions. As one humanitarian practitioner in Latin America noted, communities can exist within communities, and thus different social leaders can be found. Particularly in contexts affected by armed conflict, those who command force or are aligned with one of the parties frequently assert leadership and are treated, regardless of their legitimacy or the degree of respect they command. Practice from South Sudan during the civil war clearly demonstrated the struggle of the warring parties to appoint and install competing 'chiefs' in communities claiming to represent the same community, as control over community structures can be a strategic tool of influence. These competing chiefs were frequently presented to humanitarians to represent community needs, negotiate assistance modalities etc.

In addition to expediency and time pressure, that encourage humanitarians to rely on self-appointed leaders, there are also practices of constituting 'committees of community representatives' to fulfil policy requirements ensuring participation and representation of the community that appear meaningful from a policy or institutional perspective. Practice shows that these committees also may not always represent or

hold influence over the community unless they have been chosen through a proper analysis. In instances where such proper analysis has been conducted, practitioners are able to successfully identify the correct interlocutors.

Some of them emphasised that identifying counterparts requires a combination of tools: observing group dynamics, drawing on local networks, and consulting with trusted interlocutors. As one humanitarian in Europe observed, informal leaders can sometimes be identified by noting "who is the person that people refer to all the time."

However, relying on observation alone can introduce bias. More visible or accessible individuals may not represent the full diversity of the community. Practitioners stressed the importance of surrounding themselves with diverse teams and actively listening to all community segments.

Understanding the broader social and legal context also helps negotiators interpret the legitimacy of potential counterparts. Customary law, religious knowledge, and informal norms play key roles. For instance, a United Nations staff member in Asia recounted having studied the customary laws that rule the community without the constitution, but also relying on the experience from other community members through CCHN platforms and in-person meetings.

2. Time, place, and manner matter

Successful negotiations with communities rarely occur as single instance. Instead, they evolve over time through sustained presence and engagement, repeated exchanges, and trust-building efforts. One international humanitarian worker from Latin America put it simply: "Don't rush. [These negotiations are] part of a bigger process. It takes as many meetings as they need."

The legitimacy of the negotiator often hinges on personal attributes (listening skills, empathy, cultural sensitivity), rather than formal credentials. Several humanitarians in various regional contexts reflected on the balance that they create with these communities to stay professional and at the same time 'be liked' by them.

> **"We are just trying to resonate with the communities… They already know what the problem is and what they need from us."**
>
> Humanitarian worker from an INGO

Negotiators must also account for the long-term impact of their presence and operations on community dynamics. Aid delivery can reshape power relations, generate dependency, or revive old grievances. One INGO staff member in Europe noted the difficulty of saying "no" and emphasised that rather than focusing on absolute outcomes, they articulate the rationale for decisions and manage expectations.

Community leadership may shift due to generational changes or internal dynamics, yet humanitarian negotiators often view these leaders as long-term actors. A practitioner from the Middle East contrasted this with official negotiations, noting that State officials come and go, while in these communities, the investment is very high.

3. Self-reliance and bias

Humanitarians often rely on their own intuition and personal networks to guide decisions in these settings. While this flexibility allows responsiveness, it also carries the risk of:

- Unconscious bias (e.g. favouring English-speaking counterparts, male leaders).
- Reinforcing power asymmetries when marginalised voices are excluded.
- Over-reliance on local partners who may have their own interests in mediating access to communities.

Rather than relying on assumptions, effective negotiators work to understand the values and motivations of diverse community members. They recognise that elected leaders may not always be representative and that different factions within a community may have competing priorities.

Trust is the foundation of successful community negotiation. Aggressive or transactional approaches often backfire, particularly in contexts where communities have experienced repeated external interventions. Instead, emphasis is placed on building trust over time by demonstrating genuine interest and prioritising the community's needs over institutional agendas.

Humanitarians are also rethinking how to partner with communities in more sustainable ways. A national staff member in Latin America explained that they don't go meet communities to distribute items but rather to reinforce the community's capacities. By doing so, practitioners move away from transactional forms of negotiation rooted in power imbalances and instead foster more reciprocal and capacity-strengthening relationships.

> **"I have one part of my heart as a member of the community and one part as a humanitarian… most of my legitimacy comes from that."**
>
> UN staff member, Africa

Characteristics of effective community negotiators

Success in negotiating with communities rarely hinges on technical expertise alone. Instead, it depends on a negotiator's ability to build trust through active listening, emotional intelligence and deep contextual knowledge.

Negotiators embedded in or familiar with the community tend to be more effective. Many humanitarians noted that being "local", or at least from the country, can make negotiations significantly easier. Language, shared identity, and long-term presence were often cited as more important than organisational status or formal roles.

Rather than relying on authority or transactional tactics, effective negotiators focus on relationship-building, authenticity, and long-term engagement. These traits are often gained through personal commitment, lived experience, and ongoing reflection.

