



Case study

Negotiating the reopening of a community-based protection centre in Northwest Syria

Restoring access to protection and gender-based violence (GBV) services for women and girls

Introduction and summary of key points

This case study examines a protection negotiation undertaken to restore access to critical services for women and girls following the closure of a community centre by a *de facto* local authority.

A local NGO had been running the centre as a safe space for women and girls and offered them support, including gender-based violence (GBV) services. Its closure exposed women and girls, and other vulnerable groups, to immediate protection risks by depriving them of vital services and case management.

The negotiation took place in a highly sensitive environment characterised by entrenched social norms, fragmented governance, and donor-imposed constraints that limited dialogue with certain non-state actors. The humanitarian negotiator was tasked with securing the centre's reopening while maintaining the integrity of protection programming and navigating these constraints.

Rather than confronting the *de facto* authority's decision to close the centre, the humanitarian team engaged with local authorities over time, carefully framing protection concerns and strategically mobilising community support. By building trust, understanding the counterpart's motives and pressures, and identifying shared interests, the negotiator was able to gradually shift the counterpart's position.

The process ultimately led to the reopening of the centre, with limited concessions from the humanitarian organisation, allowing essential services to continue while preserving core protection principles.

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 (UNHCR), and the Global Protection Cluster (GPC), 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 learnings
Continuing GBV and protection services for women and girls	Community acceptance and engagement strategies	Community support can be a decisive lever for influence
Preserving safe spaces for women and girls	Framing around shared social and community benefits	Understanding perceptions and motivations is critical
Maintaining operational integrity under constraints	Careful negotiation of red lines and trade-offs	Red lines must be clear and operationally grounded

Operating context at a glance

The negotiation took place in north-west Syria¹, in an area under the control of a non-State armed actor designated as a terrorist organisation and therefore subjected to sanctions.

This environment was characterised by three main features:

- **Layered, contested governance:** Authority was split across civilian administrative structures, the *de facto* armed authority, community and religious leaders, and informal powerholders. It was difficult to identify a single decision-maker who could be persuaded to change positions.
- **Conservative social norms around gender:** Prevailing interpretations of gender roles limited women's mobility, public participation and interaction with non-family members, making protection and GBV services for women and girls socially and politically sensitive.
- **Counter-terrorism-driven donor restrictions:** Because the *de facto* authority was subject to counter-terrorism measures, donor red lines restricted direct engagement with it and its affiliated structures, narrowing the negotiator's options and making engagement through intermediaries necessary.

Protection risks

The negotiation unfolded in an environment marked by insecurity, displacement, and complex local power structures. Humanitarian actors faced significant challenges in gaining access and acceptance, particularly for protection programming targeting women and girls, which was often perceived as sensitive or misaligned with prevailing social norms.

Authorities viewed community centres, psychosocial support, and gender-based violence (GBV) case management with suspicion, particularly when they thought it would encourage women's autonomy, facilitate mixed gender or external engagement, or introduce concepts seen as coming from outside the community. These negative perceptions were reinforced by the authorities' distrust of humanitarian actors, concerns over cultural influence, and the presence of staff from outside the community.

¹ The negotiation took place before the consolidation of the new Syrian government in 2024. The interviewee consented to name country and region in which the negotiation took place. The specific *de facto* authority, sub-area, implementing organisation and centre are deliberately de-contextualised to avoid exposing identifiable colleagues, partners and service-users to risk.

Consequently, protection activities were perceived as interventions that challenged established social structures or values, thereby reducing acceptance. Local authorities and community leaders expressed their reluctance about these activities and pushed to restrict or close services. In this environment, ensuring access to protection services required humanitarians not only to design a technical programme but also to navigate social norms, perceptions, and local power dynamics.

Despite the authorities' resistance, dialogue with women and girls in the communities revealed a strong demand for the centre. For many women and girls, it provided one of the few safe, supportive spaces where they could interact and access services. Its closure exacerbated existing vulnerabilities by cutting off their access to GBV services. Additionally, it had repercussions for their overall psychosocial well-being, including the loss of a space for exchange and collective initiatives.

