



Case study

Negotiating safe access to education and child protection through community-led negotiation

Restoring a school occupied by armed actors

Introduction and summary of key points

This case study explores a field-level protection negotiation aimed at securing the vacating of a primary school occupied by armed actors in a post-conflict setting.

When humanitarian actors identified an opportunity to reinstate a school for its original function, a major obstacle emerged: part of the school compound was occupied by armed actors. Their presence prevented safe programming and raised significant protection concerns for children, particularly regarding safety, fear, and exposure to potential harm.

At the same time, engaging with armed actors was highly sensitive and constrained by strong disincentives from state authorities. This limitation required humanitarian actors to navigate relationships, perceptions, and risks carefully.

Instead of confronting the armed actors directly, the humanitarian practitioner facilitated and supported a negotiation process led by the school authorities, community representatives, and local education officials. The objective was to restore a safe and protective learning environment for approximately 1000 displaced children and children from the host community, while navigating sensitive relationships between community stakeholders, civil authorities, and military leadership.

The process required sustained dialogue, careful framing, and coordination across multiple stakeholders. Ultimately, the negotiation resulted in the peaceful relocation of the armed actors and the reopening of the school space, allowing both educational activities and humanitarian support.

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 learning
Safe access to education for children	Use of trusted intermediaries with access to decision-makers	• Legitimacy and access of interlocutors are critical • Influence is often more effective than direct confrontation
Reducing children's exposure to armed actors and associated child protection risks	Community sensitization (school leadership, parent groups)	• Leveraging the network of influence to create a conducive environment
Preventing psychosocial harm and protection risks, including sexual violence	Interest- and value-based framing focused on children's safety	• Shared values can create common shared space
Preserving relationships and avoiding escalation with the armed actors	Careful messaging and role allocation among stakeholders	• How a problem is framed can determine negotiation outcomes

Context and protection risks

In the aftermath of the armed conflict, many public facilities – including schools – remained occupied by armed actors. In this case, a primary school was partially occupied by approximately 40 to 50 fighters, who maintained a visible and sustained presence within the school compound. The school served around 1,000 children, from both the host community and internally displaced people (IDPs), primarily adolescents. Many of these children had already experienced conflict-related distress and trauma. The continued presence of armed actors created an environment characterised by fear, insecurity, and restricted use of educational spaces.

Community members, school leadership, and humanitarian actors were concerned about the potential **protection risks** this posed to children, such as:

- **Psychosocial distress:** Children experienced fear and anxiety due to the presence of armed individuals in their daily environment. This, in turn, influenced the quality of education.
- **Restricted access to, and freedom of movement in, educational facilities:** Students were unable to move, use the facilities, or play freely within the school compound.
- **Risk of violence or abuse:** The co-location of armed actors and children increased exposure to protection risks, including potential sexual violence.
- **Erosion of the civilian character of schools and the continuity of safe education:** The normalisation of armed presence within educational facilities undermined the perception of the facility's protected status, exposing the premises and the children to potential hostile actions.
- **Lack of support for regular education programming:** The presence of armed actors prevented humanitarians from providing support for regular education programming, due to institutional policies prohibiting engagement with armed actors in militarised environments.

Key approaches and actions

1. Framing the issue around protection risks and operational constraints

The humanitarian practitioner leading the process began by deliberately framing the situation not as a legal or political issue but as a shared protection concern grounded in practical realities.

Discussions with the different stakeholders focused on risks and concerns that were tangible and difficult to contest:

- Children's safety and psychosocial well-being should be prioritised;
- Exposure to armed actors within a learning environment impedes children's education;
- Children were prevented from receiving education and humanitarian support;
- Increasing tension between the community and the armed actors;
- Risk of escalation if the issue was handled poorly.

At the same time, the practitioner was operating in a highly constrained environment. The humanitarian organisation where the practitioner worked was risk-averse and did not encourage its teams to engage in any direct dialogue with parties to the conflict. This reduced space for open negotiation required a low-visibility, indirect approach from the outset.

The combination of urgent protection needs and complex operational constraints shaped all subsequent decisions.

2. Shifting from confrontation to a problem-solving approach

A key challenge was that the school representatives and the parents-teachers association favoured a confrontational strategy, demanding that the armed actors leave immediately. The humanitarian practitioner concluded that this approach could escalate tensions, provoke resistance, and potentially worsen the situation.

“That was not a good approach and that might create a certain kind of conflict. We shouldn't be considered as a source of this sort of conflict...”

As a result, the negotiator suggested shifting the approach from position-based demands (*“they must leave”*) to problem-solving dialogue focused on shared concerns, such as children's safety and community wellbeing.

Humanitarian staff supported the authorities and communities to reframe the issue as a collective challenge affecting the entire community, rather than a dispute over ownership and authority.

“It belongs to all of us.”

