Negotiating for Protection

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Introduction: Humanitarian Negotiations as a Tool for Civilian Protection

Humanitarian negotiation is a critical skill which allows humanitarian actors to navigate the complexities of their operating environments and reach their objectives. Beyond facilitating the delivery of principled assistance, negotiation is central to efforts to protect dignity, promote safety, and protect people's rights. In addition to promoting behavioural change, enhancing understanding and acceptance for international humanitarian law and protection principles, the protection of civilian toolbox provides negotiation tactics and techniques which help secure tangible protection outcomes.

Perception of negotiation as “compromise” has caused moral and ethical questions for protection practitioners, rightly concerned by the fear of losing fundamental rights related to the protection and safety of civilians. With the aim of professionalizing the domain of humanitarian negotiation, the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) seeks to further the debate around negotiation beyond notions of compromise or trade-offs. The CCHN’s broader definition highlights the interrelated interactions between humanitarian organizations and counterparts (state and non-state actors alike), which aim to preserve humanitarian presence, secure access to people and communities, and deliver protection and assistance in line with humanitarian principles.

Negotiations for protection go a step further: they seek to reinforce existing obligations and influence behaviour, norms, policies, and decisions that directly affect civilian safety. This may involve persuading military personnel to cease attacks on civilian infrastructure, to allow families to reunite across frontlines, or to ensure the safe passage of the civilian population away from areas of active hostilities, where conditions allow.

While closely interrelated, access and protection negotiations differ in purpose and scope. Access negotiations focus on reaching practical arrangements that enable safe and timely delivery of aid. Protection negotiations, by contrast, address how people are treated – seeking to influence the behaviour of armed actors toward restraint and respect for civilians, and to uphold protective norms over time. Both are mutually reinforcing: access can serve as an entry point for protective dialogue, and denial of access or deprivation of aid can itself constitute a protection risk that threatens the survival and dignity of affected populations.

Such negotiations are inherently normative, and often politically sensitive-entangled with questions of responsibility, restraint, and accountability. As recent report by the CCHN and the Humanitarian Policy Group - ODI highlights, such engagement requires more than asserting international law; it demands a nuanced understanding of interests, perspectives, and sources of legitimacy. Protection outcomes are rarely achieved through one-off discussions; rather, they depend on sustained dialogue that builds trust, fosters mutual

understanding, and incrementally reduces protection risks, as identified in the "protection risk equation" of threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities.

Reducing threats of violence requires humanitarian actors to engage with authorities and armed actors through structured dialogue, often supported by strong contextual analysis, an understanding of the legal framework, and informed by dialogue through diplomatic channels.

At the coordination level, OCHA and its Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) function play a complementary role by facilitating dialogue and information – sharing between humanitarian actors and military or security counterparts. Through these mechanisms, they help uphold international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, promote protection of civilians, and create the conditions for safe, predictable engagement at both operational and strategic levels.

At the same time, affected communities frequently conduct their own negotiations: with local commanders, at checkpoints, with other forms of local authority, to secure freedom of movement, access to services, or the release of detained relatives. Recognizing and supporting these local efforts broadens the humanitarian lens from institutionally led action to the lived practice of protection, survival, and resilience.

The following chapter represents the CCHN's contribution to the Proactive Protection initiative of the NORCAP – NOHA – ODI consortium. It builds on the CCHN's long-standing operational research and field engagement in humanitarian negotiation, particularly in contexts such as Sudan, Northwest Syria, Myanmar, and across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Drawing from this accumulated experience, the text is intended to translate real-world negotiation experience into actionable guidance for practitioners. Through its global community of practice, the CCHN has spent a decade building a body of knowledge around humanitarian negotiations that is deeply rooted in practice. It has been capturing the knowledge of frontline negotiators, analysing their dilemmas, and codifying effective approaches to the critical task of negotiating protection outcomes. This collective learning underpins the chapter's core purpose: to equip humanitarian professionals with the analytical tools, methods, and reflective space needed to plan and conduct negotiations that proactively reduce risks and strengthen civilian safety, engage constructively with a range of counterparts – from armed actors to communities – through upholding humanitarian principles, while bridging the gap between institutional policy and field-level action through context-sensitive dialogue.

The CCHN's contribution complements the consortium's broader effort to systematize proactive protection practices across the humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development sectors. It reinforces the idea that negotiating protection outcomes is not a specialized or

exceptional act, but a core professional competence for anyone working to uphold the safety, dignity and rights of people affected by crisis.

This guidance traces the full arc of that process: how humanitarian law and protection principles are interpreted in the field and turned into deliberate, context – sensitive engagement. It has examined what makes protection negotiations distinct from other forms of humanitarian dialogue, the dilemmas and ethical tensions they involve, and the disciplined preparation that underpins them, from analysing risks and actors, to designing strategies, to conducting conversations that influence behaviour and reduce harm. It also explores how community – led initiatives and humanitarian diplomacy extend this effort across levels, linking local arrangements to systemic protection gains.

Ultimately, this guidance aims to mirror the CCHN's ethos: that of transforming negotiation from a reactive response into a proactive instrument that helps humanitarian actors move from principle to practice, and from presence to tangible impact which supports the civilian population.

Understanding Protection Negotiations

"Negotiating for protection is less about persuading others to accept our principles, and more about creating the conditions where civilians can live safely despite the constraints."

– Humanitarian professional, as part of CCHN community reflections, 2024

Concept and Scope

Protection negotiation relates to dialogue, whether formal or informal, between humanitarian actors and those who hold power over the safety of the civilian population. Such dialogue is carried out not simply to secure access, but to **influence behaviour, decisions, or operational conditions that affect people's lives and dignity**. This dialogue may take place with a broad range of stakeholders including government authorities, non-state armed groups, community leaders – or with other stakeholders, often in contexts of violence or instability.

Humanitarian negotiation involves both **relational** and **transactional** dimensions: building trust, understanding through repeated engagement, and agreeing on specific arrangements that make protection outcomes possible. The relationships established should aim to open channels for dialogue on civilian safety, access, and the restraint of weapon bearers, or of others in positions of authority.

The **objectives of protection negotiations** are commonly framed around the "protection risk equation," which seeks to reduce threats and vulnerabilities, while strengthening capacities. A negotiation might seek to persuade a military commander to stop the shelling of a populated area, to secure safe passage for displaced families, or to ensure that people can reach food, water, or medical care without fear of attack. What distinguishes these interactions from routine access talks is their **normative focus**: they seek to influence how parties behave toward civilians broadly, as opposed to being centred around – or focused on enabling – specific interventions.

Illustrating Practice: Protection Negotiations

In practice, protection negotiations can take many forms. In Northwest Syria, humanitarian workers have engaged local councils and armed groups to stop evictions from camps and ensure displaced families can register their children in nearby schools. In Sudan, protection negotiators have worked with both the military and community leaders to reopen safe routes for women to collect firewood without harassment. In Myanmar, dialogue with ethnic armed groups has led to local agreements allowing the return of displaced families to farm their land.

Each of these examples involves humanitarians and communities operating at the intersection of **law, ethics, and pragmatism**, seeking to reduce harm even when the legal frameworks are ignored or contested. Outcomes are rarely immediate or permanent, but even incremental change – such as modifying a curfew or pausing a military sweep – can significantly improve civilian safety.

Who negotiates?

Protection negotiation is not the preserve of a single type of organization. They take place across the humanitarian system, from international agencies with formal protection mandates, to specialized humanitarian and protection organizations, to national actors and community representatives who often operate closest to the civilian population. Each actor brings distinct sources of legitimacy, influence, and constraint.

Mandated Protection Actors

Some organizations are legally mandated to promote respect for international humanitarian and refugee law.

- **The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** engages all parties to a conflict, including non-state armed groups. Its focus is the protection of civilians, the detained,

and ensuring humanitarian access. Its neutrality, confidentiality, and legal status offers unique entry points for dialogue, even in politicized settings.

- **The United Nations refugee agency (UNCHR)** holds a global mandate to protect refugees, people who are internally displaced and stateless persons. Its negotiations address a range of protection concerns, including access to asylum, the prevention of forced returns, and the recognition of legal documentation. Negotiations often take place with state authorities, but also with de facto authorities, or with community leaders, when required.

- **The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is mandated under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005) to monitor and report on the six grave violations against children in armed conflict. As co – chair of the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, it negotiates with governments and armed groups to prevent violations, secure action plans for compliance, and ensure children's protection and access to essential services.

Other humanitarian actors engaging in protection negotiations

A wide range of humanitarian organizations negotiate for protection outcomes as part of their everyday work. Their entry points may differ, some through sectoral expertise, others through service delivery or presence in hard – to – reach areas, but all contribute to reducing risks and upholding civilian safety and dignity.

International NGOs such as Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Humanity & Inclusion, CARE, Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières, Mercy Corps, and others regularly engage counterparts to secure safe access, prevent evictions, protect education, facilitate medical evacuations, or reduce exposure to violence.

For many of these actors, protection is a core programming area and dialogue, negotiation, and advocacy with duty bearers are integral parts of their work – often undertaken jointly with communities and local partners at local, national, and international levels. These efforts may stand alone or complement operational activities, reflecting a consistent commitment to influence behaviour and create safer conditions for civilians wherever engagement is possible.

Their leverage often comes from credibility and trust rather than formal authority. Deep community relationships, technical competence, and reliable delivery make them credible partners in dialogue. By framing protection as a shared interest**,** linking civilian safety to stability, service continuity, or public confidence, they can open space for negotiation even in politically sensitive settings.

While international organizations often bring technical expertise or global visibility, **national and local NGOs** play a vital and complementary role in protection negotiations. Their proximity to communities, contextual knowledge, and relationships with local powerholders give them unique access and credibility where others may struggle to engage. In contexts such as Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, they have successfully mediated agreements to prevent evictions, curb harassment at water points, or reduce interference in aid delivery.

At the same time, local negotiators often face significant personal and political pressures, navigating risks that their international partners may not fully perceive. Upholding a strong duty of care (through joint risk analysis, shared decision – making, and meaningful recognition of their agency) is essential to avoid exposing them to harm and support their protective role.

UN and Multilateral Actors

The **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** plays a central enabling role in protection negotiations by convening humanitarian actors and facilitating engagement with political and security counterparts. OCHA through its Civil-Military Coordination Service (UN-CMCoord) and its Access and CMCoord teams provide the humanitarian system with a focal point for structured dialogue between humanitarian and armed/security actors, facilitates mechanisms for humanitarian access, supports the negotiation of civil-military interaction, and helps translate access and coordination outcomes into protection-relevant arrangements. OCHA's coordination efforts also include the development of country-specific engagement strategies, which aim to ensure coherence across humanitarian access, advocacy, and protection initiatives.

Other UN agencies such as International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) bring thematic or operational leverage (participating in working groups, supplying protection analysis, offering specialist expertise such as on child protection, migration, statelessness) and contribute to the humanitarian system's normative and policy environment.

The **Global Protection Cluster** (and its country-level Protection Clusters or Sectors) coordinates and supports protection actors in humanitarian crises, including through the promotion of systematic protection analysis, joint response plans and collective strategies, and serves as a platform for negotiation support, advocacy and normative dialogue with counterparts (including duty-bearers and armed actors).

Beyond traditional humanitarian agencies

Several specialized organizations focus specifically on negotiating protection within the broader 'protection of civilians' agenda. Actors such as Geneva Call, Centre for Civilians in

Conflict (CIVIC), and Nonviolent Peace Force engage directly with state and non-state armed actors to promote compliance with international humanitarian norms, strengthen civilian self-protection, and foster restraint in the use of force. Their approaches often combine dialogue, capacity-building, and monitoring to influence behaviour and institutional practices. Operating at the interface between humanitarian action, peacebuilding, and human rights, these organizations complement humanitarian negotiations by addressing the conduct of hostilities, supporting community-led protection initiatives, and building long-term commitments to civilian safety within armed structures.

Community and Intermediary Negotiators (see below section XX)
*Communities themselves are often the **first negotiators of protection**. Community leaders, religious leaders, teachers, traders, and health workers mediate daily with armed actors or local authorities to ensure safety, movement, and access to services. Their legitimacy comes from trust and shared identity rather than institutional authority. Supporting these local negotiations, without transferring risk to community actors, has become an essential element of humanitarian protection practice.*

Who Can, and Cannot, Negotiate for Protection?

In principle, all organisations *can* (and, arguably, *should)* negotiate for protection. International humanitarian law does not reserve this function to any actor in particular. What determines who engages, and how, is credibility, access, expertise and perceived neutrality, along with legal and policy considerations such as sanctions or donor clauses.