Key approaches and actions

1. Grounding the negotiation in context analysis and stakeholder mapping

The humanitarian team began by trying to understand the context, the reasoning behind the closure, and the actors involved. To do so, they mapped decision-makers, identified influence networks, and consulted community members and the centre's beneficiaries to understand how the centre was perceived.

Their analysis revealed that the closure was not driven by a single concern, but by a confluence of social sensitivities, political considerations, and competing interests. It also highlighted that decision-making authority was layered and fragmented, requiring engagement with multiple counterparts.

At the same time, the team had to operate under strict donor-imposed red lines limiting direct engagement with certain actors, particularly elements of non-state authorities and affiliated structures exercising *de facto* control over the area. The interpretation of these constraints at field level, often shaped by risk aversion and limited operational guidance, further influenced the approach taken. This shaped the negotiation approach, requiring indirect engagement with certain stakeholders, including reliance on intermediaries where direct contact was perceived to fall outside acceptable donor-imposed boundaries.

2. Building trust through sustained and relationship-based engagement

To lead the negotiation, the organisation selected a staff member who was fluent in the local language, culturally attuned, in good standing and trusted in the community, and discreet, ready to engage sensitive interlocutors without drawing attention. The organisation opted for a profile based on the credibility with the counterpart rather than seniority alone.

A central approach was the gradual development of trust with the representative of the local civilian authority. Rather than seeking immediate results, the negotiator invested in repeated interactions over several weeks.

These discussions extended beyond the main issue and allowed for a deeper understanding of the counterpart's concerns, influencing pressures, and motivations. They also helped establish credibility and build a more constructive relationship.

"Trust does not come in one day or one week... it took me weeks."

The negotiation process built trust through culturally appropriate communication, respect for social norms, and a consistent positioning of the humanitarian role as neutral and non-political, driven by the principle of humanity. This relational foundation proved essential for progress.

3. Framing the negotiation around shared interests and community benefits

Rather than directly challenging the decision to close the centre, the negotiator adopted an interest-based approach, reframing the discussion around shared concerns.

The negotiator focused on the centre's benefits to the community, including its contributions to households, social stability, and the well-being of women and families. This shifted the conversation away from sensitive or contested issues and towards locally acceptable and relevant outcomes.

At the same time, the negotiator demonstrated an understanding of the local civil authority's context, including the societal pressures and expectations they were subject to, as well as the influence of certain armed actors. This helped reduce defensiveness and facilitated more constructive dialogue.

4. Leveraging community acceptance as a source of influence

Engaging with the community was a key source of influence during the negotiation. The team strategically mobilised women, girls, and other individuals who benefited from the centre's services, as well as respected local figures, such as religious leaders, to share their views and experiences of the centre and its value to the community.

The humanitarian team opted for context-appropriate and discreet engagement modalities, including small group discussions, women's networks, and consultations facilitated by trusted female staff and community focal points. These approaches ensured that women and girls shared their experiences and needs in a safe, culturally acceptable, and sensitive manner, taking into account their mobility and restrictions on public participation. In some cases, feedback was gathered indirectly through female outreach workers or community intermediaries, allowing perspectives to be aggregated and conveyed without exposing individuals.

This approach strengthened the legitimacy of the request, provided evidence of demand, and introduced indirect pressure on decision-makers without creating confrontation. It also ensured that the voices of women and girls, who directly benefited from the centre, were meaningfully reflected in the process.

In a context where authorities were sensitive to community perceptions, this proved to be a critical lever.

5. Managing red lines, demands, and negotiation trade-offs

The negotiation required continuous balancing between non-negotiable and adaptable elements. The local counterpart proposed several conditions for reopening the centre, including changes to staffing and programme delivery, such as increasing the proportion of staff recruited from within the local community, limiting the presence of staff perceived as "external," and adjusting the visibility and nature of certain activities considered sensitive.

The negotiator assessed which requests could be adapted to align with local expectations and which would compromise core protection principles or organisational integrity. In the end, the humanitarian organisation

running the centre considered adjusting the staffing composition only if it strengthened acceptance and access without affecting service quality or impartiality. The organisation also agreed to adapt some programme delivery modalities, including presenting services in ways that emphasised family and community wellbeing, thereby reducing the programme's visibility.