> **"There might be times where you won't be the best person to talk [to the community]. So you send someone who knows more people or has more experience there."**
>
> UN humanitarian, Asia

Key takeaways

- Negotiation with communities is largely **relational, not transactional**. It relies more on presence, trust, and cultural fluency than formal roles.
- Community negotiations are often **less visible** and harder to capture, requiring humanitarian actors to sharpen observation skills and build long-term local knowledge.
- Organisations need to **invest in building these skills**, offer clearer guidance for navigating local power dynamics, ensure inclusive definitions of "community," and provide their staff with the space and time to cultivate meaningful relationships with communities.

Community-led negotiation: Findings and lessons learned

Across diverse humanitarian contexts, communities often take the lead in negotiating to secure protection, access to aid, or locate loved ones who have disappeared in situations of conflict or violence, positioning themselves as negotiators rather than passive victims. These negotiations are typically informal, emotionally charged, and deeply rooted in local social dynamics, requiring humanitarian practitioners to adopt a sensitive and context-specific approach when engaging with or supporting these efforts.

Why communities negotiate

Communities initiate dialogue for three reasons: necessity, strategic choice, or external pressure.

Many communities do not perceive these engagements as "negotiation" but rather as a dialogue to safeguard their survival and well-being. However, research shows that their approaches are often highly strategic. For some communities, defining these conversations as 'negotiations' often leads to the realisation that this is, in fact, what they are doing. This recognition can be an important and even transformative moment.

While necessity and external pressure can force communities into dialogue, they also make conscious choices to engage to reduce risks, resolve grievances, or secure access to essential services. Negotiation can sometimes be triggered by specific needs, such as recovering detained family members or ensuring safe passage during seasonal harvests. Such actions may be reactive responses to immediate threats or deliberate strategies to shift power dynamics, secure concessions, and protect their community.

For example, in Colombia, indigenous authorities developed an organised process to negotiate with the local armed group the return of recruited children, mobilising family members, teachers, and traditional leaders. In Yemen, a community asked a trusted humanitarian to recover the bodies of deceased combatants by engaging all sides of the conflict. These are not isolated cases but reflect a broader pattern of strategic engagement by affected populations.

Who represents the community

Community negotiators are rarely officially appointed. Rather, they are trusted, well-connected individuals selected for their credibility, influence, or lived experience. They may be elders, youth leaders, mothers, religious figures, or activists – whoever is best placed to engage with the intended counterpart. Often, negotiators are chosen based on their ability to "speak the language" of the other side, both literally and culturally.

The process is fluid: negotiators may change based on the issue, audience, or outcome of earlier efforts. In Nigeria, communities form pressure groups, identify skilled speakers who can frame the message, and adapt representation at each level of authority they approach (see below). In Sudan, a local female association in West Darfur comprises a coalition of tribal leaders, civil society actors, and local figures indigenously formed that seeks to resolve conflict between tribal and armed groups, while also securing the harvest.

Case study: community-led negotiations in Nigeria

According to a humanitarian staff member in Nigeria, dealing with the government starts with an individual or a small group that observes the issue and decides to do something about it. They first seek buy-in from a larger group of community members to form a pressure group. Once the size of the group is considered sufficient, they identify those who can best speak on their behalf, i.e. those who speak the same language as the decision maker and can appropriately frame the talking points.

Usually, it is someone accustomed to public speaking. The community is familiar with these members and knows who has a high level of education, lives in the city, and has connections to the relevant authority/armed actor. They will also identify what will be said, attribute roles, and who can support the negotiation process. The selected speaker then seeks to meet with the relevant government body at the community level. If they do not receive a positive response, they will escalate up the chain of command, sometimes up to the federal level. At every level, the community knows who should represent them and pressure them to negotiate on their behalf.

How dialogue happens

While community-led negotiation tends to be less structured than formal humanitarian negotiation, it often mirrors the same core steps, albeit in a more organic way.

Key elements include:

- Continuous situation analysis. Communities assess threats and opportunities in real time, relying on lived experience, consultation, and subtle cues from the context.
- Identifying priorities. Issues are chosen based on urgency, feasibility, and collective input. The more cohesive the community, the more aligned their messages tend to be.
- Leveraging influence. Communities map networks of power and enlist influential actors, such as former commanders, youth leaders, or respected elders, to strengthen their negotiating position.
- Building trust and entry points. Relationships are cultivated over time. Entry points may include kinship ties, religious events, or shared community spaces.
- Strategic planning. Communities often assign roles within negotiation teams and prepare messaging. In some contexts, humanitarian actors noted that community negotiators identify the needs and frame the message, dividing the roles as necessary. For example, one person will introduce who they are, what they've done, and the objective of the meeting; another will explain the problem and how it affects the community; yet another will present their request.

