

Case study

Negotiating the protection of civilians in conflict-affected communities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Protecting displacement sites and humanitarian infrastructure

Introduction and summary of key points

This case study explores a protection negotiation process developed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The negotiation happened in one of the eastern provinces affected by protracted armed conflict, where civilians were repeatedly displaced, lived in insecurity, and faced barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance.

Multiple armed groups were involved in the conflict, each controlling different territories, with their own community allegiances and security interests. Local authorities and community actors also played an important role in influencing local dynamics. The displacement crisis in this part of the country was characterised not only by its magnitude, but by armed actors' direct targeting and instrumentalisation of civilian environments, including displacement sites and other civilian infrastructure.

Humanitarian organisations present in the area provided essential services and support to community infrastructure. However, in this environment, civilians and humanitarian staff remained exposed to violence. Facilities, such as schools and water points, were also regularly damaged or destroyed. Overall, insecurity limited the long-term impact of humanitarian action and affected communities' access to essential services.

To address this challenge, the organisation identified various entry points and stakeholders to influence and engage with armed actors. The team analysed the context, mapped stakeholders, engaged in dialogue with different actors, and involved community leaders and influential individuals. The objective was to reduce threats against civilians and humanitarian activities, while strengthening acceptance of humanitarian principles and creating conditions for safer humanitarian access.

The case highlights the importance of understanding the network of actors who influence violence and protection risks. It demonstrates that humanitarian negotiation is more than obtaining agreements; it is also about building relationships and identifying interests and influence structures that can contribute to reducing harm and achieving tangible protection outcomes.

This case study draws on the experience of a protection colleague directly involved in the negotiation effort, who generously shared insights to support learning and knowledge exchange. It captures practical lessons and good practices that can be adapted by protection and humanitarian actors across diverse operational contexts. Developed as part of the ongoing collaboration between the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Global Protection Cluster, the study aims to strengthen humanitarian negotiation practice in support of protection outcomes and contributes to the CCHN community of practice on humanitarian negotiations.

Protection priority	Key negotiation approach and tactics	Key learning
Reducing attacks against civilians and humanitarian infrastructure	The organisation mapped stakeholders to understand who influenced armed actors, how they were connected to communities, and who could facilitate dialogue. Discussions focused on the consequences of attacks on civilians and community services rather than on assigning blame.	Protection negotiations are more effective when they are based on a detailed understanding of actors' relationships and motivations.
Maintaining humanitarian access and acceptance	The organisation engaged with armed actors, local authorities, and community representatives to explain humanitarian principles, clarify the purpose of humanitarian activities, and address concerns affecting acceptance.	Building trust requires recognising different actors' concerns while maintaining a clear humanitarian position. Acceptance is built through consistent engagement and transparency over time.
Protecting humanitarian investments and improving assistance sustainability	The organisation used concrete examples of destroyed or disrupted services to demonstrate the impact of insecurity on communities. The discussion framed the protection of humanitarian infrastructure as a shared interest.	Linking humanitarian objectives to the interests of affected communities can help create common ground and encourage actors to reconsider harmful behaviours.

Operating context at a glance

The humanitarian response was implemented in an area where armed conflict had generated multiple waves of displacement and left civilian populations vulnerable.

Armed groups' competition over territory, resources, and influence exposed communities to violence, restricting their movement and disrupting essential services.

To escape the violence, families moved to IDP sites in areas where they had social or community connections. However, these locations remained unsafe, and families remained exposed to attacks, intimidation, and further displacement. The presence of armed actors around civilian areas increased concerns regarding the ability of communities to access humanitarian support without being exposed to additional risks.

Humanitarian organisations operating in the area couldn't deliver assistance because infrastructure and services were frequently under threat. For instance, schools, water points and other community assets were often destroyed, leaving affected populations even more exposed to risks.

Protection risks

- **Attacks on civilians and displacement sites.** Armed groups conducted raids on internally displaced population (IDP) sites and villages, sometimes targeting populations from communities perceived to have an allegiance with the opposing party to the conflict. These attacks resulted in killings, destruction of shelters, and widespread insecurity among displaced populations.

- **Sexual violence and exploitation.** Women and girls living in displacement sites were exposed to sexual violence and exploitation due to overcrowding, inadequate facilities with limited privacy and a lack of safety and risk mitigation measures.
- **Child recruitment and exploitation.** The interviewee confirmed that children were used by armed groups, both directly and indirectly, within the conflict ecosystem.
- **Systematic destruction of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure.** Schools, health infrastructures, water points, IDP shelters and other community assets funded by humanitarian actors were repeatedly destroyed shortly after construction, undermining both assistance and community resilience and trust.