At the same time, the negotiation team held clear red lines, including preserving the confidentiality of survivor-centred GBV case management, ensuring non-discriminatory access to services, maintaining the safety and independence of staff, and avoiding any arrangement that would expose the programme content or beneficiary selection to undue influence. Proposals that risked breaching confidentiality, excluding certain groups, or interfering with core protection standards were not accepted.

This calibrated approach enabled progress while preserving the protective function and credibility of the intervention.

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

Adapted to operational reality	Held firm – non-negotiable
• More locally recruited female staff and community-based facilitators • Lower public visibility of the centre • Activities reframed around family and community wellbeing • Selected delivery modalities adjusted	• Confidential, survivor-centred GBV case management • Non-discriminatory access to services • Safety and independence of staff • No external influence over programme content or beneficiary selection

Questions for your own negotiation

- Which of your counterpart's requests infringe on a protection principle, and which are about visibility or discomfort?
- What can you adapt (staffing, framing, modalities) without breaching confidentiality, impartiality or staff safety?

CCHN tool: Map your counterpart's requests onto the ["Red Lines, Bottom Lines" tool](#) before your meeting and to identify which asks are acceptable and which are non-negotiable for your organisation.

Challenges and lessons learned

The importance of managing multiple stakeholders and maintaining coordinated engagement

A key challenge throughout the negotiation was the presence of multiple actors influencing the decision-making process, both formally and informally. While the negotiation was primarily conducted with a local authority representative, it became increasingly clear that decisions were shaped by a wider network of people present in the community, including individuals with political, social, or personal interests.

This was compounded by uncoordinated engagement, including side conversations by other humanitarian staff members who didn't follow the agreed negotiation strategy. These well-intentioned interventions risked creating confusion, weakening messaging consistency, and undermining the credibility of the negotiation process.

In addition, certain local actors acted as “spoilers,” opposing the reopening of the centre for ideological or personal reasons and attempting to disrupt progress.

These dynamics highlighted three crucial lessons:

- **Influence and decision-making were shaped by an ecosystem of actors**, which required regularly identifying their political, social or personal influence, and engaging with all of them, instead of a single counterpart;
- **Internal coordination within the humanitarian organisation was essential to avoid undermining the negotiation**, including defining roles within the negotiation team (lead negotiator and support functions) and consistently communicating the same message to avoid confusing counterparts and losing credibility through mixed messaging;
- **Proactively managing “spoilers” proved key to tackling resistance**, including by anticipating opposition, engaging selectively with them, and reframing messages to align with broader interests;

The importance of navigating perceptions, sensitivities, and social norms

The centre’s closure was driven in part by perceptions that its activities were misaligned with prevailing local social norms, particularly around gender roles and discussions perceived as promoting women’s empowerment.

These perceptions created resistance that could not be addressed through technical arguments alone. Directly contesting the decision risked reinforcing negative narratives about humanitarian and protection action, creating defensiveness and entrenching opposition.

Instead, the negotiation required a constant effort to navigate perceptions and reframe the issue in ways that resonated with local values. This involved shifting the discussion from potentially sensitive or contested topics to more widely accepted concerns, such as family wellbeing, social stability, and community benefit.

This experience underscored several key lessons:

- **Negotiation outcomes are shaped by how issues are perceived**, highlighting the importance of adapting language and framing issues around the local context;
- **Sensitive protection programming requires careful cultural positioning and framing**, alongside sensitisation efforts with communities and key decision-makers; identifying entry points that align with shared values and priorities remains crucial;
- **Disregarding social norms and narratives can trigger resistance and reduce acceptance.**

Ultimately, the case demonstrated that effective protection negotiation requires engaging not only with decisions but also with the underlying beliefs, perceptions, and narratives that shape them.

The value of structured institutional guidance and operational clarity

The practitioner who shared this case reflected that the negotiation process relied heavily on personal judgement, experience, and adaptive learning, rather than structured organisational guidance.

“Negotiation is not only tools but accumulated experience.”

While clear institutional red lines were in place – particularly regarding engagement with certain actors and the preservation of core programme principles – these constraints were not always translated into practical guidance for navigating complex situations.