Dialogue locations are usually chosen based on considerations of safety, neutrality, and strategic relevance, and may include marketplaces, community centres, refugee and displacement camps, or religious sites.

Although community-led dialogue tends to be fluid and less structured than formal humanitarian negotiation, it often mirrors many of the same steps. Communities constantly monitor the situation around them, assessing the likelihood of success and identifying the right moment to act. They gather information through consultations with victims, families, and other members, and map the networks of influence to determine who should be approached first. Preparation also involves identifying priorities through collective

discussion, assigning clear roles within the negotiation team, and mobilising trusted influencers such as elders, faith leaders, or youth figures to strengthen their position.

Community-led Negotiation: Protecting a Children's Safe Space in Frontline Ukraine

In a frontline settlement of eastern Ukraine, years of war and displacement have deeply affected civilian life. The region has endured long occupation periods, and many areas remain under constant artillery and drone attacks. For almost three years, children have lived between basements and shelters, deprived of normal schooling, outdoor play, and social interaction. The combination of two years of pandemic restrictions followed by years of conflict has created a generation of children struggling with isolation, fear, and emotional distress.

To respond, the local community established a Children's Safe Space inside the settlement's cultural center. The space offered educational activities, art therapy, and psychosocial support with the help of teachers, volunteers, and local psychologists. It quickly became the only place where children could gather safely, learn, and play with others.

Preparation and engagement

When community members noticed signs that the cultural center was being used for other purposes, they became alarmed. Boxes that resembled military ammunition were stored in one section of the building, and men in uniform were seen entering and leaving regularly. At one point, a man carried what appeared to be a defused anti-tank mine into the building.

The community learned that the local authorities had ordered the creation of a war heritage museum inside the same facility and that the stored materials were to become part of its future exhibits. Although the objects were neutralized, their appearance and the presence of uniformed personnel made the building a potential target. From above, drones could easily mistake the center for a military site. Parents and volunteers feared for the children's safety, and activities were briefly suspended.

Recognizing that confronting local authorities could be risky, the community decided to initiate dialogue rather than a complaint. They agreed to present their concerns collectively, highlighting the danger for children and the broader community, and to propose practical solutions instead of demanding immediate removal of the museum.

Negotiation dynamics

The negotiations were held with representatives of the local administration. The community explained that while they respected the plan to preserve the memory of the war, combining military exhibits with children's activities violated both humanitarian standards and common sense. They emphasized that the presence of uniformed individuals and visible ammunition, even if deactivated, put civilians at risk by creating the perception of a military site.

The discussions were detailed and respectful. Community members supported their points with specific examples of risk and referred to the international convention on the protection of children. The local authorities initially defended the project, saying that the museum was essential for commemorating Ukraine's resilience and would serve educational purposes in the future.

Through patient dialogue, the community reframed the issue around shared priorities: keeping children safe while preserving historical memory. This helped the local authorities move from a defensive stance to cooperation. Together, they reviewed each element of the problem and its consequences. The head of the administration eventually agreed that, under current security conditions, the risks were greater than he had realized.

An agreement was reached. Military personnel would no longer enter the building in uniform. The museum materials would be stored in a locked room, inaccessible to children. The boxes, which in fact contained civil protection equipment such as gas masks, would be clearly labeled and moved away from areas used by the space. Most importantly, no new exhibits would be brought in until the security situation improved or the war ended.

Results

After these measures were implemented, the children's space resumed full activities. The atmosphere changed quickly: parents felt reassured, volunteers could focus on supporting children, and the sense of community safety grew stronger. The agreement also reduced potential visibility to reconnaissance drones, improving the protection of the entire settlement.

The process had broader effects beyond physical safety. The respectful and structured negotiation strengthened trust between community leaders and local authorities, laying the foundation for future cooperation on protection issues. The authorities, for their part, expressed appreciation for the constructive approach, recognizing that civilian perspectives are vital to preventing harm in frontline areas.

Lessons learned

This case shows how community-led protection can achieve practical safety outcomes through calm and respectful dialogue. By relying on their own legitimacy and local relationships, community members were able to raise sensitive concerns without confrontation, aligning humanitarian principles with local governance structures.

It also demonstrates the power of reframing, shifting the focus from criticism to shared responsibility for children's safety. This approach allowed the community to preserve both respect for local authority and the integrity of humanitarian norms.

Finally, the case highlights that effective protection is not always about large-scale interventions but about small, well-prepared negotiations that reduce risk and build trust. In contexts of prolonged conflict, empowering communities to lead such dialogue remains one of the most sustainable forms of civilian protection.

Using approaches consistent with the Naivasha Grid and CCHN negotiation framework, the community balanced principles with pragmatism, anchoring dialogue in shared interests rather than blame. By reframing the issue around children's safety, building trust with local authorities, and offering feasible solutions, they turned potential conflict into cooperation. This process highlights key skills to strengthen in community negotiators: context and stakeholder analysis, trust-building, interest-based reframing, and translating humanitarian norms into locally relevant arguments. Ultimately, the case demonstrates that effective community-led protection depends less on formal authority than on disciplined empathy and the ability to sustain relationships under pressure.