Key approaches and actions

1. Mapping power beyond armed groups

Instead of adopting a narrow reading of armed actors as isolated decision-makers, the team developed a “social and political influence” map of the conflict.

The interviewee explained that they systematically analysed *“who is connected to whom, who can influence which group, and how these groups are linked.”* This mapping included the vast network of people that shaped armed actors’ decisions and behaviour on the ground.

The humanitarian team identified **provincial-level political actors** who maintained direct or indirect links with armed groups, including members of parliament and local political representatives who were aligned with or supportive of their communities of origin.

The team also included **civil society leaders, community-based authorities, and religious actors** who were seen as legitimate within specific localities and could transmit messages in ways external actors could not.

The mapping included **local economic actors**, such as traders and business actors operating in conflict-affected areas. These actors often had day-to-day interactions with armed groups and, in some cases, provided logistical or social support, making them part of the informal infrastructure sustaining influence and access.

This broader understanding of power revealed that armed groups were not autonomous entities, but were embedded in layered systems of community identity, socio-economic dynamics, and local political legitimacy. Through this analysis, the humanitarian team concluded that armed groups’ decisions were shaped beyond command structures and included social expectations, kinship ties, and local networks of dependence and support.

As a result, their negotiation strategy shifted from directly engaging with armed leadership to a distributed approach where they activated people across the network. This included actors who were not participating in hostilities, but who could shape perceptions, reinforce messages, or create pressure within their own communities.

This approach was particularly helpful in a context where authority was fragmented and legitimacy depended on social ties, rather than institutions.

2. Engaging authorities as co-responsible actors

During the negotiation process, the humanitarian team positioned local authorities and community leaders as co-owners of humanitarian and protection outcomes with responsibility over the communities benefiting from humanitarian action.

Many of these actors were already embedded in community dynamics and had direct social, familial, or political links with both displaced populations and armed groups.

When engaging with local authorities, the humanitarian negotiation team emphasised the protective role authorities had over community infrastructure, including those provided through humanitarian assistance, and to displaced populations settled in the areas. The negotiation team underscored how infrastructure benefited authorities' "own community", and how their protection was a shared local duty.

"They are responsible for protecting these achievements (infrastructure built by humanitarian organisations) because it is their community that benefits from them."

This reframing had two effects. First, it changed the perception that humanitarian organisations were solely responsible for protecting schools or water points from being destroyed and preventing attacks on displaced people. Second, it activated pre-existing social obligations, such as kinship ties and community belonging, and the fact that many leaders were part of or closely connected to the affected communities. Redistributing accountability proved more persuasive than external pressure or formal messaging.

Mapping actors and influence networks allowed the team to identify formal authorities and counterparts, and analyse roles, power dynamics and relations. Community leaders, civil society actors, traders, and political actors who had links to armed groups or influence were not treated as alternative negotiators, but as entry points to reinforce messages and ensure that humanitarian concerns were understood across different layers of the conflict system.

Authorities were encouraged to act as intermediaries in favour of behavioural change within armed groups, particularly when they had familial or social proximity to combatants or were themselves part of the same community structures that supported or influenced armed groups.

3. Transparency about engagement with multiple actors

During the negotiation process, the organisation explicitly and transparently communicated that it was engaging simultaneously with armed groups, local authorities, and community leaders.

"We did not hide our engagement; we explained to all actors that we were in contact with everyone."

The decision was strategically significant in a context where neutrality was constantly scrutinised by the host government. By refusing selective confidentiality, the organisation reduced the risk of being perceived as aligned with a particular party to the conflict.

Transparent communication also reduced tensions due to misinformation. Each actor knew their position would be reflected in discussions with others, which encouraged more consistent messaging and limited false information.

Importantly, this transparency did not mean full disclosure of sensitive operational details. A critical boundary was maintained between openness about engagement and protection of individuals and sources. While

engagement was openly acknowledged across negotiating counterparts, sensitive details such as individual identities and specific sources were not disclosed. This ensured that transparency strengthened trust without exposing people to risk.

4. Using facts instead of moral arguments

When engaging with armed actors, the negotiation team deliberately avoided framing their arguments solely around international legal obligations. Instead, they drew on moral, factual and operational realities on the table.

The key shift was not in the information itself, but in the normative framing. Rather than focusing on whether actors were complying with international legal frameworks, the team reframed the discussion around whether such actions served the actors' stated objective of protecting their communities.

The framing was deliberately pragmatic. Attacks on schools, health facilities, and displacement sites were presented not as an abstract violation, but as a self-defeating strategy that weakened the very communities the armed actor claimed to defend.