In practice, however, many humanitarian actors may hesitate to directly engage with perpetrators of violence on what is perceived to be “politically sensitive” protection issues, fearing that doing so might strain relationships with counterparts or consume limited political capital. Yet, avoiding these discussions can weaken the collective ability to address serious protection risks.

Effective protection dialogue requires relationships built to address difficult issues, not maintained only to preserve access or goodwill. Establishing regular, proactive and structured exchanges around protection, rather than engaging only when violations occur, helps create a shared foundation of trust and understanding from which more sensitive negotiations can later unfold.

Nothing prevents any humanitarian organization from developing its capacity to negotiate for protection, provided it is done in line with humanitarian principles, organizational (and collective) red lines, and do-no-harm considerations. This recognition widens the frame of what protection negotiation entails: it is not confined to a legal mandate but represents a shared responsibility and skillset across the humanitarian community.

Coordinated and Multi-Layered Negotiation for Protection

Given the diversity of mandates and approaches, effective protection outcomes depend on sustained coordination and collective reflection among all actors engaged in negotiation. Just as coordination and coherence are vital for protection programming, they are equally essential in how protection negotiations are conducted. When these efforts operate in isolation or are fragmented, opportunities for influence are lost, messages risk contradiction, and community negotiators may be exposed to additional risk.

Conversely, a coordinated negotiation ecosystem, anchored in shared situational awareness, mutual respect for mandates, regular peer exchange, and clear multi-layered engagement channels, enables actors to complement rather than compete with one another. Collective reflection and information sharing help align negotiation strategies across levels of engagement (field, operational, and leadership) ensuring that local dialogues inform higher-level engagements (and vice versa), that principled positions are consistently upheld, and that humanitarian actors speak with a unified, credible voice when seeking to influence behaviour and secure protection outcomes.

Equally important is the *depth of engagement:* protection negotiations must be multi-layered, connecting field, operational, and leadership levels to reinforce one another. Field teams may secure immediate safety, operational actors codify these gains into collective standards, and senior humanitarian leaders translate them into durable political or policy commitments. Together, this layering turns isolated efforts into a continuum of protection influence that is both principled and pragmatic *(See Annex II for an illustrative example of how these layers interact in practice).*

Leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining this coherence in protection negotiations. According to the 2024 IASC Terms of Reference, Humanitarian Coordinators are expected to actively pursue humanitarian access, leading or facilitating negotiations with relevant actors (including non-state parties) to secure free, safe, and unimpeded access to people in need. They are further responsible for promoting respect for international humanitarian and human rights law across all parties to a conflict and for fostering collective accountability for protection through coordinated advocacy and joint action among humanitarian partners.

Efforts to maintain coordination, common messaging, and shared objectives are further channelled through established platforms such as the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), access working groups, and civil–military coordination mechanisms. These forums provide space for joint analysis, alignment on negotiation strategies, and agreement on red lines. While many organisations may engage bilaterally with authorities or armed actors, systematic coordination is essential to avoid duplication, inconsistency, or unintended negative impacts on parallel negotiations.

Key takeaway: Coherent protection negotiations rely on both horizontal coordination across actors and vertical alignment across levels, linking immediate safety gains to long-term systemic protection.

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What Makes Protection Negotiations More Difficult: Insights from the Field

Negotiating protection outcomes is rarely straightforward. **Consistently across missions and contexts, humanitarian practitioners describe it as one of the most complex, sensitive, and often misunderstood areas of humanitarian engagement.**

The following pages summarise the main difficulties shared by practitioners, drawing directly from CCHN field missions, research interviews, and workshops. These challenges tend to cluster around four main dimensions: how protection is understood, how organisations and individuals operate, how counterparts respond, and how the broader environment shapes the space for negotiation.

	Challenge	What It Means in Practice	Practical Mitigation Measures
How protection is understood	**Misunderstanding of "protection"**	Counterparts often equate *protection* with *security*, a state prerogative, and may perceive humanitarian use of the term as intrusive or accusatory.	• Analyse how actors understand the term before engaging. • Use locally resonant language (e.g., *safety*, *stability*, *dignity*). • Illustrate protection aims through concrete, relatable examples.
	Limited understanding or acceptance of IHL and protection norms	Awareness of humanitarian law varies; some actors misinterpret or reject it, leading to disputes about civilian status or proportionality.	• Focus on behaviours and practical application rather than legal debate. • Translate norms into shared moral or cultural values (family, compassion, honour). • Use short operational examples to demonstrate compliance benefits.
	Protection viewed as non-essential	Because protection outcomes are less visible than aid delivery, various counterparts (authorities, donors, or even within the humanitarian agency itself) may deprioritise them, especially during crises.	• Frame protection as integral to assistance and stability. • Highlight small, visible results (e.g., safer distributions, reduced harassment). • Link protection to operational efficiency and community acceptance.
The individual negotiator and the organization	**Personal discomfort raising sensitive issues**	Negotiators may avoid protection topics out of fear of seeming political or losing access.	• Prepare messages collectively and rehearse delivery. • Establish regular meetings to discuss protection with counterparts, some not focused on violations, to highlight progress and challenges. • Build rapport before addressing sensitive issues. • Debrief after meetings to refine phrasing and confidence.
	Organisational silos or weak internal coordination	Protection, operations, and management often act independently, leading to inconsistent messaging and weakened credibility.	• Clarify roles, red lines, and messaging prior to engagement. • Share short internal briefs after meetings. • Promote cross – department reflection to align positions.

	Internal risk aversion or weak leadership backing	Leadership caution, perceived donor restrictions, or fear of repercussions can limit principled engagement, creating a "chilling effect."	• Seek explicit mandates and written parameters for engagement. • Document rationale for sensitive decisions. • Encourage *risk – sharing* rather than transferring responsibility to field staff.
	Confidentiality dilemmas	Balancing the need for discretion with transparency and accountability can divide teams and weaken trust.	• Define in advance what can be shared, with whom, and under what safeguards. • Discuss confidentiality openly with counterparts and communities. • Use anonymised examples and informed consent in internal reporting.
The counterpart	**Rejection or reinterpretation of norms**	Some actors deny humanitarian principles or frame them through political, cultural, or religious lenses.	• Focus on concrete protective behaviours rather than abstract principles. • Link actions to counterparts' interests (stability, reputation). • Reinforce positive behaviour privately rather than through public criticism.
	Stalling or failing to follow up on engagements	Counterparts acknowledge concerns and promise to act but then delay or fail to follow up, using time to deflect pressure without real progress.	• Frame requests or agreements in specific, time – bound, and observable terms, rather than *"we'll see".* • Summarize key points at the end of the meeting (orally or in writing) to ensure shared understanding • Follow – up persistently but respectfully. • Involve supportive intermediaries or emphasize mutual benefits *("confirming this action will strengthen community trust in your leadership").*
	Suspicion or fear of exposure	Counterparts may suspect humanitarians of gathering evidence for accountability and therefore avoid dialogue.	• Start with low – sensitivity topics to build trust. • Demonstrate neutrality and confidentiality consistently. • Use trusted intermediaries where appropriate.

The greater operating environment	**Fragmented authority or weak command structures**	Agreements made with leaders may not be implemented due to fractured chains of command or shifting alliances.	• Engage multiple levels of influence – political, military, community. • Keep stakeholder maps updated and flexible. • Maintain informal contacts for follow – up. • Ensure smooth handover and transition in contexts with high staff turnover within humanitarian organisations. • Preserving and cultivating institutional memory is key.
	Counter – terrorism restrictions and donor clauses	Legal and funding conditions may discourage contact with certain actors, reducing humanitarian space.	• Clarify what is legally prohibited versus organisationally restricted. • Record decision – making and risk analysis. • Advocate for *principled flexibility* with donors and legal advisors.
	Volatile or fragmented conflict environment	Frequent changes in control or context disrupt trust and continuity in relationships.	• Update context analysis regularly. • Develop multiple entry points with various stakeholders. • Capture and share lessons learned after each round of dialogue.

Ethical & Operational Considerations

Ethical reflection lies at the heart of protection negotiation. Every engagement carries both moral and operational risks – who benefits, who may be exposed, and what trade – offs are acceptable. Ethical awareness ensures that humanitarian dialogue protects civilians without undermining principles or trust.

Core Principles

- **Neutrality:** Negotiation must not favour one party or appear politically aligned; perceived bias can prevent dialogue from being established;

- **Do No Harm:** Agreements should never worsen civilian conditions or expose individuals (particularly vulnerable or marginalized groups) to harm, exclusion, or retaliation. Negotiators should assess how measures designed to protect the wider community may unintentionally disadvantage or endanger specific groups;

- **Informed Consent and Agency:** Communities must be consulted, understand the risks, and retain the choice to decline engagement;

- **Safety and Security:** Negotiators must assess threats to staff and communities and apply mitigation measures (e.g. discreet meetings, anonymity, safe logistics);

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Objectives, red lines, and limits should be clear internally and, where appropriate, to counterparts, without jeopardizing operations;

- **Avoiding Co-optation:** Practitioners must resist being instrumentalized to legitimize harm or serve political agendas; and

- **Balancing Confidentiality and Disclosure:** Confidentiality can build trust, but excessive secrecy erodes accountability and community confidence.

Ethical dilemmas often emerge when principles collide, between impartiality and community preference, or between transparency and confidentiality. Ethical negotiation, therefore, is a disciplined process of reflection and deliberation (internally and ideally, with the communities)**:** testing assumptions, clarifying red lines, and documenting reasoning transparently within one's organization, and the broader humanitarian community.

Positioning Humanitarian Negotiation within Broader Protection Strategies

Humanitarian actors pursue protection outcomes through different yet complementary forms of engagement. Negotiation is one modality within a broader spectrum of approaches that focus on engagement, persuasion and influencing that includes protection dialogue, advocacy, and humanitarian diplomacy (see Annex I on Humanitarian Diplomacy).

Each serves a distinct purpose: from securing immediate operational arrangements, to influencing longer-term policy and behavioural change. Understanding how these approaches intersect enables practitioners to select the most effective pathway for each engagement and situation and to ensure coherence between field-level dialogue, principled advocacy, and diplomatic engagement.

Within a comprehensive protection strategy, negotiation can play a bridging role. It can help translate advocacy positions and policy commitments into concrete local agreements or arrangements (such as safe passage, temporary ceasefires, or the release of detainees) and, in turn, generates field evidence that informs legal, political, or diplomatic action. In this way, negotiation connects the normative and the operational, helping to ensure that protection principles are realised through practical, context-specific outcomes.

Negotiation can function as a proactive instrument, revealing risks before they materialise. Its effectiveness depends on sustained dialogue with actors, together with coordination between humanitarian organizations, protection clusters, and local stakeholders. Information should transfer and be understood across organisational levels: from community dialogue to high-level diplomacy. When aligned, these layers of engagement reinforce one another, transforming isolated interventions into a coherent, multi-level protection effort.

Ultimately, protection negotiation is both a skill and a mindset. It demands understanding, curiosity, patience, and humility, as well as the courage to engage directly with those who hold power over civilian lives. **When anchored in these behaviours, dialogue can lead to protection outcomes which have considerable impact for people and communities which are otherwise vulnerable.**

Table 1. Protection Engagement Modalities

This table outlines the main forms of engagement used by humanitarian actors to achieve protection outcomes. It highlights how negotiation relates to, and differs from, other modalities – helping practitioners identify the most appropriate approach for each context and ensure complementarity across operational and strategic levels.

Modality	Definition	Primary Objective	Actors Engaged	Style/Approach	Nature of Outcome	Example
Protection Negotiation	Negotiating specific protection outcomes (e.g., prevention of displacement, access to detained persons)	To reach an agreement with an actor to reduce protection risks or ensure rights	Humanitarian negotiators + armed actors, authorities, community leaders	Pragmatic, field-oriented	Often informal or non-public, but with measurable protection effects	Engages with an armed group to stop the recruitment of children in a specific village
Protection Dialogue	Structured exchange on protection norms and behaviours	To engage parties on their responsibilities under IHL/IHRL	Authorities and weapon bearers	Confidential, sustained, principled	Long-term relationship-building, may not produce immediate outcomes	Confidential series of meetings with a Ministry of Justice to discuss detention conditions and ensure compliance with IHL.
Advocacy	Public or private engagement to influence policies or opinions	To influence behaviours, policies and practices in support of strengthened protection	Humanitarian protection, human rights and peacebuilding organizations, media influencers, donors and diplomatic actors	Strategic engagement – can be private, third party or public-facing	New laws, resolutions, public commitments, or shifts in attitudes and priorities among policy and decision-makers.	A coordinated, multi-year advocacy effort by that engaged states through public campaigns, expert consultations, and dialogue, culminating in the adoption of the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA).
Humanitarian Diplomacy	Negotiation and persuasion to gain political or institutional support	To influence policy environments and diplomatic positioning/action	Senior humanitarian actors, diplomatic actors, states, regional bodies	Policy-oriented, high-level, often multilateral	Formal agreements, policy shifts, or access to decision-making	High-level engagement to establish civilian safe zones.