Negotiation tactics

Communities deploy a wide range of tactics, carefully tailored to their counterpart. The most common approach is to appeal to shared norms – religious, cultural, or moral. In the Central African Republic, religious leaders warned of divine punishment to discourage abuses. In South Sudan, church-affiliated women employed a care-based approach, emphasising the well-being of families, to reduce tensions, ultimately prompting the relocation of a military base. Other tactics include:

- Conditional support. Leveraging the community's cooperation, legitimacy, or silence.
- Threats. From electoral consequences to collective withdrawal or, even in rare cases, community retaliation.
- Incentives. Offering food, legitimacy, or aid access.
- Nudging and protest. Gently influencing internal debates within armed groups or raising concerns during community meetings.
- Compromise. Accepting trade-offs (e.g. compliance with certain rules) to secure broader safety.

These tactics are adapted based on what is most persuasive to the counterpart, be it local customs, religious doctrine or strategic interest. Beyond persuasion, communities also rely on tactics such as leveraging their cooperation or withholding support from authorities or armed groups, reminding political leaders of electoral consequences, or in some cases threatening to withdraw entirely. They may also offer conditional incentives such as food, shelter, or legitimacy, or make compromises to minimise violence against civilians. Nudging is another strategy where negotiators use kinship or community meetings to spark internal debate within armed groups in the hope of shifting behaviours over time. These practices show the adaptability of communities, tailoring their approach to the motivations and vulnerabilities of their counterparts.

Factors that shape outcomes

Several elements increase the likelihood of a successful negotiation:

- The right negotiator. One who is trusted by the community and the counterpart, seen as credible, and able to navigate delicate power dynamics.
- Social cohesion. Unified communities can speak with one voice, making it harder for counterparts to exploit internal divisions.
- Strategic alignment. Success is more likely when community demands align with the counterpart's interests (e.g., image, stability).
- Empathy and proximity. Ties of kinship or identity between communities and counterparts can foster restraint.
- Persistence. Dialogue is rarely a one-off meeting. Success often depends on repeated engagement and trust built over time.

Risks and mitigation

Community negotiators face significant risks, from being perceived as collaborators or targets to exclusion from traditional power structures. Risks may also arise when external actors intervene without fully understanding local dynamics. Negotiations with armed actors carry heavy personal risks, as engagement can provoke retaliation.

Communities adopt a range of strategies to reduce exposure. These include assigning roles carefully, maintaining confidentiality, and selecting neutral or discreet meeting spaces. Negotiators often rely on informal channels, local knowledge, and trusted relationships while emphasising shared humanitarian concerns to create common ground. Maintaining links with multiple sides helps them avoid being seen as partial, while strong social cohesion and collective mobilisation reduce the risk of divisions being exploited.

In deciding whether to engage, communities frequently conduct a success–risk assessment, weighing the likelihood of securing concessions against the danger of provoking violence. Negotiators may face suspicion, reprisals, or legal jeopardy even when dialogue goes ahead, sometimes requiring relocation or support from trusted community figures. Additional challenges stem from 'spoilers,' such as leadership changes within armed groups or the influence of diaspora actors, which can undermine agreements. In these situations, communities may pause their engagement until a more receptive counterpart emerges.

Supporting community negotiators

The report emphasises that any support to community-led negotiations must be demand-driven, context-specific, and co-created. A one-size-fits-all model risks doing harm. Instead, humanitarian actors can:

- Facilitate **peer exchange** between community negotiators from different regions or contexts.
- Offer **skills-based training** in clear communication, active listening, strategic planning, and effectively articulating objectives, including conveying messages clearly.
- Support **access to decision-makers** and external power holders.
- Offer **logistical and financial support** to enable dialogue.
- Ensure that any support does not undermine existing practices or structures. Humanitarian actors should take time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of community-led approaches and co-design support measures with negotiators, rather than imposing parallel mechanisms.

As one negotiator put it, the most valuable support is not negotiating on behalf of communities but standing alongside them to amplify their voices.

Case insight: Families of the missing

Since 2023, the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) and the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency (CTA) have partnered to strengthen the ability of **families of the missing** to engage constructively with authorities. Drawing on the CCHN's expertise in negotiation and peer learning and the CTA's longstanding field engagement with families, this initiative aims to **equip families with practical tools and strategies** to navigate complex interactions related to the search for their loved ones.

The initiative began with a global '**listening tour**,' where families from eight countries across multiple continents shared their diverse experiences, challenges, and strategies in engaging with different counterparts. Their input directly shaped the methodology and content of four online peer workshops held in 2023, 2024 and 2025, and one onsite workshop in Armenia in 2025, which have since engaged more than 100 family representatives from more than 25 countries. In parallel, trainings of facilitators were launched to foster a growing network of peer leaders among families themselves.