This approach was reinforced by linking violence to real consequences, including humanitarian withdrawal and funding loss:

"If we withdraw from the area, other actors will follow, and assistance will stop."

This helped armed groups understand that their actions had not only immediate effects, but also longer-term consequences for the population in their areas of control, such as reduced humanitarian presence and loss of access to essential services for the communities to which they belonged.

At a glance: what was adapted, and what stayed non-negotiable

Adapted to operational reality	Held firm – non-negotiable
- Shifted from engaging armed leadership directly to activating a wider influence network: political, community, religious and economic actors - Reframed arguments from legal compliance to the human consequences for the counterpart's own community - Positioned local authorities and leaders as co-responsible for protecting community and humanitarian infrastructure - Adapted language to each counterpart to avoid mistrust and misinterpretation by non-humanitarian counterparts: avoiding "protection monitoring" terms that could read as investigation and raise concerns	- Neutrality and equal engagement, with no siding with any actor's narrative - Protection of individual identities and sensitive sources - Transparency about who was being engaged: no selective confidentiality between actors

Questions for your own negotiation

- Beyond the armed leadership, who really shapes their behaviour (political, community, religious or economic actors) and which of them could carry your message?
- How can you rephrase humanitarian jargon and express concepts in language that avoids mistrust, misinterpretation and concerns?
- Can you reframe your ask around the counterpart's own stated goal (protecting their community) rather than legal or moral obligation?

CCHN tools: Start your negotiation by identifying what you and your counterpart agree on and letting it shape your opening argument ("[Island of Agreement](#)" tool), map stakeholders to identify influential actors ([stakeholder mapping tool](#)), and build common ground by identifying your counterpart's underlying motives and values ("[negotiation iceberg](#)" tool).

Challenges and lessons learned

Making neutrality credible in a context of mutual suspicion

Preserving the humanitarian organisation's neutrality proved challenging in a highly fragmented environment where mistrust ran deep. Armed groups, authorities and communities were all aware of the presence, interests and relationships of the other, and if they had perceived the humanitarian team to align with one side, it could have affected access, humanitarian staff's safety and operations, and the communities they served.

To reduce risks, the humanitarian team ensured that neutrality was continuously demonstrated through actions and consistent behaviour. For instance, when they communicated transparently about engaging with multiple counterparts.

Another important element was how arguments were framed. Rather than approaching discussions through moral judgement or accusations, the humanitarian organisation relied on factual and consequence-based conversations. The team presented concrete situations and created space for counterparts to share their own perspectives and understanding of these events. This helped position the discussion around the impact of violence on civilians and humanitarian operations, rather than making actors feel they were being judged or blamed.

These conversations also helped the negotiating team to better understand how different actors perceived their own role. Many actors framed their actions around protecting their communities, defending land or responding to perceived threats. Understanding these motivations did not justify violence, but it did help identify common interests and develop messages that could support a more constructive dialogue.

The negotiation focused on a shared concern: communities needed humanitarian assistance and the infrastructure and services supported by humanitarian organisations. Continued violence and attacks against those objects were directly affecting the same populations that different actors claimed to protect.

In this case, neutrality was not perceived as detachment or silence, but as equal engagement with different actors, sincere willingness to provide humanitarian assistance, and a clear refusal to adopt or side with any actor's narrative.

This experience demonstrated that in contexts where trust is limited and authority is fragmented, simply explaining the concept of neutrality is not enough. Humanitarian actors need to make neutrality credible through consistent engagement, equal treatment of different counterparts, and careful choices in language and communication so that humanitarian principles are understood and accepted.

Managing security risks while conducting sensitive negotiations

Speaking about protection issues with armed actors created significant security risks for the engaged humanitarian frontline staff. The team feared they could perceive discussing attacks on civilians, destruction of schools and other humanitarian infrastructure, or allegations of harm as monitoring, accusation or intelligence-gathering.

These conversations could potentially expose the negotiating team, local staff, community interlocutors and the continuity of humanitarian operations to retaliation or violence. A poorly managed conversation risked damaging trust and increasing suspicion towards humanitarian actors and engaged community members.

To avoid this scenario, the team approached the negotiation as a process, rather than a single meeting or a direct request made to armed actors. They prepared and conducted a thorough risk analysis before any sensitive discussions took place or any decisions were made.

One key mitigation measure was setting up **communication channels** with **community leaders, local authorities and people with influence or links to armed actors**. By contacting them before meetings in sensitive areas, these contacts helped explain the purpose of the conversation to others in the community, reassure them, and reduce the risk of misunderstandings.

These contacts acted as a **practical safety network, too**. Even if it was not a formal early warning/ security risk management system, it helped the team check if it was safe to move, confirm access conditions, and reduce uncertainty when working in volatile areas.