Example: Civilian Safe Zones
This interplay between modalities becomes clearer when viewed through a practical example, showing how different forms of engagement can converge on the same protection goal while operating at distinct levels of influence.

Building on the engagement modalities introduced earlier, the example of civilian safe zones demonstrates how **a single protection objective can be pursued through different but complementary approaches**.

A **protection negotiation** might involve local dialogue with armed groups to stop attacks and agree on no-go areas for weapon bearers around schools or markets.
Through **protection dialogue**, actors such as the ICRC remind parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Advocacy efforts mobilize awareness and pressure for compliance.
Humanitarian diplomacy operates at political level to obtain formal recognition of protected corridors or zones (see Annex I on Humanitarian Diplomacy).

Each modality engages a distinct level of influence but together they reinforce one another, turning complementary actions into a coherent protection strategy aimed at reducing risk and ensuring safety for civilians.

From Challenge to Practice

The recurring challenges of protection negotiation reveal a central truth: negotiation itself is preparedness. When practitioners plan deliberately – mapping interests, clarifying mandates, defining red lines, and anticipating shifts – they move from reacting to crises to proactively shaping protective space.

Effective negotiators prepare not only arguments, but also relationships, language, and structures that sustain dialogue over time.

They understand that:

- Power imbalances can be offset by legitimacy;
- Trust grows from consistency; and
- Principles gain meaning only when tested in real life situations.

In this sense, preparation reinforces protection: it safeguards civilians by ensuring that humanitarian actors engage with clarity, coherence, and care.

"Preparation is protection. The more we structure our thinking, about what we want, what we can give, and what we cannot, the less likely we are to be forced into choices that compromise people's safety."

– Humanitarian professional, Sudan, 2024

The following section explores how humanitarian professionals can plan and conduct protection negotiations systematically, drawing on a range of established approaches and tools used across the sector, including, but not limited to, the CCHN's "Naivasha Grid" methodology and its tools.

In Practice: Questions to Guide Protection Negotiators

Use these prompts to prepare or debrief a protection negotiation. They help connect ethical reflection, operational planning, and the lived realities of affected people.

1. **Purpose and scope.** What is the protection issue at stake? Am I seeking to reduce threats, lower vulnerabilities, or strengthen capacities?
2. **Legitimacy and leverage.** Why am I (or my organization) a credible actor to engage on this issue? Who else holds influence that I can work with or through?
3. **Counterpart mapping.** Who truly has the authority to make or implement the decision I am seeking? How do they perceive protection, and what values or interests motivate them?
4. **Access and Continuity of Dialogue.** What access do we have to the counterpart, and how regular and meaningful is our communication? Are meetings frequent or occasional? Are they in person, remote, or mediated through third parties? What channels (calls, messaging, intermediaries) can sustain dialogue and manage setbacks?
5. **Community engagement.** How have affected people been consulted, and do they consent to this engagement? Who might be placed at risk if I proceed, or if I do not, and what have I done to mitigate potential risks?
6. **Ethical trade-offs.** What dilemmas might arise between principles and outcomes? Have we agreed on our institutional and collective red lines, and what is negotiable?
7. **Integration.** How does this negotiation link to wider protection efforts, such as early warning, advocacy, resilience or any other interventions? And how does it align with inter-agency coordination mechanisms or joint strategies at country level?
8. **Sustainability and follow-up.** What mechanisms exist to monitor compliance and maintain dialogue once the agreement is reached?

Preparing for Negotiations for Protection

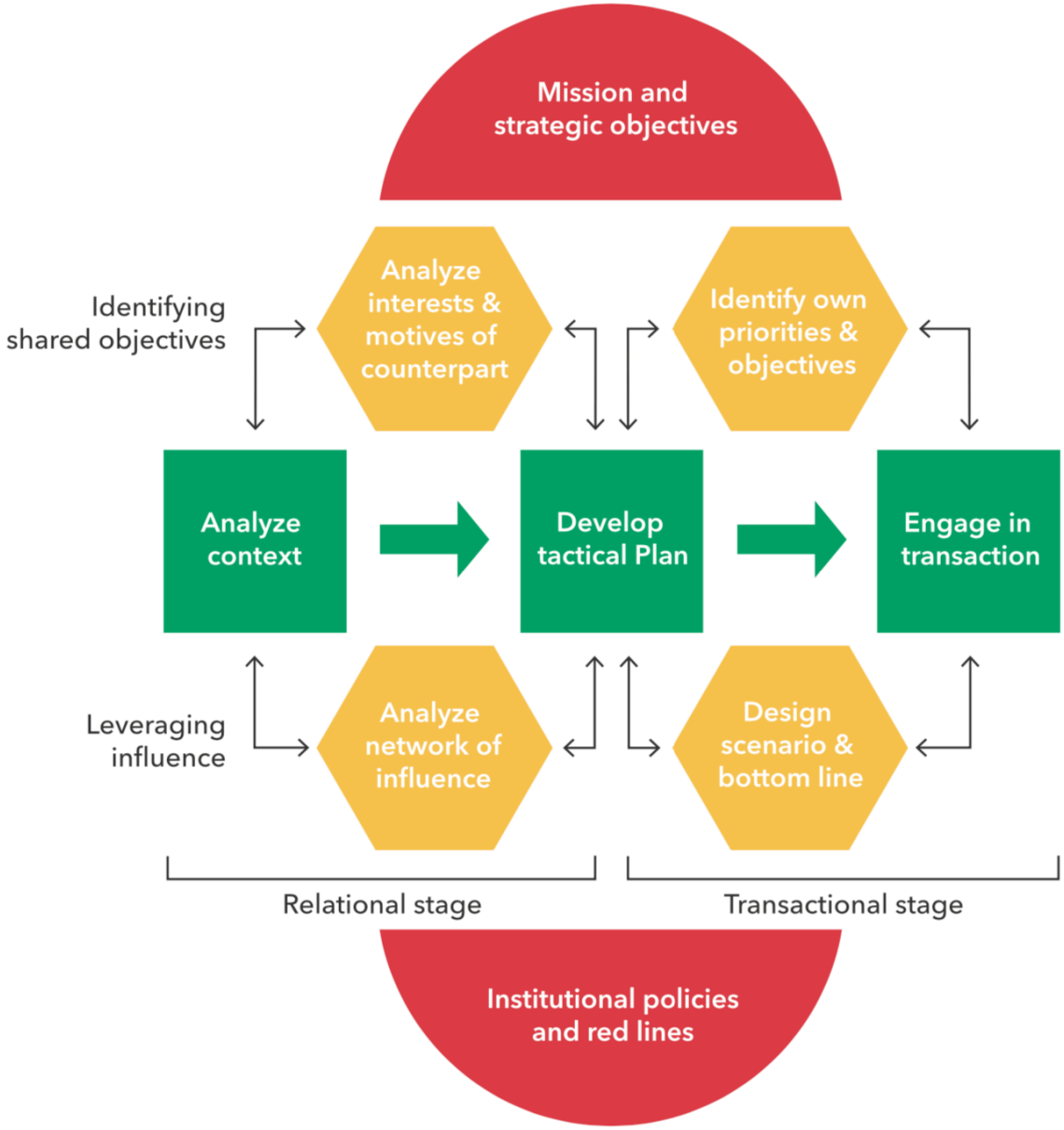
"The success of a humanitarian negotiation is contingent on the ability of humanitarian negotiators to build trust as part of ongoing relationships with the counterparts, to identify shared objectives, and to have the capacity to leverage influence through the use of networks of stakeholders."

– CCHN Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiation

Preparing for a protection negotiation is not only about gathering information or defining objectives. It is about developing a **structured strategy** that links humanitarian intent to operational choices. The CCHN Field Manual on Frontline Humanitarian Negotiation (2019) emphasizes that good preparation transforms uncertainty into deliberation: it allows negotiators to act deliberately rather than react instinctively.

For protection practitioners, preparation means translating an abstract goal such as "improve civilian safety", into specific, achievable steps that respect humanitarian principles and are feasible within a given context. Preparation helps negotiators anticipate dilemmas, coordinate with their teams, and ensure that what they negotiate aligns with both organizational policy and community expectations.

The CCHN's "Naivasha Grid" methodology divides the negotiation process into three interrelated dimensions: **analysing the context**, **developing a tactical plan**, and **engaging in a transaction**. The Naivasha Grid maps the roles of the frontline negotiator (green pathway), the negotiation team (yellow pathway), and the mandator or leadership (red pathway). Each plays a distinct but complementary part in transforming principles into actionable engagement.



Understanding the problem

Every protection negotiation begins with understanding the problem: not only what is happening, but *why* it is happening, and *who* holds the power to change it. This stage forms the analytical foundation for all subsequent negotiation planning. Without it, humanitarian actors risk addressing symptoms rather than causes or engaging with counterparts who cannot influence outcomes.

The CCHN's approach to context analysis in this case merges **protection risk analysis** with negotiation strategy. It begins by **identifying and prioritising the protection risk**, then examines its **root causes and drivers across the conflict system and** finally determines **which causes can realistically be addressed through negotiation**. This process ensures that engagement is both strategic and purposeful.

Identify, Prioritise, and Analyse the Protection Risk

As defined by the Global Protection Cluster, a protection risk is the actual or potential exposure of the affected population to violence, coercion, or deliberate deprivation and may include direct violence (killings, abductions, sexual assault), forced displacement, denial of services, or attacks on essential infrastructure. The goal is to describe the risk clearly, based on contextual, verified information rather than assumptions.

Example of a protection risk

In a conflict-affected region, schools are being occupied and used by armed forces as barracks, exposing children to weapon bearers and interrupting education.

Practitioners, in consultation with the communities, determine which of the multiple risks present in a given context should be addressed first. Typical criteria may include urgency (imminent harm), scale (number of people affected), severity (of the consequences and impact) and feasibility (availability of interlocutors and entry points).

Once the priority risk is identified, practitioners must ask themselves: *why is this happening?*

Some causes may be structural (such as weak command and control, resource shortages, or limited awareness of international norms), whilst others may be intentional or opportunistic, for example, the use of schools for tactical advantage.

> *"We realized that before asking the commander to leave the schools,*
> *we had to understand his problem. It wasn't malice – it was logistics.*
> *That's what analysing context really means: finding the problem you can solve together."*
>
> *– Humanitarian professional, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2024*

Problem Tree analysis

A simple way to unpack layers of protection risks is through a "**Problem Tree Analysis"**, which helps teams and communities visualise the links between causes and effects of a protection issue. The **tree trunk** represents the core protection problem; the **roots** reveal its direct and indirect causes (explored through techniques like the "five whys"); and the **branches** illustrate its short- and long-term consequences.

This tool can be used collaboratively with affected communities or local partners to clarify why the problem persists and which factors can realistically be addressed through negotiation or complementary interventions.

Understanding these layers helps negotiators distinguish between what can be influenced through dialogue and what may require other forms of engagement, such as advocacy, community programming, or legal intervention.

For example, if the military occupation of schools stems from lack of awareness of the law or logistical constraints, negotiation could focus on identifying alternative facilities and reminding counterparts of their obligations under international humanitarian law. If, however, it forms part of a deliberate strategy of intimidation, a different approach – or higher-level diplomatic engagement – may be required.

Identify Which Causes Require Negotiation

Not every protection problem can (or should) be negotiated. The next step is to identify which elements of the problem are *negotiable*, meaning they involve human decisions or behaviours that can be influenced through dialogue, and which are not.

For the example above, several issues might be addressed through negotiation:

- Convincing commanders to vacate occupied schools and avoid using them in the future;
- Securing commitments to respect designated "safe education zones";
- Arranging for safe return of children and teachers once the buildings are cleared; and
- Establishing monitoring mechanisms to prevent reoccupation.

Other aspects, such as broader policy reform or reparations, might require advocacy or legal follow-up rather than negotiation. The point is to define a *realistic and specific negotiation objective* that addresses the immediate protection risk.

Understanding the negotiation environment: mapping actors and analysing the network of influence

Once the protection problem or risk analysis has been established, the next step is to understand **who holds power and influence over that issue**, and how their relationships, values, and power dynamics shape the negotiation environment. This process, often called "actor mapping" or "network analysis," is not only about identifying the formal decision-maker. It is about recognising the ecosystem of influence that surrounds them.