This reframing created space for constructive engagement, reducing the likelihood of confrontation and avoiding direct challenges to the armed actors' roles and legitimacy.

3. Identifying and leveraging the influence of interlocutors

Given the limitations of direct engagement, the practitioner focused on identifying interlocutors who had:

- Credibility within the community;
- Existing relationships with the armed actors; and
- Institutional legitimacy and access to decision-makers.

While several potential interlocutors were considered, such as the school principal, parent representatives, and community members, a local senior education official emerged as a particularly effective intermediary due to their established relationship with the armed group's commander, credibility within the community, and understanding of both the educational and security dimensions of the situation.

Based on this, the negotiation strategy focused on:

- Positioning local actors as primary negotiators;
- Keeping the humanitarian frontline actor in a facilitative, behind-the-scenes role;
- Leveraging the existing and trusted relationship between the senior education official and the armed group commander, rather than creating new ones.

This approach helped to balance effectiveness and risk management, particularly given the constraints on direct engagement.

4. Preparing local stakeholders for engagement

Recognising that the success of the negotiation would depend not only on what was requested but also on how the issue was presented, the practitioner invested in preparing community representatives and local authorities before the engagement with the military commander.

This preparation included:

- Encouraging non-confrontational and non-accusatory communication;
- Framing the issue as a collective concern and a request for support rather than a demand;
- Acknowledging the armed group's perception of its own role in protecting the community;
- Promoting awareness of how the armed group might interpret certain messages; and
- Raising awareness of how communication can open or close opportunities for dialogue.

This preparation ensured that engagement would start from a position of respect and mutual recognition rather than confrontation.

"Use soft and polite words... asking for support rather than telling them what to do."

The objective was to increase the likelihood that the armed group commander would listen to community concerns and engage constructively in discussions about possible solutions.

5. Conducting a gradual negotiation process

The senior education official attempted to reach the commander by phone without success. They subsequently shifted approach, avoiding sensitive discussions remotely and opting for an informal, in-person meeting to frame the issue before exploring options. The negotiation itself unfolded through a layered and incremental process, rather than a single engagement:

- Face-to-face engagement to build rapport and trust;
- Gradual transition to more structured discussions;
- Regular follow-ups over two months.

The practitioner advised the education official against discussing sensitive details over the phone, encouraging in-person interaction to manage tone, nuance, and trust building more effectively.

This phased approach allowed:

- Time for relationships to develop;
- Space for the commander to adjust their position without losing face;
- Flexibility to adapt to challenges as they emerged.

6. Co-developing a practical solution

As discussions progressed, the focus shifted from *whether* the armed actors should leave the school to *how relocation could realistically take place*.

Rather than proposing a fixed solution, stakeholders worked collaboratively to identify arrangements that addressed both community concerns and military needs.

Discussions explored alternative temporary locations for the armed group, agreed on feasible timelines, and clarified the roles and responsibilities of each party. The community helped identify relocation options, while the armed group agreed to reduce interactions with children and support the transition.

The eventual agreement included:

- Relocating armed actors to a temporary alternative site;
- Sharing responsibility between the local stakeholders and the armed group for facilitating the transition; and
- Minimising the armed actors' interactions with children during the process.

Importantly, the solution was co-developed rather than imposed by one party. This, in turn, strengthened ownership and feasibility, increased acceptance by all parties and reduced resistance.

The outcome emerged through a two-month dialogue of trust-building and pragmatic problem-solving rather than through a single decisive negotiation moment.

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

Adapted to operational reality	Held firm – non-negotiable
• Shifted from confrontation (“they must leave”) to collaborative problem-solving • Local actors led as primary negotiators; the humanitarian actor stayed behind the scenes • Engaged indirectly through a trusted intermediary, in person rather than by phone • Reframed the issue as a shared community concern and a request for support • Moved gradually over about two months; co-developed the solution (temporary site, timelines, roles)	• Children’s safety, by minimising their interaction with armed actors throughout • The civilian character of the school and safe education • The institutional red lines: no programming in militarised environments and no direct engagement with armed actors

Questions for your own negotiation

- When you can’t engage a counterpart directly, who already holds credibility and access with them, and could carry your message better than you can?
- Does your intermediary have real authority in the counterpart’s eyes, or only proximity? Are they aligned with humanitarian principles?

CCHN tool: Use a [stakeholders map](#) to weigh interlocutors on credibility, access and alignment before deciding who leads.

Challenges and lessons learned

The importance of coherence and disciplined coordination

A major issue arose when the school principal, during negotiations, personally approached the armed individuals on school grounds and directly asked them to leave, disregarding the strategy agreed upon with other stakeholders.

Instead of advancing the negotiation, this uncoordinated engagement backfired. The armed actors saw the request as dismissive of their role and sacrifices, and as lacking sufficient authority and legitimacy. Consequently, it was neither effective nor welcomed, leading to increased resistance and temporarily hindering the negotiation process.