The team managed **confidentiality and trust**. Since some community members had links with armed groups but were not comfortable speaking openly about it, the team made it clear that the discussions were not about identifying individuals or exposing anyone but about understanding the situation and finding solutions to protect civilians.

Another important mitigation measure was **adapting how messages were communicated depending on the counterpart**. The team recognised that certain terminology could create additional suspicion. Terms directly linked to “protection monitoring” could be sensitive and sometimes interpreted as investigation, intelligence gathering for attribution of violations. Communication focused more on understanding humanitarian needs, community wellbeing and ensuring the assistance could continue.

The team relied on existing acceptance built through previous humanitarian work, such as the construction of schools, the installation of water points, and assistance provided to displaced populations in settlement sites. Because communities had already seen the value of humanitarian assistance, this helped create a level of trust and reduced the perception that the engagement represented an external intervention against local actors.

Still, acceptance did not eliminate risk. Even with preparation and relationships, operating in such environments always involved uncertainty. Security management therefore remained an ongoing process involving continuous context analysis, adaptation and decision-making.

“There are no zero-risk operations in these areas. The objective is to reduce risks through communication, local relationships and continuous analysis.”

This became a key learning from the process: **humanitarian actors cannot remove all risks when engaging with armed actors, but they can reduce them by preparing, building trust with local actors before in-person engagement, anticipating possible reactions, and ensuring that engagement is supported by a strong understanding of the local context.**

Questions for your own negotiation

- How will you make neutrality credible through consistent action (equal, transparent engagement with all sides) rather than by explaining it?
- Which humanitarian technical terminology or accusation might be heard as suspicious by the armed actors, indicating undue interference, intelligence gathering, and how will you reframe them around needs and shared consequences?

CCHN tool: Run a structured risk analysis and prepare with the Naivasha Grid; map trusted intermediaries as a communication and safety network before any in-person engagement.

Outcomes

While some of the longer-term protection objectives, particularly those related to preventing child recruitment and securing sustained changes in armed groups' practices, remained challenging and were not fully achieved, the negotiation process secured significant gains.

By building relationships with armed actors and their networks of influence, the organisation was able to establish dialogue, strengthen acceptance of humanitarian action, and demonstrate that engagement could lead to concrete behavioural changes. Early successes, particularly in reducing attacks against civilian infrastructure and improving humanitarian access, helped create trust and opened space for continued engagement on more sensitive protection concerns over time.

The negotiation process resulted in tangible outcomes:

- Increased awareness among armed actors and community representatives about the impact of armed conflict on children, including the consequences of child recruitment and attacks on schools.
- Reduction in attacks against civilian infrastructure, particularly schools, allowing education activities to continue.
- The release of some children from armed groups following awareness-raising efforts.
- Improved humanitarian access and continuity of operations in previously constrained areas.
- Strengthened local information-sharing and early warning mechanisms to identify humanitarian needs and population movements.
- Increased understanding among authorities, communities and armed actors of humanitarian principles, and humanitarian work in general.
- Greater engagement of local authorities and community leaders in protecting humanitarian infrastructure and supporting humanitarian operations.

What made the negotiation work?

1

Mapping the wider network of influence

A detailed actor mapping helped identify not only armed groups, but also political, community and economic influencers. This allowed engagement at multiple levels.

2

Local ownership of protection

Community leaders and local authorities were actively involved as key protection actors. This created a sense of shared responsibility for safeguarding humanitarian activities and protecting the civilian infrastructure that they supported.

3

Message framing based on shared interests

Communication with armed groups and community stakeholders focused on shared interest in protecting civilians, services and community infrastructure. Rather than assigning blame to any specific group, messaging highlighted the collective impact of attacks on displaced and host communities alike.

4

Transparent engagement with multiple actors

Engaging all parties openly reinforced humanitarian neutrality and reduced suspicion. No actor felt excluded, which helped build trust and keep humanitarian access open.

Key takeaways

- Protection outcomes are often cumulative: securing smaller behavioural changes and building trust can create the conditions for addressing more sensitive issues and achieving longer-term protection objectives.
- In fragmented conflicts, influence is distributed: map the wider network of political, community, religious and economic actors, not just armed command structures.
- Framing harmful actions as self-defeating for the counterpart's own community can shift behaviour more than legal arguments.
- Positioning authorities and community leaders as co-responsible for protecting infrastructure redistributes accountability and is more persuasive than external pressure.
- Neutrality has to be made credible through consistent, transparent and equal engagement – not simply explained.
- There are no zero-risk operations with armed actors; risk is reduced through preparation, trusted local relationships, adapted language and continuous analysis.



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