Humanitarian negotiations rarely occur in isolation. They take place in crowded environments where multiple actors (political authorities, security forces, community leaders, religious figures, business networks, and the media) interact and compete for power and legitimacy. **A humanitarian organization may see the local military commander as its primary counterpart in a protection issue, but that commander is in turn influenced by others: senior officers, local governors, tribal elders, or even radio journalists who shape public opinion.**

This mapping should go beyond organizational hierarchies to include social and relational influence. In many contexts, local commanders, religious figures, or respected elders may wield more authority than official representatives. Understanding this web of relationships helps negotiators find leverage points: allies who can encourage, reassure, or pressure the counterpart to make a positive decision.

The goal of this mapping is to mobilize support among influential stakeholders and create a context in which it becomes easier (and safer) for the counterpart to move toward a humanitarian outcome we are seeking to negotiate.

Example

In the school occupation example, the commander's decision to vacate schools may depend less on his personal judgment and more on how the move is perceived by his peers, superiors, subordinates, or by the community themselves. If local elders publicly frame the relocation as a gesture of leadership and discipline, the commander's incentive to comply may increase. Conversely, if peers view it as a sign of weakness, resistance could harden. Humanitarian actors themselves occupy a place on this political map. Their engagement brings visibility, resources, and can infer the provision of political legitimacy, which can shift local dynamics. Maintaining neutrality does not mean pretending that humanitarian action has no political effects; rather, it requires that those effects are managed responsibly, so that engagement supports protection outcomes without compromising neutrality or impartiality.

In practical terms, network mapping involves:

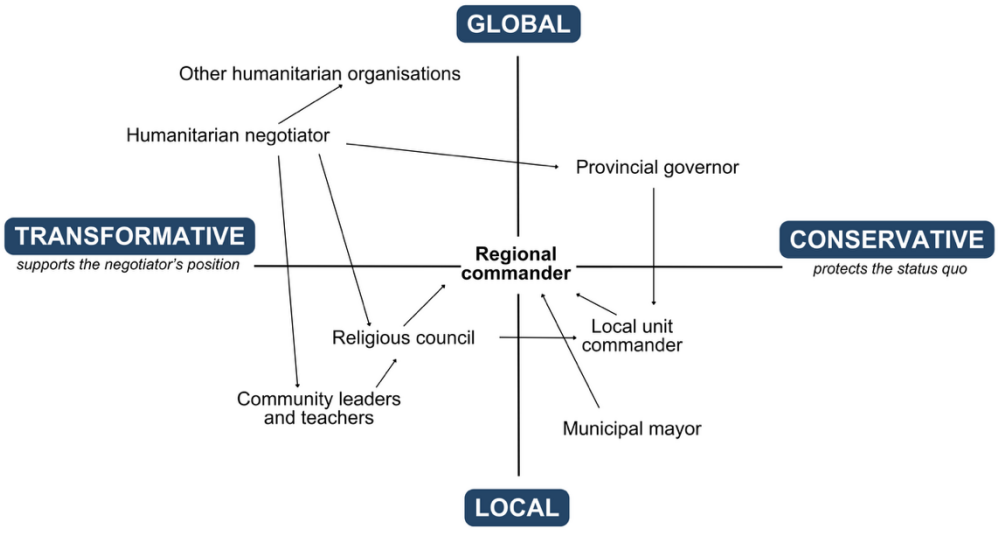
- Identifying who influences whom, both formally (through authority) and informally (through trust, kinship, or reputation);
- Assessing each actor's interest in, or sensitivity to, the issue;
- Analysing which relationships could enable progress and which could create resistance and developing specific tactics to address them; and
- Exploring how humanitarian actors can activate supportive nodes within the network (such as respected elders, media outlets, or sympathetic officials) to make a protection outcome more acceptable.

By integrating this analysis into the negotiation planning, practitioners move from negotiating with a single individual, to leveraging the environment of influence around them.

Example (continued)

Field staff discover that while the military unit occupying schools takes orders from a regional commander, the decision to use schools originated locally because soldiers lacked accommodation. A respected mayor and a local religious council maintain cordial relations with the commander. Engaging these intermediaries could open a path for dialogue and identify alternative spaces for the troops.

The CCHN's **Network Mapping Tool** encourages teams to visualize these relationships: who influences who, and who has direct or indirect leverage. Sometimes the most effective entry point is not the most obvious.



Understanding Armed Actor Structures. Lessons from ICRC's The Roots of Restraint in War (ICRC, 2018)

Protection negotiations frequently involve armed actors. Engagement must be structured, principled, and transparent. Guidance from the ICRC's Roots of Restraint in War and Guidelines on Civil-Military Relations, highlight key parameters:

- Clarity of roles: Humanitarians protect civilians; they are not part of command systems.
- Predictable contact: Engage through official, traceable channels to avoid informal arrangements that blur humanitarian limits.
- Consistency of message: Repeat the same humanitarian principles across all levels of contact.

Effective protection negotiations depend on how well humanitarians understand who they are engaging with. The ICRC's Roots of Restraint in War (2018) provides a framework for analysing how restraint, or the lack of it, emerges within different types of armed organisations. It highlights that structure and socialisation shape how norms are internalised, how orders are followed, and how negotiation messages travel through the system.

Armed Actor Type	Key Characteristics	Negotiation Implications
Integrated State Forces	Formal hierarchy, training institutions, codified discipline.	Engage through formal, hierarchical channels, identifying decision-makers at tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Match interlocutors' seniority and appeal to professional identity, military discipline, and international reputation to foster compliance.
Centralised Non-State Armed Groups	Strong internal command, ideological or political doctrine.	Identify the ideological or legitimacy anchors (e.g., community protection, justice narrative); negotiate at leadership level where orders cascade effectively.
Decentralised Non-State Groups	Loose command structure, field autonomy, multiple factions.	Build local relationships and maintain flexible engagement across commanders; small, confidence-building agreements often more effective than formal MoUs.
Community-Embedded Armed Groups or Militias	Leadership drawn from local social hierarchies (tribal, clan, religious).	Align messages with community spiritual / moral values and norms like honour, protection, and social harmony. Work through respected intermediaries if needed.

Negotiation Tip:
When mapping stakeholders, include both formal authority (who signs orders) and normative authority (who shapes behaviour). Influence may lie as much with elders, political patrons, or clerics as with commanders. Understanding the factors that motivate groups to restrain the use of violence

(through law, ideology, or community pressure) helps negotiators craft messages that travel through the right channels.

Recognising these distinctions helps negotiators decide where to focus their influence and how to frame their message. When engagement is grounded in a clear understanding of an armed actor's internal logic, whether disciplined through command, driven by ideology, or bound by community norms, it becomes easier to identify realistic entry points for protection dialogue.

In practice, this means adjusting tone and strategy: appealing to professionalism in state forces, to legitimacy or doctrine in organised non-state groups, or to social reputation and community expectations in locally embedded militias. By matching the approach to the actor's structure, humanitarian negotiators can promote restraint more effectively without compromising their principles.

Analysing converging and diverging interests: "Facts, Norms, Island of Agreement" tool

In humanitarian negotiation, it is important to understand different perspectives and the reasons which create them. Two people can perceive the same situation (for example, an armed unit utilising a school for their own purposes) and yet draw opposite conclusions about what is acceptable or necessary.

Analysing the negotiation environment helps humanitarians understand how differently stakeholders perceive their context; it can also be useful to understand how and why these stakeholders make decisions.

"Context analysis" in negotiation focuses on how counterparts view a given issue and the reasons for their position. The underlying questions are: *What do they believe is happening? Why do they think it is justified? What would make them reconsider?*

A useful way to approach this analysis is by separating **facts** (what is happening, what could be measured or proven with evidence) from **norms** (beliefs or rules that shape behaviour in a certain group), and identifying where these align or diverge.

Definitions and examples

Facts refer to a shared understandings of reality: what has happened, what evidence exists, and what both sides can agree upon. ***For example***: Schools are currently occupied by soldiers; classes have stopped; families are worried.

Norms represent the principles or values at stake. These may derive from the law (e.g., international humanitarian law, human rights), religion, local customs, or even the

counterpart's own code of conduct. *Oftentimes, the telling tale sign is when you introduce the statement with the word "should".*

For example: Both parties agree that children should be safe and have access to education. The military also values public trust and wishes to be seen as disciplined.

The "**Island of Agreement"** is the overlap where agreed facts and convergent norms meet, forming the initial ground for negotiation.

For example: Both sides recognize the importance of education and the need to protect children from harm. This shared understanding becomes the bridge to discuss relocating soldiers and restoring schooling without undermining military needs.

In the school occupation example, a humanitarian team's goal is to persuade the local commander to withdraw troops from schools. Before opening dialogue, the negotiator must **distinguish between facts and norms**, **and between what is shared and what is disputed**.

For instance, both sides may:

- Agree on some facts: i.e., that soldiers are stationed in schools and that classes have been suspended...
- ...but disagree on others: such as whether this occupation endangers children or was justified by security needs.
- Similarly, they may share certain norms, such as valuing education and community stability...
- ...even if they diverge on others: for instance, whether military necessity outweighs civilian protection.

The negotiator's task is to identify agreed facts and any convergent norms; this creates the starting point for any discussion. Once identified, these shared elements can create a small but solid foundation, **a practical "island of agreement,"** from which dialogue can progress around shared concerns before introducing sensitive issues – ultimately reducing risks for civilians.

In this case, a useful opening might be: *"We all want children to be safe and continue learning. Let's find a way to make that possible without compromising the position of your soldiers."*

This exercise is particularly valuable when protection issues are sensitive or politically charged. It allows negotiators to **start from shared concerns rather than confrontation**, gradually introducing normative arguments once common ground is established.

Field Tip: *Before any meeting, list the top three agreed facts and shared norms that both sides recognize. Use one of these as your opening line. It will set the tone for collaboration and help de–escalate potential defensiveness.*

Facts		Norms	
Contested	**Agreed**	**Convergent**	**Divergent**
• The extent of damage caused by military occupation (the commander may downplay it). • Whether troops have harassed or threatened civilians. • Whether alternative facilities exist for troop accommodation. • Whether schools were "abandoned" before occupation.	• Soldiers are currently stationed in several schools. • Classes have been suspended and students displaced. • Families are expressing concern for children's safety. • There is no active fighting in the immediate vicinity. • The local commander has authority to relocate the troops.	• Both parties recognize that children deserve safety and access to education. • The military wants to maintain community trust and appear disciplined. • The mayor and religious council value social stability and moral responsibility. • Humanitarian actors and authorities alike see education as essential to community recovery.	• The military may prioritize "security first," justifying use of schools for operational convenience. • Humanitarian actors prioritize civilian protection and adherence to international norms (e.g., the Safe Schools Declaration). • The commander may view international law as external interference, while humanitarian actors see it as universal obligation. • Some local leaders may defer to military authority as a symbol of order.
Factual negotiation ←		→	**Normative negotiation**
Avoid debating these directly at first. Instead, propose joint verification ("Let's visit together") or reframe toward practical outcomes ("Regardless of who's responsible, we can restore schooling safely").	*These points can be used to build rapport and establish a shared understanding of the situation without blame. They provide an evidence-based starting point for dialogue.*	*These shared norms form the foundation of the island of agreement. Negotiators can build on them by proposing solutions that satisfy all parties' values ("Relocating troops shows leadership and earns community respect").*	*Divergent norms should be acknowledged, not confronted. Negotiators can translate universal norms into locally accepted language—linking "respect for civilians" to "honour," "discipline," or "duty." Over time, reframing norms helps shift behaviour.*

In the CCHN Field Manual, *Tool 2 – Drawing the Island of Agreement* encourages negotiators to separate **facts** from **norms** and to distinguish what is **agreed upon** from what is **contested**.

This helps humanitarian teams prepare for dialogue by first understanding:

- What both sides agree has happened (*agreed facts*);
- What is perceived differently (*contested facts*);
- Which values or principles both recognize (*convergent norms*); and
- Which beliefs or rules are in conflict (*divergent norms*).

The overlap between these areas forms the **"Island of Agreement":** the safer starting ground for negotiation.

The **Island of Agreement** becomes the **entry point for dialogue**. Negotiators can open discussions around non–controversial issues (*How can we make sure children go back to school safely?*) before moving into more sensitive terrain (*How can troops relocate without compromising their security?*).