As a result, the negotiator had to balance competing priorities, including advancing protection outcomes; maintaining operational integrity and impartial, non-discriminatory access; respecting confidential, survivor-centred GBV case management; keeping staff safe; and protecting the programme’s independence and freedom from external influence.

Although the negotiation ultimately succeeded, the practitioner noted that the process could have been strengthened through more structured preparation and clearer guidance, including:

- Systematic stakeholder mapping at an earlier stage;
- More clearly defined roles within the negotiation team; and
- Greater clarity on how to operationalise red lines in practice.

The experience highlighted that, beyond defining boundaries, humanitarian organisations must also provide practical and context-specific guidance to support field-level decision-making.

This negotiation also reinforced the importance of investing in structured approaches to negotiation, such as the [CCHN’s Naivasha Grid](#), and of clearer alignment between policy constraints and operational realities.

Questions for your own negotiation

- Who else shapes your counterpart’s decision and could try to derail progress? Think of formal authorities, religious or community leaders, and informal power-holders.
- Is everyone on your side speaking with one voice, or are parallel conversations quietly undercutting your strategy?

CCHN tool: Regularly update your [stakeholders map](#) and revisit it as influence shifts; agree which team members are responsible for maintaining which relationships and prepare your negotiations with the Naivasha Grid.

Outcomes

The negotiation ultimately led to the reopening of the community centre. While some concessions were made, including staffing adjustments such as engaging local community members, the agreement preserved the centre's core purpose and enabled it to continue operating over time.

The reopening of the facility restored access to essential services, including GBV support and safe spaces for women and girls, thereby improving rights, inclusion, and well-being. It also strengthened more systematic engagement between humanitarian actors and local authorities, demonstrating that constructive outcomes could be achieved even in environments where humanitarian and protection action is contested, distrusted, or poorly understood.

Additionally, this experience highlighted the central role of trust, persistence, and adaptive strategies in negotiation. At the same time, the process underscored the many ways in which negotiations can reduce protection risks, whether by engaging with perpetrators, addressing vulnerabilities, or supporting capacities.

The red lines around engaging with the non-state armed actors were a defining factor in this negotiation. While intended to guide action, the red lines were sometimes unclear or overly rigid, limiting flexibility and potentially prolonging the negotiation process. The practitioner noted that local stakeholders and authorities could have been better sensitised to humanitarian and protection principles, modalities, and approaches earlier if a more direct engagement with certain actors had been allowed, helping to find mutual interests and a shared space.

Finally, internal coordination and role division within the negotiating team, as well as institutional support from the humanitarian organisation, also emerged as important areas for reflection. The experience demonstrated how unaligned engagement can weaken negotiation efforts and underscored the importance of clearly defined roles, consistent messaging, and shared strategies.

What made the negotiation work?

1 Trust-based engagement

Building trust through repeated and respectful interactions over time, creating the credibility and openness needed to discuss sensitive issues.

2 Strategic use of community influence

Leveraging community acceptance, including by giving a voice to individuals directly affected by the outcome of the negotiation, to reinforce legitimacy and demonstrate demand for the centre's reopening.

3 Careful framing of the issue around shared interests

Discussions focused on community well-being, family welfare, and social stability rather than on protection and gender issues, reducing resistance.

4 Understanding the counterpart's motivations

Investing time in understanding the concerns, direct and indirect pressures, and interests behind the centre's closure enabled more targeted engagement.

5 Early stakeholder mapping

Identifying key decision-makers and influence networks beyond the formal counterpart to guide the engagement strategy.

6 Balancing adaptation and red lines

Adjusting to local realities where possible while maintaining clear non-negotiable protection principles and organisational boundaries.

Key takeaways

- Community acceptance and local influence can significantly shape protection outcomes.
- Trust-building is a gradual process requiring sustained and respectful engagement.
- Framing issues around shared interests rather than contentious concepts enables progress in sensitive contexts.
- Red lines must be clear, realistic, and operational to support negotiation.
- Internal alignment across the negotiation team is critical to maintaining credibility and effectiveness.



Funded by
the European Union

This case study was financially supported by ECHO as part of the 2025-2026 project 'Advancing protection negotiations and protection leadership to drive systems change for strengthened protection outcomes.'