Who they negotiate with

Families of the missing frequently engage with various actors involved in the search process, including police, security forces, prosecutors, forensic institutions, local authorities, and national human rights bodies. In some instances, they also interact with non-State armed groups, media, international organisations, and community leaders. These engagements are typically uncoordinated and informal, driven by the urgent need to locate their loved ones or understand what happened to them.

Why do they negotiate

Families seek various outcomes from these interactions, often depending on the phase of the search process.

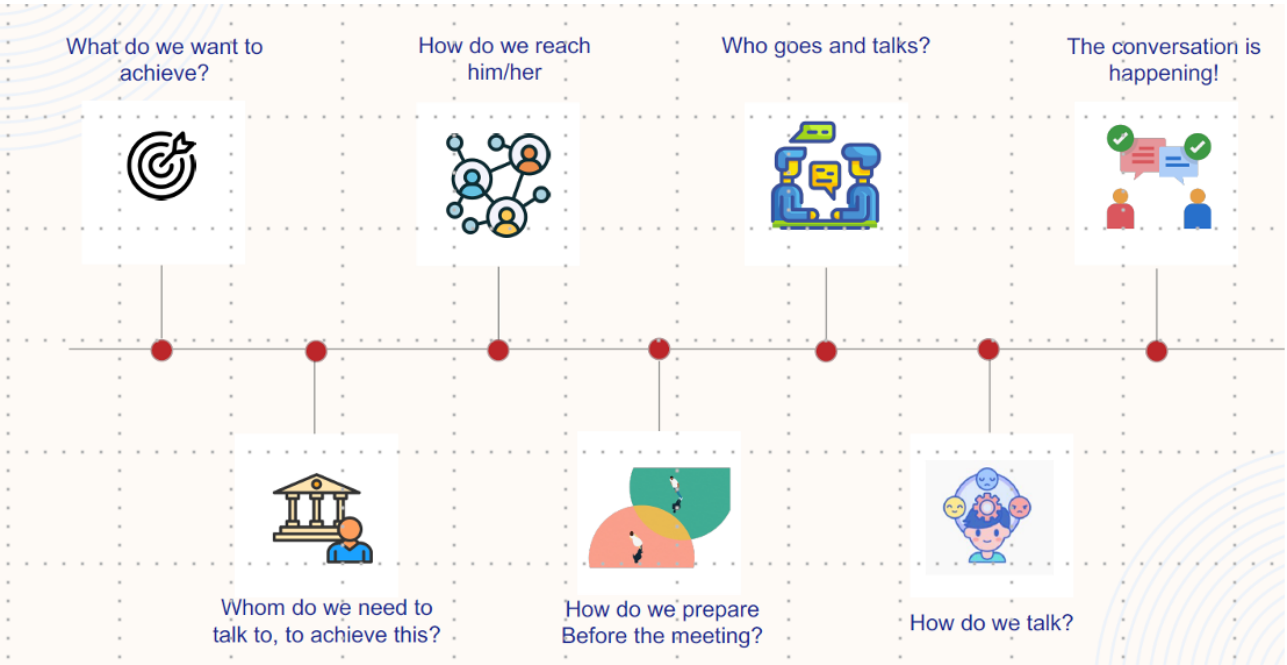
Common objectives include:

- Access to case information or investigation files.
- Progress in search, forensic procedures, or DNA identification to establish the identity of remains.
- Accountability and recognition from authorities.
- Clarification of roles and responsibilities within State institutions.
- Written commitments or next steps.

These conversations are often deeply personal and emotionally charged, as families advocate for their rights and the dignity of their loved ones. At the heart of their struggle is the right to know what happened, whether in the hope of finding their relatives alive, or to mourn with certainty if they have passed. For many, the process is also about seeking recognition and justice, including social rights such as compensation or support from the state, which affirms both the loss endured and the value of the lives taken. In this way, their advocacy is not only a quest for answers but also an affirmation of memory, dignity, and belonging.

How they prepare

While families of the missing often lack formal negotiation training, they have developed effective preparation strategies through experience, reflection, and exchanges with members of their associations or with other families facing similar situations. These practices, though informal, often mirror structured approaches to negotiation and dialogue. Building on this, the CCHN and the CTA, within their joint project with families of the missing, developed a road map to illustrate and support the process of preparing for negotiation with authorities.



1. Researching the authority and preparing a context analysis

Families from countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Brazil, and Tunisia shared how they prepare in advance by studying the background of the officials they are meeting. This includes reviewing the individual's biography, role, and behaviour patterns, as well as the mandate of the institution.

This preparatory work reflects a clear understanding that outcomes often depend on the specific person they meet, not only the institution.