In practice: How to Use It in the Field

1. **Draft the map internally:** Before starting the dialogue, the team lists what they know or suspect to be agreed or contested.
2. **Test assumptions:** During initial exchanges, listen for language that confirms or contradicts these categories.
3. **Adjust in real time:** As trust grows, the island often expands, or can change – facts are clarified, and norms begin to converge.
4. **Use shared values as bridges:** Refer to moral, cultural, or professional codes that resonate with the counterpart's worldview (e.g. "As a disciplined force, your men set an example for the community").

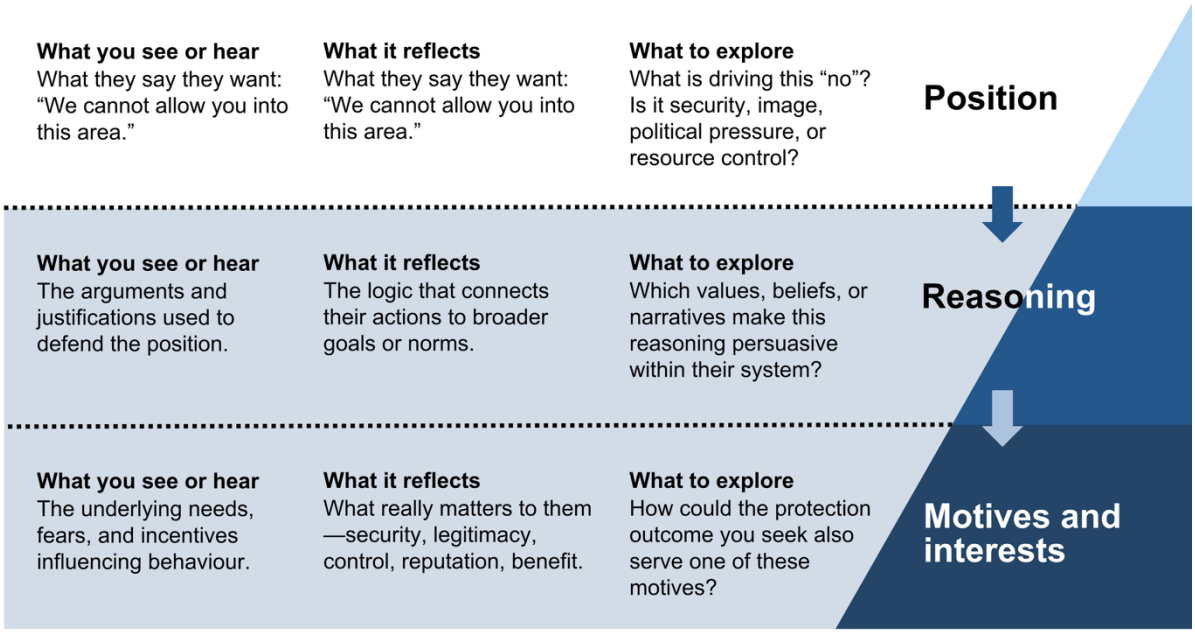
Once shared facts and convergent norms have been identified, negotiators know **what can be discussed safely**. The next step is to understand **how the counterpart thinks and decides** within that shared space.

While the Island of Agreement helps locate common ground, it does not explain *why* a counterpart holds certain views or *what might persuade them to shift their position*. This is where deeper analysis, of reasoning, motives, and interests, becomes essential. Understanding what lies beneath the surface allows practitioners to move from finding common ground to **strategically influencing behaviour**.

Understanding Your Counterpart: Analysing the Position, Exploring the Reasoning, Motives, and Interests

In any humanitarian negotiation, what is visible at the surface, i.e. the counterpart's *position*, is only a small part of the whole picture. Like an iceberg, most of what determines behaviour lies below the water: the *reasons*, *motives*, and *interests* that sustain a position. Understanding this hidden structure is essential for designing a strategy that goes beyond reacting to demands and instead identifies what can be influenced.

The "Negotiation Iceberg" helps negotiators visualize three levels of their counterpart's stance:



Moving Beyond Positions: Reading the Iceberg

Humanitarian counterparts (whether government officials, local authorities, armed groups, or community leaders) often articulate fixed positions: *We cannot accept a programme around gender–based violence here,* or again, *all displaced people must return.*

Field experience shows that these surface refusals often mask a more complex calculus:

- **Political survival** (fear of appearing weak or losing control);
- **Security or legitimacy concerns** (avoiding blame, safeguarding reputation);
- **Economic or patronage networks** (control of aid resources, taxation systems); and
- **Cultural or social norms** (gender roles, community cohesion).

By systematically analysing what lies beneath, negotiators can uncover areas of flexibility that a purely legal or moral argument might miss. A counterpart who rejects a child protection activity may, in fact, share concern about youth recruitment if framed as a *community security* issue.

Practical Application: Using the Negotiation Iceberg

Presence of Armed Actors Inside or Near a Displacement Site

When armed actors enter or establish outposts inside or beside a site for displaced persons, they compromise its civilian and humanitarian character – placing residents at risk, eroding trust, and potentially making the site a legitimate military target.

Negotiating for their withdrawal or relocation is among the most delicate protection engagements: it touches on military pride, security logic, and political symbolism, all while directly affecting civilian safety.

The **Negotiation Iceberg** provides a structure to unpack and influence such a complex situation.

1. Start with Observation, Not Interpretation

The negotiation begins with what's visible: the **position – or** rather, *what* the counterpart is sharing explicitly.

At a coordination meeting, the local military commander states: *Our soldiers will stay near the camp. Their presence protects the displaced people.* To a humanitarian ear, this contradicts both humanitarian law and operational policy.

But the first task is *not* to react or cite norms: it's to observe.

- What words are used? ("Protects," "security," "stay near.")
- Who speaks: the commander himself or a political representative?
- Is the tone assertive, defensive, or conciliatory?
- What other actors are silent or supportive?

These observations help the negotiator understand whether this position is a *negotiating stance* or a *public declaration* meant for others in the room. It also slows the process, allowing time for preparation rather than confrontation.

2. Map the Reasoning

The second layer of the iceberg reveals the **reasoning**: the internal logic that makes the counterpart's position sound reasonable to them – or *how* are they reasoning.

In this case, the commander explains: *Armed groups operate in the area. If we pull back, we expose the civilians to attack. Our presence is deterrence.* This reasoning frames the military presence as *protection*, not threat. The negotiator notes that the commander sees himself

as fulfilling a protective role, a shared humanitarian value, but pursued through different means.

Mapping this reasoning is key: it transforms the discussion from *principles versus authority* to *different understandings of safety*.

3. Identify Underlying Motives and Interests
Below the explanation advanced, lay **motives and interests** (the *why*): these are the true drivers of the behaviour.

Through contextual analysis, discussions with local staff, and prior engagements, the team identifies several possibilities:

- **Security and control:** The outpost offers early warning and dominance over a contested area.
- **Visibility and legitimacy:** Being seen "protecting civilians" enhances the military's image with both the population and superiors.
- **Logistical convenience:** The site provides shelter, water, and proximity to roads.
- **Economic benefits:** Troops stationed nearby may access humanitarian distributions or local markets.

Understanding these motives helps shift the approach from condemnation to persuasion. The goal is not to prove them wrong but to find alignment: how can their interests be met without endangering civilians?

4. Start Exploring a Common Shared Space and Reframe Protection as a Shared Interest
The negotiator now works to **reframe** the issue in language that resonates with the counterpart's motives and explanation: *We share your concern about protecting families in the camp. The challenge is that your soldiers' presence may create a military target. If the site is perceived as a military position, it increases the risk of attack. What we propose could enhance both your control and the community's safety.*

Possible reframing options include:

- **Security logic:** Suggest relocating the outpost slightly farther but establishing *joint patrols* or *information sharing* to maintain deterrence.
- **Visibility logic:** Propose joint communication stating that the army supports civilian protection through *respect for humanitarian norms*.

- **Practical logic:** Offer to identify an alternative location for troops with better access to water or shade, showing that the move serves their needs too.

Each framing connects the military's interest (security, legitimacy, convenience) with the humanitarian goal (civilian protection).

An example from Mali, 2023:
Negotiators faced a similar issue when an army platoon set up tents beside a displacement camp. By highlighting the fear that the arrangement exposed soldiers to ambushes and also complicated humanitarian logistics, they secured agreement to move the post 800 metres away – framed as "improving operational security" rather than "respecting humanitarian space."

5. Validate and Test Your Assumptions – Through Listening
Rather than assuming motives, the negotiator **actively listens** and asks open – ended questions to verify hypotheses about what drives the counterpart's position.

- *What concerns you most about moving the post?*
- *How do you think civilians perceive your soldiers' presence?*
- *If there were another way to guarantee security, what would it look like?*

These questions open dialogue and reveal underlying fears or constraints.

An example from Sudan, 2024
When commanders refused to leave a school compound sheltering displaced families, negotiators discovered (through such questioning) that the soldiers lacked secure accommodation elsewhere and feared attacks if isolated. Once this was understood, the humanitarian team coordinated with local authorities to provide tents at a nearby police compound. The troops relocated voluntarily, and the school resumed hosting displaced families safely.

6. Review and Adapt Collectively
Back with their team, negotiators review the iceberg map:

- Which motives were confirmed (fear of exposure)?
- Which were less relevant (economic benefit minimal)?
- Which arguments resonated (shared safety narrative)?

They plan subsequent discussions to ensure compliance and maintain dialogue: knowing that *trust is fragile and the situation may revert*.

They also capture learning for future engagements:

> *"When protection issues involve armed actors, appealing to their sense of professionalism and legitimacy often works better than citing humanitarian law alone."*
>
> - *Field practitioner specializing in engagement with armed actors*

Key Takeaway – From Analysis to Tactical Planning

Preparing for a protection negotiation means moving from information to insight, and from insight to strategy.

To reach this point, humanitarian negotiators should have asked the following questions:

- *What is the problem?* What exactly is happening to civilians, and what risks are they facing?
- *Why is it happening?* What drives these behaviours, and what can be influenced through dialogue?
- *Who can change it?* Who holds the authority or influence to make a difference, directly or indirectly?
- *Where can we start?* What shared facts, values, or interests form an initial island of agreement?
- *How does the counterpart think and decide?* The Negotiation Iceberg helps look beneath visible positions to uncover the reasoning, motives, and interests that shape decisions.

This process not only clarifies **what to negotiate**, but also **how to approach it – with whom, in what order, and using which arguments or incentives**. It sets the stage for the next phase: developing a tactical plan, where humanitarian actors translate analysis into action, choose engagement methods, and prepare for the actual dialogue.

The Negotiator's Balancing Act: Moving from Normative to Pragmatic

Where Principles Meet Practice
Humanitarian negotiators operate between **what should be done** according to law and **what can be achieved** in the realities of crisis. The challenge is not the absence of norms but the ability to **translate them into persuasive, context–sensitive action**.

Pragmatism is not the opposite of principle – but rather the manoeuvring space between the full compliance and the blatant violation of a given principle.

Law as a Compass, Not a Weapon
International humanitarian and human rights law give humanitarian negotiation its moral and legal compass. They define what is non-negotiable: the protection of civilians, respect for life, and human dignity.

But legal language alone rarely convinces. Many counterparts act from security, political, or survival logic and may see legal citations as distant or accusatory.

"We should have the Geneva Conventions in our back pocket,
but we shouldn't slam them on the table."

– Jonathan Somer, Danish Red Cross, during webinar in 2024

For negotiators, the law is a **shared reference**, rather than a threat. It guides direction, not tone.

Translating Norms into Persuasive Reasoning
The task is not to prove the law but to **communicate its purpose**.

Negotiators reframe legal norms through the human and operational consequences they seek to prevent.

Normative Statement	Pragmatic Translation
"Schools must not be used for military purposes."	"Occupying schools exposes your troops and turns families against you."
"Children must not be recruited."	"Keeping boys in school stabilises communities and reduces insecurity."
"Civilians must be protected."	"Reducing harm to civilians strengthens your control and reputation."

The goal: make the law sound like common sense.

Building Trust Before Making Demands
Protection dialogue works **when it begins with the humanitarian impact, not with accusations:** Negotiators who start from what people experience (fear, loss, dignity, disruption) rather than from violations, open a space for cooperation around shared concerns like stability, respect, or reputation. Legal references gain traction only after credibility and empathy are established.

Trust opens the door; the law keeps it open.

Understand, Then Align

You don't need to agree with your counterpart – you need to understand how they think. Look below the surface of their position:

Security concerns (fear of losing control);
Legitimacy needs (desire for authority or respect);
Operational logic (focus on tactics, not norms).

Once motives are clear, frame protection as a shared interest, not a concession.

Pragmatism as Integrity in Action

Being pragmatic means knowing when to adapt the message and when to hold the line.