“The armed actors considered that the school representative was not considering them as protectors of the community.”

Crucially, this interaction highlighted that the school principal was not the appropriate authority to influence or direct the armed actors, who were more responsive to command structures. The mismatch between the messenger and the decision-making hierarchy further reduced the request's effectiveness.

This experience underscored several lessons:

- Negotiation outcomes are shaped not only by *what is communicated*, but also by *who communicates it and with what authority*;
- Legitimacy and alignment with existing power structures are critical to influence behaviour; and
- Uncoordinated or poorly positioned engagement can undermine trust and delay progress.

It also reinforced the importance of:

- Clear role assignment among stakeholders;
- Consistent and agreed messaging; and
- Careful selection of interlocutors based on both access, authority, and trust.

Ultimately, the episode demonstrated that effective negotiation requires both coordination and credibility, ensuring that the right message is delivered by the right actor, at the right level.

The value of structured institutional guidance and support

The practitioner who shared this experience also noted that the overall process relied heavily on personal intuition and informal coordination mechanisms.

“I was doing it by my own intuitions.”

While a clear institutional “red line” was in place (*programming in the presence of armed actors and direct engagement with them were prohibited*), it was not accompanied by practical guidance on how to navigate such situations. As a result, the practitioner had to operate within defined constraints, without a structured roadmap to achieve change.

Although the negotiation ultimately succeeded, looking back, the practitioner noted that it could have been strengthened through more structured support and preparation, including:

- **Strengthened operational guidance and decision-making support:** Beyond defining boundaries, the organisation could have developed context-specific guidance outlining practical pathways for engagement. For instance, through scenario-based guidance on indirect engagement, risk mitigation strategies, and examples of acceptable forms of dialogue through intermediaries.
- **Structured analytical tools and processes:** The practitioner highlighted the lack of preparation. Systematic stakeholder mapping tools to identify power holders, influencers, and acceptable intermediaries early in the process; guidance on intermediary selection, and validation including criteria for credibility; alignment with humanitarian principles; and negotiation planning templates to structure objectives, messaging, sequencing, and fallback options. The negotiator noted that attending the CCHN negotiation training and applying its methodology were very helpful in navigating similar situations.
- **Team support:** Rather than relying on a single individual, the organisation could have formed a small negotiation support cell (with programme, protection and access staff); defined clear roles and responsibilities in the negotiation process; and created space for internal peer review or strategy discussions before engagement.
- **Real-time technical support and supervision:** Frontline staff could have benefited from access to remote technical advisers during critical stages; regular check-ins or coaching to validate approaches and adapt strategies; and clear escalation channels for sensitive decisions.

The experience showed that while institutional red lines are crucial, they alone are not enough. Successful frontline action in complex settings depends on additional operational guidance, structured tools, and organisational support. Investing in preparation, collective planning, and backed decision-making reduces risks and boosts chances of lasting success, especially when direct engagement is limited.

Questions for your own negotiation

- Is the right message being carried by the right person, at the level the counterpart actually responds to?
- Has everyone agreed who interacts with the counterpart (and who holds back)? One off-script approach nearly derailed this negotiation – how will you prevent that?

CCHN tool: A small negotiation support cell with an agreed role and messaging plan keeps coordination tight; prepare and sequence with the [Naivasha Grid](#).

Outcomes

The negotiation process resulted in:

- Peaceful relocation of the armed actors;
- Reduced protection risks for children and improved psychological well-being;
- Improved conditions for educational activities;
- Humanitarian support to regular education programming;
- Preservation of community relationships; and
- No reported violence or escalation.

Importantly, all parties felt that their interests had been acknowledged throughout the process.

“It was very much peaceful and in harmony, in common understanding.”

What made the negotiation work?

1

Focusing on children's safety

The discussion centred on the protection risks children faced rather than on legal disputes or political positions, helping stakeholders identify a common concern.

2

Using trusted local intermediaries

Progress was possible because the negotiation relied on actors who already had credibility and relationships with the commander of the armed group, rather than on direct pressure from humanitarian staff.

3

Supporting community ownership

Community members, school representatives, and education authorities were involved in identifying solutions, thereby increasing acceptance and reducing the risk of confrontation.

4

Framing the issue collaboratively

Stakeholders avoided language that created winners and losers and instead emphasised shared interests and practical alternatives.

Key takeaways

- Using legitimate intermediaries for indirect negotiation can facilitate progress in negotiations focused on protection outcomes, especially those related to rights and children's safety.
- The choice of interlocutor, based on legitimacy, authority, and access, is decisive for influencing armed actors.
- Framing issues around shared protection concerns, rather than demands, reduces resistance and enables dialogue.
- Institutional “red lines” must be matched with practical operational guidance to effectively support frontline decision-making.
- Strong coordination, preparation, and message discipline among stakeholders are essential to avoid undermining negotiations.



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