2. Choosing who engages with authorities

Families reflected on the importance of selecting the right person to represent them in meetings, someone credible, calm, and able to communicate clearly. In some contexts, this choice is shaped not only by the person's composure and ability to build trust with counterparts but also by factors such as seniority or gender, which can strongly influence how their voice is received.

3. Creating accountability through documentation

In contexts with limited trust in authorities, families take steps to record and formalise interactions. Some shared that they bring notebooks to meetings and ask officials to confirm or sign what was discussed. This practice reflects a growing awareness of the need to secure commitments in writing and build a traceable path forward.

4. Mobilising support through network mapping

In many cases, families already relied on their networks to advance their search, often reaching out in a reactive way when opportunities arose. Few had taken the time to reflect on these networks beforehand or to consider the risks linked to their use. Participants from Mexico and Nepal, for example, shared how activating parts of their networks helped them successfully influence a counterpart.

5. Managing emotional pressure

Many families acknowledged the emotional toll of meetings with authorities, including feelings of anger, frustration, or helplessness. These emotions can either open doors or disrupt communication. In the workshops, families expressed how stress impacted their ability to express themselves clearly or stay calm.

Some reported being sent from one authority to another with no result and facing stigmatisation or threats from officials. In this context, emotional preparation becomes essential. Families shared practices such as breathing, praying, walking, or peer discussion to maintain control and composure.

6. Reflecting on risk before engaging

In settings where visibility brings risk, some families reported carefully reflecting on whether, when, and how to engage. This includes assessing the reputational, social, and security risks of speaking out, particularly for women, who reported experiences of being harassed, infantilised, or not considered credible.

Families also recognised that in some cases their interlocutors could be the very perpetrators of the disappearances, which exposes them to serious personal danger. Many nevertheless choose to take these risks in the hope of finding their loved ones. At the same time, they acknowledged the importance of considering how their actions and use of networks could put others at risk, making careful reflection a necessary part of their strategy.

Strategies used in practice

Families often rely on deeply emotional personal stories when engaging with authorities. They share their experiences, losses, and daily struggles in ways that aim to make their situation understood, provoke empathy, and advocate for their cause, whether it is finding their loved ones, seeking accountability, or obtaining recognition and support for the impacts they have endured.

Strategies could include:

- Sharing personal pain to elicit empathy.
- Mobilising allies and networks to apply collective pressure.
- Appealing to legal or moral obligations (where relevant).
- Documenting commitments made by officials.
- Persisting through rejection and administrative delays.

Women described a range of experiences, sometimes finding that their voice drew unexpected attention and curiosity, but also facing condescension, blame, or harassment from officials.

Challenges families face in interactions with authorities

Families of the missing face unique challenges when negotiating with authorities:

- Legitimacy and representation: Questions often arise over who speaks for families, and internal divisions can weaken their collective influence.
- Power imbalance: Families engage from a position of vulnerability while authorities hold institutional and political power.
- Mistrust and stigma: Families may be perceived as politically motivated, which undermines credibility.
- Access and responsiveness: Meetings are often delayed, redirected to lower-level officials, or end without follow-up.
- Emotional burden: Recounting painful experiences repeatedly can retraumatise families.
- Risk of instrumentalization: Authorities may use families symbolically without addressing their real concerns.

What they need

Families of the missing face deeply personal and emotionally charged challenges as they seek to understand the fate of their loved ones and advocate for their rights. While they often lack formal negotiation training, they draw on personal experience and exchange with other families to navigate complex interactions with authorities. To strengthen these efforts, families need recognition as active participants rather than solely as victims, practical tools to structure their actions and anticipate resistance, and opportunities to learn from peers who have faced similar challenges.

They also require sustained guidance and support in preparing for emotionally and logistically complex meetings, including careful consideration of the risks involved for themselves and others when engaging their networks. Supporting families in addressing these needs would not only enhance their capacity to communicate effectively and build trust with authorities but also create safer, more constructive conditions for engagement, ultimately contributing to more meaningful humanitarian outcomes.

Negotiation through communities: Findings and lessons learned

In some contexts, humanitarian actors are unable or unwilling to engage directly with certain power holders for legal, operational, risk appetite or mandate reasons, including armed actors labelled by authorities as 'terrorist' or 'criminal.' In such cases, communities may become intermediaries, conveying messages or facilitating dialogue between humanitarian organisations and these actors. This practice, called 'negotiation through communities,' introduces additional complexity, risk, and ethical dilemmas.