Language can shift; principles cannot.

Clarity on institutional red lines gives negotiators credibility and freedom to explore options without compromise. Pragmatism keeps principles alive when conditions are hostile.

From Legal Reference to Persuasive Reasoning

From	To
Legal obligation	Human consequence
Universal principle	Local relevance
Rule – based argument	Contextual persuasion
Normative stance	Pragmatic influence

Example. The Occupied School: From Legal Obligation to Persuasive Reasoning

In a conflict-affected rural area, a **non-state armed group occupied the only concrete school**, turning it into a defensive position. For the community, this was the safest building; for the fighters, the most strategic. The situation **clearly violated international humanitarian law (IHL):** schools are civilian objects that must not be used for military purposes, and all parties must take precautions to protect civilians from the effects of conflict.

A straightforward legal appeal such as *"You are violating Article X of the Geneva Conventions"* would have been correct, but not effective. The group's commander did not see himself as bound by international treaties, nor was he motivated by legal compliance. His priorities were **security, legitimacy, and community relations**.

The humanitarian negotiator therefore **shifted from a normative argument to a pragmatic one**. Instead of invoking law, the dialogue began with **human impact and operational logic**:
Families were frightened and displaced;
The presence of troops in the school made it a potential target;
The occupation risked alienating the local community whose support the group relied on.

Once the commander acknowledged these consequences, the negotiator **reframed the discussion in the commander's own terms**:

- **Security argument:** "We understand this building offers a strong position, yet its visibility also draws attention. Would relocating slightly further out make it easier for you to manage the situation and reduce unnecessary risks for everyone nearby?"
- **Legitimacy argument:** "Protecting schools earns respect from the community; they'll see you as responsible, not reckless."
- **Sustainability argument:** "If this school is destroyed, your children and theirs lose a future place to learn. Let's find another location that meets both needs."

The combination of **human consequences and operational reasoning** opened space for a practical solution. After consultation with community leaders, an alternative site was identified and the group **voluntarily withdrew**. The agreement respected IHL but succeeded because it **spoke to the commander's interests** rather than his obligations.

This negotiation illustrates the essence of pragmatic protection:

- **Start with empathy, not accusation;**
- **Use law as guidance, not as threat; and**
- **Translate norms into the counterpart's logic of action.**

The result was the same as what the law demanded, but achieved through persuasion, trust, and reasoning rather than legal confrontation. **Lesson:** Legal norms provide direction; persuasive reasoning delivers compliance. The art of protection negotiation lies in making the law feel relevant, not too abstract, or theoretical.

Summary Insight
Translating humanitarian law into negotiation practice is a skill and should be tailored to each unique operational situation faced on the ground. By grounding principles in empathy, consequence, and mutual interest, negotiators uphold the essence of protection.

The law is the compass to follow, while pragmatism are the steps to be made on the ground.

Together, they make **the language of law speak the language of humanity.**

Designing a tactical plan for negotiations

Once the context is well understood and the mandate is clear, the **frontline negotiator** develops a tactical plan. This plan translates strategic objectives into concrete, sequenced actions: *who to meet, how to approach them, what to say, and when to move from listening to proposing*.

Determining the typology of the negotiation

Not all negotiations are the same. Recognizing what kind of negotiation you are in helps you anticipate the tone of the discussion, the arguments that will resonate, and who should represent the organization at the table.

According to the CCHN Field Manual (Tool 4), humanitarian negotiations generally fall into three relational types:

- **Political negotiations**, which focus on identity, values, and legitimacy. Who *are you? Why are you here?*
- **Professional negotiations**, which focus on the modalities, or how operations will be conducted. *How will you operate?*
- **Technical negotiations**, which focus on concrete logistical/technical arrangements. *What, where, when, and with whom?*

Each type demands a different form of preparation and communication. Knowing the typology helps negotiators foresee the nature of the dialogue, the level of risk, and the kind of legitimacy that will be most persuasive.

Applying it to our school occupation example:

The first encounter with the commander is likely **political**. He may question the organization's mandate, motives, visibility, or neutrality. Here, the objective is to build acceptability and trust. Depending on the context, the discussion should be led by a senior representative or local liaison who can speak credibly about the organization's mandate and reassure the counterpart about its intentions.

Once legitimacy is secured, the conversation becomes **professional**. Both parties discuss how to maintain safety and order while reopening schools. The most effective negotiator at this stage is a field coordinator or technical specialist, able to reference accepted standards and co-design practical methods.

Finally, when agreement is close, the negotiation becomes **technical**, focusing on details such as timelines, handovers, and monitoring arrangements. Here, a liaison or logistic officer can lead, ensuring clarity and implementation.

These types are not steps in a linear sequence; a single protection negotiation can shift between them, sometimes within the same meeting. A well-prepared team anticipates this movement, ensuring the right person leads each discussion and that arguments evolve accordingly – from principles and values to methods and modalities, to practicalities.

In practice, successful protection negotiations move fluidly between these levels, maintaining coherence across them:

- At the political level, legitimacy opens the door;
- At the professional level, shared standards build space for negotiation; and
- At the technical level, practical modalities turn understanding into action.

By recognizing the typology early, negotiators can stay ahead of the discussion, use the most relevant sources of legitimacy, and prepare the right team to achieve sustainable protection outcomes.

Negotiation type	Key questions	Objective	Typical risk level	Recommended negotiator profile	Case Example: Vacating Occupied Schools
Type A Political *Identity and values*	"Who are you?" "Why are you here?"	Establish acceptance and legitimacy of the organization; minimize perceived political threat.	**High** Reputational, political, and security risks if misunderstood or instrumentalized.	Senior representative, head of office, or respected local liaison able to speak credibly on mandate, neutrality, and intent.	The commander questions the NGO's motives. The negotiator explains the mission using local examples and proposes a discreet collaboration through the mayor's office to reduce visibility and political risk.
Type B Professional *Methods and standards*	"How will you work here?"	Build consensus on professional norms and methods (safety standards, accountability, coordination).	**Medium** Risk of misunderstanding professional standards or compromising quality/ethics.	Field coordinator, education or protection specialist with technical and managerial authority.	The commander agrees in principle but asks how to ensure order. The education specialist proposes daily perimeter checks and a shared code of conduct for troops and teachers.
Type C Technical *Practical arrangements*	"What, when, and how?"	Agree on concrete steps: timelines, routes, verification, communication channels.	**Low** Operational risk if details are unclear or commitments vague.	Liaison officer, logistician, or local staff member with practical knowledge and relationships.	After agreement, both sides plan the move: which unit withdraws first, who inspects, and when classes resume. A joint WhatsApp group is created for updates.

Why Typology Matters

Recognizing the negotiation typology helps negotiation teams anticipate the tone of discussion, prepare the right arguments, control the temperature of the conversation, and identify the right representative at each stage.

A good negotiation team plans for these shifts in advance, aligning roles and authority within the negotiation mandate:

- Who speaks to **values and acceptance** (political)?
- Who speaks to **methods and standards** (professional)?
- Who finalizes **practical steps** (technical)?

In complex protection settings, no one person covers all levels equally well. Each type requires distinct skills and sources of legitimacy. Knowing whether the conversation will be political, professional, or technical allows negotiators to anticipate what kind of legitimacy will matter most to their counterpart, whether it is moral and institutional credibility, professional expertise, or technical competence.

Clear handover between team members, from head of office to technical staff, ensures coherence and trust across all levels of engagement. Establishing this legitimacy early

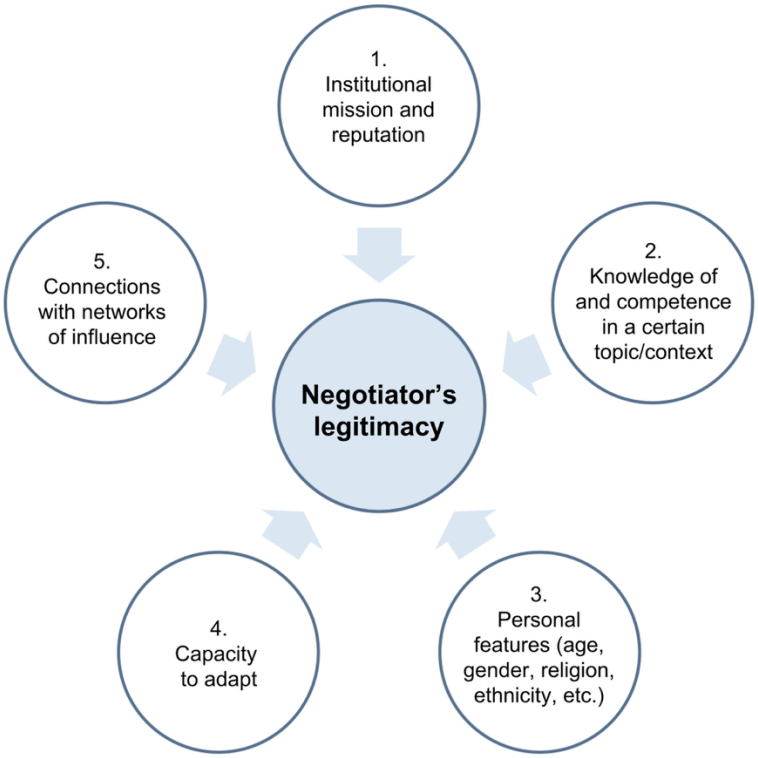
creates the foundation for a respectful relationship, where commitments can be discussed and sustained over time.

The following section explores how humanitarian negotiators foster trust and legitimacy in ways that reflect both their organization's mandate and the expectations of their counterparts.

Fostering Legitimacy in Protection Negotiations

In protection negotiations, legitimacy is not assumed but earned. While humanitarian organizations often rely on their principles to justify access, experience from the CCHN community shows that **counterparts rarely respond to entitlement; they respond to credibility**. Building legitimacy means shaping how the counterpart perceives the negotiator and their organization, not only through what they say, but through how they behave and who they are.

The CCHN's *Tool 3* identifies **five main sources of legitimacy**, which negotiators can strengthen or combine depending on the typology of the negotiation – whether political, professional, or technical.



Source of Legitimacy	What it Means in Practice	Example in the School Occupation Case
1. Institutional Representation *Where are you coming from?*	The organization's reputation, mandate, and recognized neutrality. This lends authority to the negotiator's presence.	Presenting the organization as a longstanding, impartial actor in education and child protection builds confidence that the dialogue is not politically motivated.
2. Contextual or Technical Expertise *What do you know?*	Knowledge of the issue and the local context demonstrates relevance and professionalism.	Using data on school safety or education continuity to propose practical, evidence-based solutions shows competence and respect for local realities.
3. Personal Legitimacy *Who are you?*	The negotiator's personal profile, (age, gender, language, attitude, cultural sensitivity, and integrity) affects how they are received.	A calm, respectful tone and familiarity with local customs helps defuse tension and reinforces the negotiator's sincerity.

4. Adaptability *How do you connect?*	The ability to adjust communication style, language, and behaviour to match the situation without compromising principles.	Adapting formality or meeting style – from a structured briefing to an informal tea – helps build rapport while staying focused on protection goals.
5. Network Connections *Who trusts you?*	Relationships with respected intermediaries or networks that influence the counterpart.	Being introduced by the mayor or a community elder strengthens the negotiator's credibility and lowers the commander's perception of risk.

Not all sources carry equal weight in every context. In a **political negotiation**, counterparts may value institutional neutrality and moral integrity above technical details. In a **professional negotiation**, expertise and standards build credibility. In a **technical negotiation**, efficiency and precision matter most. A skilled negotiator knows which combination of legitimacy sources to emphasize, depending on the context and the interlocutor.

Legitimacy also depends on **self-awareness**. Each negotiator brings strengths and vulnerabilities – background, gender, accent, age, status... – that can influence how they are perceived. Reflecting on these factors as a team before engagement helps anticipate how to complement one another. Sometimes, the most legitimate person to lead the conversation is not the most senior, but the one whose profile best resonates with the counterpart.

In essence, legitimacy is relational. It grows through consistent behaviour, reliability, and a genuine effort to understand the counterpart's world. In protection negotiations, this credibility is what allows principled dialogue to open space for concrete action – turning organizational values into trust, and trust into actions that guarantee safety for civilians.

"Legitimacy opens the door; trust keeps it open. The kind of legitimacy you need depends on the kind of conversation you want – technical if you're fixing a problem, moral if you're changing a behaviour."

– Humanitarian professional, Jordan, 2024

Clarifying the Negotiation Mandate: Institutional Alignment

Before engaging with any counterpart, humanitarian negotiators must operate under a **clear and shared negotiation mandate**. The *CCHN Field Manual* defines a mandate as *the set of objectives, boundaries, and authorizations that enable the negotiator to act with confidence while safeguarding the organization's principles and reputation.* It is both a compass and a safety net: it tells the negotiator where to go, and how far they can go.

In practice, a mandate clarifies four essential elements:

1. **The Objective:** the protection outcome sought. For example, securing the release of detainees, stopping forced returns, or persuading an armed group to vacate schools. The objective should be precise with a clearly identifiable outcome, yet flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions.
2. **The Scope of Action:** what the negotiator is authorized to request, offer, or agree to. This may include proposing alternative arrangements, sharing information, or coordinating follow-up actions. Scope defines the negotiator's "room for manoeuvre."
3. **The Red Lines:** what cannot be compromised, even under pressure. These are grounded in humanitarian principles (impartiality, neutrality, independence) and organizational ethics. In a protection negotiation, red lines might include offering material incentives in exchange for compliance or accepting discriminatory conditions.
4. **The Reporting Line**: who must be informed or consulted. Mandates are collective: they rely on internal communication between field staff, technical advisors, and leadership. Clear communication ensures coherence and institutional backing.

In the field, negotiators often describe the mandate as **a balance between authority and protection**. It empowers them to take initiative, but it also shields them from unrealistic expectations or blame. In the informal exchanges, for example, which take place within the CCHN community of practice, professionals repeatedly emphasize that unclear mandates create confusion and internal friction. These practitioners "negotiate with their own organization" before they ever reach the counterpart.

A good mandate is therefore both **structured and flexible**. It sets direction while allowing adaptation as the situation evolves. During the school occupation scenario, for example, the negotiator may have the mandate to request troop withdrawal, but also the discretion to propose practical alternatives (temporary shelters, phased relocation) as long as humanitarian principles are upheld.

Ultimately, a clear mandate builds confidence inside and outside the organization. It ensures that negotiation outcomes reflect not only the negotiator's skill, but the institution's collective values and responsibility.

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Defining Red Lines and Planning Scenarios

Protection negotiations often take place in fast-changing, high-pressure environments. **Frontline negotiation teams rarely have full control over how a discussion unfolds, but they can control how well they are prepared**. Two elements are central to that preparation:

- Defining negotiation red lines, and
- Planning possible scenarios for how the dialogue might evolve.

Together, they provide both clarity and flexibility: a shared understanding of what cannot be compromised, and a plan for how to adapt when circumstances shift.

Understanding and Defining Red Lines

In humanitarian negotiations, **red lines** are the boundaries that negotiators cannot cross without breaching humanitarian principles, institutional ethics, or operational safety. They represent the outer limits of acceptable compromise.

As emphasized in the CCHN Field Manual emphasizes that these red lines must be collectively discussed and validated, not individually decided during the negotiation. **They are an organizational safeguard defined by the mandator, not a personal stance of the negotiator.**

Peer consultations and field learning identified several recurring red lines that humanitarian negotiators define to preserve principled, lawful, and safe engagement when pursuing protection outcomes. These limits are not rigid rules but guiding boundaries that mark the point beyond which negotiation would compromise humanitarian integrity or cause harm.

They are not applied systematically; their interpretation and weight depend on the operational context, mandate, and institutional policies of each organisation.

1. **Conditional or politicised assistance**: Agreements that tie aid or protection to political endorsement, security cooperation, or propaganda are rejected. Humanitarian resources cannot serve military or political objectives.
2. **Complicity in rights violations:** Negotiators refuse arrangements that could enable or normalize serious abuses, for example forced displacement, arbitrary detention, or discrimination in service delivery. Engagement may continue, but only with safeguards and sustained dialogue to prevent harm.
3. **Loss of civilian character:** Allowing armed escorts, weapons storage, or military use of humanitarian sites is considered unacceptable under IHL and humanitarian principles. Preserving the civilian nature of operations protects both staff and affected people.
4. **Discriminatory or non-impartial assistance**: Aid cannot be distributed based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or political loyalty. Requests to favour or exclude groups on such grounds are declined, even if this delays implementation.

5. **Endangering affected populations**: Negotiators reject conditions that would place people at risk, such as sharing personal data that could lead to targeting, or operating in environments where civilian safety cannot be upheld. Confidentiality and dignity take precedence overreach.
6. **Undermining organisational integrity**: Demands that compromise accountability, like concealing abuse, ignoring PSEA standards, or bypassing audits, are not accepted. Short-term access cannot come at the expense of credibility or long-term presence.
7. **Breaching humanitarian or legal norms**: Any arrangement that would clearly contravene international humanitarian or human rights law, for example, providing material support to armed actors or tolerating recruitment of children, is off-limits.
8. **"Access-for-silence" tradeoffs**: Negotiators avoid deals where continued access depends on ignoring protection concerns or withholding reports of abuse. Dialogue may remain discreet, but silence must never imply consent.

Applying it to our school occupation example
The negotiation team agrees internally that while they can propose logistical support for school rehabilitation, they cannot offer material incentives to or accept partial school use by armed actors. This clarity gives the frontline negotiator confidence to steer the discussion without overstepping institutional boundaries.

Well defined red lines are not barriers to negotiation: they are anchors that allow teams to stay principled while exploring creative solutions within safe limits.

Planning Negotiation Scenarios

Even the best prepared negotiation rarely goes as expected. CCHN field practice encourages negotiators to map multiple plausible scenarios before entering the room. Scenario planning helps the team visualize different directions the conversation could take and decide in advance how to respond.

A simple three-scenario approach:

	Best-case scenario	Likely scenario	Worst case scenario
What?	The counterpart agrees with the protection objective quickly and seeks practical collaboration.	The counterpart partially agrees but raises operational or reputational concerns	The counterpart refuses, stalls, or introduces unacceptable conditions.

Our example	Troops vacate both schools within a week.	The commander agrees to vacate one school first.	He refuses and claims the schools are military property.
Plan: what should you do next?	Move toward technical arrangements; confirm timelines and follow-up steps.	Use evidence and empathy to reframe the issue; propose phased or lower-risk steps.	Maintain composure, restate principles, avoid reactive concessions, and leave the door open for re-engagement.

Using Red Lines and Scenarios Together

Scenario planning and red lines work best when they inform each other.

- **Scenarios provide flexibility:** how the negotiation might evolve.
- **Red lines provide security:** how far it can go.

Before any engagement, the team should discuss:

- What we want to achieve;
- What we can offer or adjust;
- What we must not compromise;
- How we will react if the discussion moves beyond acceptable limits.

This internal alignment transforms uncertainty into preparedness. Negotiators who have thought through their scenarios and limits beforehand are more confident in the room, more consistent in their tone, and better able to maintain trust even when saying "no."

> "*Having clear red lines didn't make the negotiation rigid – it made us calmer. We knew what we could say yes to, and where to pause. That confidence helped the commander trust that our word had w*eight."
>
> – Humanitarian professional, Sudan, 2024

Designing the Pathway for a Difficult Discussion

A negotiation rarely follows a straight line. As the CCHN Field Manual notes, good negotiators design the pathway of their discussion in advance – anticipating sequence, tone, and likely turns. Protection outcomes depend as much on how dialogue unfolds as on what is said.

Entry: Setting the Tone and Objective

The opening shapes whether the conversation begins in tension or collaboration. Starting from shared ground (see the Island of Agreement in Section XX) helps build trust and signals respect for the counterpart's perspective. Beginning with a smaller, more focused group can also create space for a candid exchange, allowing interlocutors to understand the issues in advance, prepare their positions, and engage without feeling caught off guard or exposed.

Use agreed facts or convergent norms as openers (*We all value education and stability in this community*).

Frame the meeting's purpose constructively (*We'd like to find practical options that maintain both security and schooling*).

Choose timing and setting carefully: private conversations often yield more openness than formal briefings.

Example: Instead of starting with: *Your troops must leave the schools*, the negotiator begins with: *We know your unit has helped keep this area stable. The community also wants to see their children back in class… Perhaps we can find a solution that works for both.*

"A lot of the protection work I did, started long before the formal meeting – by speaking privately with protection colleagues and military counterparts to prepare the ground for a positive outcome. Conflict actors are often more open about their positions, concerns, or limitations with non-protection actors they trust. These informal exchanges help them save face and make it easier to reach understanding once the negotiation begins."

- Humanitarian professional, 2026

Progression: From Listening to Proposing

As discussions unfold, negotiators cycle between listening, testing, and reframing. The key is to stay adaptive without losing direction.

Begin with listening: allow the counterpart to explain their reasoning and priorities.

- Rephrase key points to confirm understanding and to clarify underlying interests.
- Introduce proposals as questions rather than demands ("*Would it help if we found an alternative site for your troops?*").
- Use empathy strategically: acknowledging your counterpart's challenges strengthens mutual respect and trust.
- If resistance arises, step back to a smaller, shared issue before returning to the main point.

The objective is to build incremental protection space: small, practical commitments that shift behaviour and perception over time. Maintaining the relationship often matters more than immediate agreement.

Closure: Consolidating and Following Up

Ending well is as important as starting well. A strong closure turns discussion into accountability.

- Summarize agreed points clearly: who will do what, by when.
- Reinforce the mutual benefit (*This arrangement protects children and strengthens your leadership's image*).
- Confirm the next contact or a review date before leaving the room.

Example: The commander agrees to relocate one of two occupied schools. The negotiator confirms details, thanks him for his leadership, and proposes a follow-up meeting after one week to assess progress: a closure that reinforces respect and accountability.
Protection negotiation is often a series of such partial gains; systematic follow-up turns these into sustainable outcomes.

Supporting and Strengthening Community-Led Negotiations

Community-led Negotiations: Structuring and Supporting Locally Led Dialogue

Community-led negotiations describe the practices of communities acting as their own agents of protection. In these cases, people negotiate directly on behalf of their families and neighbours rather than for others, which introduces a strong emotional dimension and reduces the distance that formal negotiators can maintain. Such negotiations may involve dialogue with local authorities, armed actors, or other power holders to secure safety, ensure access to essential services, or protect livelihoods.

These initiatives are often driven by necessity, strategic choice, or external pressure. They are often undertaken without formal humanitarian support, and at times carry significant risks for those involved; although other forms of assistance may be available through civil society, faith-based groups, or community leaders such as elders, women, or youth who maintain links to wider networks. The focus is usually on tangible outcomes such as safe passage, preventing forced recruitment, or establishing local ceasefires. Although not formalised in humanitarian structures, these efforts are often grounded in local norms and mirror many elements familiar to humanitarian negotiators: analysis of the context, mapping of stakeholders, and tactical planning. The primary objective, however, is usually the collective safety of the community rather than achieving specific negotiated outcomes.

Drivers of Engagement

Communities engage in dialogue with power holders for different reasons: out of necessity, as a strategic calculation, or in response to external pressure. Often, such interactions are viewed not as negotiation in the humanitarian sense but as a normal part of daily life and survival. When communities come to recognise these exchanges as negotiation, it can be a transformative shift that affirms their strategic decision-making.

Communities negotiate to safeguard their survival and wellbeing. While some actions are reactive responses to immediate threats, others are deliberate strategies to shift power relations or reduce risks over the longer-term. In some contexts, communities may negotiate to recover detained family members, ensure safe passage for trade or livelihoods, or to resolve grievances. In Colombia, for example, indigenous authorities organised a process to negotiate with local armed groups for the return of recruited children, mobilising family members, teachers, and traditional leaders. In Yemen, a community asked a trusted humanitarian to mediate with all sides of the conflict to recover the bodies of deceased combatants. Such cases illustrate how negotiation forms part of the daily survival strategies of affected populations.

Representation and Legitimacy

Community negotiators are rarely appointed through externally recognised mechanisms. They tend to be trusted individuals such as elders, youth leaders, mothers, religious figures, or activists, selected for their credibility, influence, lived experience, and personal characteristics that enable effective communication, mediation, and trust-building. The capacity to communicate effectively and to understand the counterpart's language and cultural logic is critical. Representation is fluid, shifting as issues evolve or new actors emerge. In Nigeria, communities form pressure groups, identify skilled speakers, adapting representation as they moved between levels of authority. In Sudan, a women's association in West Darfur unites tribal leaders and civil society figures to resolve local disputes and secure the harvest, demonstrating collective leadership that emerges organically from within the community.