Communities and civil society organisations (CSOs) play key roles in humanitarian negotiations, yet they differ significantly in nature and structure. Neither operates under a traditional humanitarian mandate, yet both often become central actors in navigating access and protection dilemmas. As previously explained, communities may not always be organised within a formal frame, nor are they funded or positioned as implementing partners; their negotiation practices arise from immediate needs and collective survival strategies. CSOs, while also engaging from necessity as they are part of the communities they represent, often operate within a more structured and institutionalised framework. They are often formally registered, funded, and connected to wider networks, which gives them greater visibility and organisational capacity. This raises an important question: how does the dynamic of negotiating through communities differ from negotiating through CSOs, given that both may face similar pressures but navigate them with very different tools, exposure, and levels of recognition?

Numerous humanitarian organisations have exclusively relied on this approach, particularly along the use of 'tribal elders,' 'chiefs,' etc. In various contexts. It is not always clear that the decision to employ this approach was conducted after a careful cost benefit and risk analysis from a community perspective. A review of practice shows that in some instances humanitarians may have purely been motivated by a risk transference approach without having made meaningful efforts to overcome their own (perceived) barriers for engagement. So while practice shows that tihs could be a good approach from a last resort perspective, it would never truly substitute direct engagement by humanitarian actors.

Context and drivers

Negotiation through communities arises when:

- **Humanitarian actors are restricted from or unwilling to directly engaging** with certain groups due to legal constraints, organisational policies, or security conditions.
- **Communities hold or can establish connections** with these actors due to shared geography, family ties, social networks, or cultural affiliations, while humanitarians cannot. Their proximity alone might not be enough.
- **Humanitarians rely on communities to act as conduits**, intentionally or unintentionally, to enable access or facilitate certain agreements.

Challenges and risks

Using communities as intermediaries introduces significant operational, ethical, and protection challenges:

- Transfer of risk. Communities tasked with acting as intermediaries may face direct security threats, as they could be exposed to retaliation or coercion from the very actors with whom they are asked to engage or from people opposed to that engagement like other communities, armed actors or authorities, etc. This dynamic can shift the burden of risk from humanitarian organisations onto civilians without adequate safeguards.
- Power imbalances and lack of leverage. Unlike formal humanitarian negotiators, communities often have no material concessions or support to offer in exchange for demands, putting them at a disadvantage in dialogue with armed actors or authorities. Humanitarian actors, in contrast, may hold leverage through access to resources such as food, medical assistance, or other services, or through connections that can facilitate support and recognition, which communities typically cannot offer.
- Erosion of communities' role and influence. The arrival of humanitarian actors and the reliance on communities as intermediaries can shift community members from being transformative agents in their own protection to being treated as passive facilitators of external agendas. These risks generating frustration, mistrust, and potential harm.

Case study: Negotiation through communities in Colombia

Humanitarian organisations are officially not authorised to interact with armed groups, except for the International Committee of the Red Cross (historically) and, in recent years, only when explicit authorisation is granted by the authorities, which is rarely the case. In Colombia, direct contact between humanitarian actors and armed groups is often extremely limited. However, local communities remain in regular contact with these groups, as they live within the same territories. Humanitarian operations, such as aid distributions or program implementation, often require these groups' "green light" to proceed safely.

In practice, municipal officials, including mayors, are sometimes used to convey messages to armed actors on behalf of humanitarian organisations. This approach allows humanitarian teams to communicate their presence and intentions in a specific area.

This arrangement carries significant risks. Armed groups may suspect humanitarian workers of being spies, and the involvement of municipal officials in transmitting messages could put their personal security in danger. For humanitarian staff, there is also the risk that the message passed may be misunderstood or misrepresented, potentially harming the organisation's reputation and endangering personnel.

In **Venezuela**, humanitarian actors have at times relied on community members to serve as intermediaries with armed groups. While this approach can help open dialogue, it also exposes serious risks. Communities perceived as engaging too frequently with one group are quickly labelled as informants by the opposing side. This perception has led to increased tension and reprisals, leaving community members caught in inter-group rivalries.

The lesson for humanitarians is clear: pushing communities too far into the negotiation space can put them at risk of being seen as aligned with one side. This underlines the importance of carefully assessing when and how communities are involved as proxies in negotiations, ensuring their safety remains paramount.

Operational lessons

The CCHN's experience highlights several lessons for negotiation through communities:

- **Conflict-sensitive approaches.** Any reliance on communities must be preceded by a detailed analysis of local dynamics, governance structures, and power relations.
- **Clear recognition of community roles and protection needs.** Communities should not be placed in de facto negotiation roles without preparation, support, or understanding of the risks involved.

Illustrative dynamics

Recurring patterns identified by the CCHN include:

- Communities may be compelled to engage armed actors on behalf of humanitarian agencies to secure access for aid, especially in areas where direct engagement is prohibited.
- Poorly designed practices risk eroding humanitarian space and placing communities at the centre of security dilemmas they are not equipped to manage.

Conclusion

While the CCHN has gathered valuable insights, the operational lessons on negotiation through communities remain less developed than in other areas. This is mainly because humanitarian professionals have shared fewer explicit examples.

Several factors may explain this gap. We believe relying on communities as intermediaries is a frequent practice deeply embedded in daily operations, yet it is often not perceived as a distinct negotiation practice. In many cases, humanitarians may see it simply as a natural part of working in complex environments, with communities acting as the 'bridge' or 'tunnel' to counterparts and therefore do not single it out in their reporting.

As a result, the risks that communities face as intermediaries can remain under-examined. The CCHN will continue to document and analyse these practices together with humanitarians to make such dynamics more visible and deepen collective understanding of their implications.

Synthesis: Towards a community-centred negotiation approach

The findings across the CCHN's work on negotiation with, by, and through communities point to the urgent need for a community-centred approach to humanitarian negotiation. Communities, in all their diversity, are not passive recipients of protection and aid; they are central actors who, through resourcefulness, resilience, and courage, shape their own safety, dignity, and access to assistance. Community engagement is therefore essential, whether humanitarian actors negotiate directly with communities as partners, support negotiations led by communities themselves, or rely on communities to facilitate dialogue through their connections. In these modalities, meaningful and respectful engagement helps safeguard communities from undue risks while strengthening their role as agents of protection and negotiation.

Humanitarian negotiation frameworks and tools must be adapted to reflect this community-centred reality. They should recognise communities as legitimate actors in negotiation processes, strengthen their capacities where appropriate, and ensure that engagement does not inadvertently cause harm or transfer risks onto the very populations' humanitarian action aims to support.

Common principles across negotiation types

Whether negotiating *with*, *by*, or *through* communities, several key principles consistently emerge:

- Trust as the foundation. All forms of community-related negotiation require trust – built over time, through respectful, honest, and sustained engagement. Trust enables dialogue, reduces the risk of misunderstandings, and creates the space for collaborative problem-solving. In the Families of the Missing project, trust was essential to creating safe environments for emotional and strategic dialogue with authorities.

- Respect for community agency and diversity. Communities are not homogeneous. They contain diverse interest groups, leadership structures, and internal dynamics. Effective negotiation approaches – whether by humanitarians or community members – must account for this complexity and avoid imposing external assumptions or solutions.

- Conflict sensitivity and do-no-harm. Engagement with communities, particularly when encouraging or relying on them to act as negotiators or intermediaries, must be guided by rigorous conflict and power analysis. This helps prevent unintended harm, such as risk transfer to vulnerable groups. The Families of the Missing initiative carefully integrated emotional resilience and context-sensitive tools to manage such risks in emotionally charged interactions.

- Soft skills and emotional resilience as critical competencies. Active listening, empathy, cultural humility, and managing emotional dynamics are essential for both humanitarian and community negotiators. The CCHN-CTA work highlighted how emotional self-awareness and pressure management are vital for constructive engagement, particularly in highly personal and sensitive contexts.

- Peer learning and mentorship strengthen sustainability. Supporting communities to build their own capacity – as seen in the development of family facilitators in the Families of the Missing project – helps ensure long-term resilience, ownership of negotiation processes, and continued collective action.

Key gaps and opportunities

The synthesis of findings points to several areas where the NORCAP-supported work can have a real impact:

- **Development of tailored tools**. There is a need for practical guidance and tools that reflect the realities of negotiating with, by, and through communities, and that can be adapted to different contexts and cultures. Even communities with expertise and their own processes can benefit from tailored support, as demonstrated in the CCHN's work with families of the missing. Specific methodologies should be designed based on the needs of the communities involved in negotiation and adaptable to each context. For humanitarians negotiating with communities, support is also needed through guidance on good practices, soft skills, and context-sensitive approaches.

- **Ethical frameworks for negotiation through communities**. When negotiating through communities, humanitarians must understand and mitigate the associated risks, with context-specific tools to support safe and effective engagement. Guidance is needed on when and how it may be appropriate to engage communities as intermediaries, and how to do so in ways that minimise risks and respect community agency.

- **Greater institutional recognition of soft skills**. Organisations should place greater value on competencies such as trust-building, emotional intelligence, and cultural sensitivity, skills often decisive for success in community negotiations.

Conclusion

Humanitarian negotiation succeeds when communities are not seen as passive recipients but as active architects of their own protection and access. The CCHN's work shows that positioning community perspectives and lived experience at the centre of negotiation is essential. Humanitarians need tailored tools, guidance, and skills to engage ethically and effectively, while sustainable peer learning models, like the family facilitators network, enable communities to strengthen their capacity over time.

Embedding conflict sensitivity and protection concerns at the heart of all community-related negotiations ensures that engagement safeguards populations while fostering locally driven, resilient solutions. Supporting this approach allows donors to contribute to negotiation processes that are collaborative, context-sensitive, and impactful for the communities they aim to serve.

CONTACT

For further information, please contact:

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation
info@frontline-negotiations.org

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

Learn from experience.
Shape a global community.