Conducting Dialogue

While community-led negotiations tend to be less structured than formal humanitarian efforts, they often follow similar stages. Continuous context analysis is a core feature: communities assess threats and opportunities in real time through consultation and observation. Priorities are identified through collective discussion based on urgency and feasibility. Communities map networks of influence, drawing on individuals such as elders, spiritual leaders or former commanders to strengthen their position. Relationships can be built through kinship, religious events, or shared community spaces, and negotiation roles can be distributed among participants. Dependent on culture and local norms, one individual might introduce the group and its purpose, another may outline the problem, and a third may present the request.

Dialogue locations are selected for safety, neutrality, and convenience – markets, community centres, camps, or religious sites. Communities monitor developments continuously, gather information through personal networks, and time their engagement carefully to coincide with perceived opportunities and entry points. Preparation is collective and iterative, often relying on informal communication and deep contextual knowledge.

Negotiation Methods

Communities employ a wide range of tactics, carefully adapted to their audience. The most common strategy is to appeal to shared moral, cultural and/or spiritual norms. In the Central African Republic, religious leaders used their moral and spiritual authority to dissuade combatants from committing abuses. In South Sudan, women associated with local churches drew on their symbolic maternal roles, appealing to combatants as they would to their own children and invoking deeply rooted familial values of care and responsibility to ease tensions and negotiate the relocation of a military base. Other methods include conditional cooperation, incentives, or strategic withdrawal.

Communities may leverage their cooperation, legitimacy, or silence; threaten electoral consequences or collective withdrawal. They can offer or withhold food, resources or legitimacy as inducement. They sometimes accept partial compromises, complying with certain conditions to secure broader safety. Nudging and subtle persuasion are also frequent, where negotiators use kinship, familial or community ties to influence armed actor behaviours. These tactics reflect adaptability, aligning moral reasoning and cultural awareness with pragmatic calculation.

Determinants of Success

Several factors increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. Success depends on the credibility of negotiators trusted by both their communities and counterparts. Social cohesion enables consistent messaging and reduces the potential for manipulation by outside actors. When community goals align with counterpart interests – such as stability or public image – the likelihood of agreement rises. Empathy and proximity also play a role: kinship or shared identity can create a basis for restraint. Above all, persistence matters. These negotiations often involve repeated contact and long-term relationship building.

Managing Risk

Community negotiators can face considerable risks, from being perceived as collaborators to becoming targets of retribution. Risks increase when external actors intervene without understanding local conflict and power dynamics, and sources of influence. To reduce exposure, communities strategically assign roles, maintain confidentiality, and select appropriate meeting places, for example that symbolise neutrality, and/or are discreet. They rely on trust and local networks to create common ground.

Before engaging, communities will weigh potential benefits against risks, assessing the chance of success relative to the possibility of violence. Negotiators may face suspicion or retaliation, at times requiring protection or relocation. Spoilers, such as leadership changes or interference by external actors, can also disrupt agreements, and may prompt communities to pause or withdraw from dialogue until conditions become more favourable.

Supporting Local Negotiators

Support for community-led negotiation must be context-specific, driven by demand and cocreated jointly. Standardised models will undermine local practices and inevitably do harm. Humanitarian actors can strengthen these processes by facilitating peer exchange among negotiators from different areas, providing skills-based training in communication, listening, and planning, supporting access to decision-makers, and offering logistical assistance for dialogue. Such efforts should enhance, not replace, local mechanisms. The most effective support recognises the existing strengths of communities and builds out from there. As one negotiator explained, meaningful assistance is not negotiating on behalf of communities but standing beside them to amplify their voices.

Case Study Community – led Negotiation: Protecting a Children's Safe Space in Frontline Ukraine

The following case illustrates how structured, respectful dialogue enabled a community to protect children's safety amid active conflict.

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 (CSS) inside the settlement's cultural center. The CSS 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.

1. 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 a dialogue rather than an open 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.

2. 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 labelled and moved away from areas used by the CSS. Most importantly, no new exhibits would be brought in until the security situation improved of the war ended.

3. 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.

4. 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 the 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.

Case Study Community-led Negotiation: Delivering Nutrition Education in Conflict-Affected Central Mali

This second example shows how negotiation rooted in cultural understanding sustained humanitarian access under social and religious constraints.

In central Mali, years of conflict and the control of armed groups have disrupted community life and access to essential services. Families face growing food insecurity, and many young children suffer from acute malnutrition linked to early weaning, poor feeding habits, and limited nutrition awareness. In response, a humanitarian organization, together with a local partner, launched a nutrition education project to improve families' knowledge and habits around breastfeeding, child feeding, and hygiene. The program aimed to engage both women and men, recognizing that decisions about food and childcare are shared responsibilities within households.

The first session took place in a rural village under the authority of an armed group that imposed strict religious and social rules. During the activity, which brought together men, women, and children, members of the group arrived and ordered it to stop. They demanded to know who had authorized the meeting, and when they learned that the village chief had approved, they punished him publicly, accusing him of allowing men and women to mix in violation of their interpretation of religious law. The event caused fear and confusion, and all project activities were immediately suspended.

1. Preparation and engagement
After several days of uncertainty, community members decided to initiate dialogue with the armed group. Elders, mothers, and teachers took the lead, seeking to reopen the space for nutrition education while avoiding further confrontation. They emphasized that the project was not a social gathering or foreign influence but a health initiative responding to a shared problem. Many families had lost children to malnutrition, and mothers needed guidance on how to feed infants safely with the limited food available.

By framing the sessions as a collective moral duty to protect children's wellbeing, the community leaders appealed to values respected by both local traditions and religious norms. This approach lowered tensions and opened a space for negotiation, allowing the conversation to focus on finding a practical solution rather than debating principles.

2. Negotiation dynamics
During the discussions, the armed group reiterated its refusal to allow any activity in which men and women participated together. The community leaders acknowledged this concern and proposed an alternative model that would respect local customs. Women would attend the nutrition sessions at the health center, facilitated by the village midwife, while men would participate in separate sessions at the village school, led by a male facilitator from the local NGO.

The proposal balanced the need for community learning with the group's social expectations. After several exchanges, the armed actors agreed, noting that nutrition was a legitimate issue that benefited their own families as long as the sessions remained gender – segregated. Another obstacle emerged when the midwife declined to lead the sessions without remuneration, explaining that the task required significant time and personal risk. The humanitarian organization recognized her contribution as essential and arranged for her to receive a small stipend through the project budget. This decision acknowledged local expertise and reinforced a sense of fairness that helped secure her participation.

3. Results
Once these adjustments were made, the nutrition education activities resumed safely. The sessions focused on breastfeeding, hygiene, and the use of local ingredients to prepare balanced meals for children. Women met regularly at the health center with the midwife, while men attended sessions at the school. Participation gradually increased as confidence returned, and the community began to see the project as a locally owned effort rather than an external intervention.

Although the activities did not follow the initial plan of joint participation, the compromise ensured the continuation of essential learning opportunities in a sensitive environment. The armed group tolerated the program, and the community–maintained access to information that supported healthier practices at home.

4. Lessons Learned
This case shows how community-led negotiation can sustain humanitarian access in environments shaped by social and religious constraints. By framing the project around shared

values, family care, protection of children, and community health, the negotiators were able to find common ground with the armed group without abandoning humanitarian principles.
It also underlines the importance of local leadership and cultural understanding. The credibility of community representatives allowed them to navigate a volatile environment where external actors had little space for direct dialogue. Recognizing and compensating the midwife's role reinforced trust and equity, showing that practical compromises can uphold both humanitarian purpose and local dignity.

The experience demonstrates that humanitarian negotiation is often about maintaining presence and purpose under constraint rather than achieving perfect outcomes. Through careful preparation, empathy, and respect for local realities, communities can preserve space for essential humanitarian work even in the most difficult circumstances.

This negotiation shows how communities can preserve humanitarian space through pragmatism and cultural knowledge. Viewed through the Naivasha Grid, the process balanced respect for humanitarian principles with sensitivity to local power and social norms. Community leaders upheld the principle of humanitarian necessity, children's right to health, while adapting the operational form of activities to meet the armed group's expectations on gender separation.

By reframing the project around shared moral values such as family care and children's wellbeing, they transformed potential confrontation into cooperation. This balance between principled positioning and relationship management aligns with Naivasha's logic of navigating between ethical integrity and contextual legitimacy. The experience highlights the need to strengthen community negotiators' skills in value-based reframing and clear communication, enabling them to bridge humanitarian aims with local belief systems. Ultimately, the case demonstrates that effective humanitarian negotiation in constrained environments depends not on rigid adherence to external models, but on the disciplined use of empathy, legitimacy, and culturally grounded persuasion to sustain access and trust.

Conclusion

Negotiating for protection is ultimately about translating communities' need for safety and security, as well as international humanitarian law, and other relevant normative frameworks, into behavioural change and protective action that save lives and strengthens safety and dignity. It requires humanitarian actors to engage deliberately and ethically with those who hold power, using dialogue not as compromise but as a means of influence. Across contexts, practitioners demonstrate that negotiation, when grounded in analysis, preparation, and reflection, can open protective space.

Proactive protection begins long before a crisis peaks. It is cultivated through preparedness, presence, and persistence: through relationships that outlast emergencies. Effective negotiators embody both principle and pragmatism: they listen, adapt, and seek the small, credible steps that gradually reduce risk. Each negotiated improvement, a checkpoint removed, a safe corridor maintained, a school vacated, is a step that can lead to incremental protective outcomes, while building an environment conducive to protection.

By investing in negotiation as a core protection skill, humanitarian organisations can move from reactive responses to proactive influence, from witnessing suffering to being agents of restraint and respect. In this sense, humanitarian negotiation is not merely a professional technique; it is one of the most powerful instruments of protection available to the humanitarian community.

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ANNEX I – Advancing Protection Through Humanitarian Diplomacy

How Can Humanitarian Diplomacy Improve Protection Outcomes?

Humanitarian diplomacy is the use of negotiation to persuade decision makers and opinion leaders to act in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for humanitarian principles, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law. It plays a critical role in mobilising political will, resources, and support to respond effectively to humanitarian crises. To achieve their goals, diplomats require fundamental negotiation and mediation skills, such as rapport building, and the ability to adapt.

In the current context of the humanitarian reset and funding constraints, protection activities face increasing pressure, making humanitarian diplomacy all the more essential. As highlighted by a recent policy brief by ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group, humanitarian diplomacy [1]. It can serve not only as a reactive tool, but also as a preventive one. It is often complimented by advocacy.

Building on the CCHN's thematic work, the six steps below outline a structured approach for applying **humanitarian diplomacy to protection**, grounded in practical negotiation skills and humanitarian principles.

Step 1. Define the Protection Problem and Prioritise Issues

Begin by clarifying whether the protection concern truly requires a **diplomatic approach** rather than a field-level negotiation, and/or whether they could complement each other. Humanitarian diplomacy targets **decision makers, policymakers, or powerholders** whose choices shape humanitarian space or civilian safety.

Assess potential tensions between your diplomatic efforts and humanitarian principles and determine how your organisation will manage them. Focus on issues where **impact is achievable**, as protection-related diplomacy often demands considerable political and institutional effort.

Tip:
Start by analysing threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities using the *risk – equation* (Risk = Threat × Vulnerability / Capacity). Prioritise threats that:

- Require engagement with duty bearers, states, or de facto authorities;

[1] Davies, G., Gray, F. and Barbelet, V. (2025) 'Keeping protection paramount amidst a 'humanitarian reset': the need for proactive protection action to reduce civilian harm'. HPG policy brief. London: ODI Global

- Cannot be resolved through frontline negotiation alone; and
- Are systemic.

Step 2. Map Relevant Actors and Stakeholders

Conduct a structured **actor mapping** to identify who you need to influence and through which pathways. This may include ministries, military and non-state actors, diplomatic missions, regional bodies, think tanks, or private entities.

Keep in mind that engaging with certain interlocutors may be politicized. For example, engaging with a de facto authority that recently carried out a coup and is accused of IHL violations and abuses against an ethnic minority could be perceived as compromising impartiality.

Consider both *who has decision power* and *who has leverage over them*. High-level access does not automatically equal influence.

Tip:
Before deciding whom to approach, consider a multilayered approach engaging:

- Stakeholders who contribute to, or have direct influence over the threats on the civilian population;
- Those sharing a convergent interest with your protection outcome; and
- 'Safe' intermediaries such as civilian coordination bodies that military and security authorities usually establish to deal with humanitarian organisations.

Step 3. Understand the Counterpart's Needs and Interests

Effective diplomacy requires **empathy and evidence**. Put yourself in your counterpart's position: understand their incentives, constraints, and fears. Diplomatic or political actors can be generalists who may lack operational or legal expertise.
Ask: *What motivates them? What risks do they perceive? What values shape their decisions?*

Tip:
Do not assume that protection issues are shared priorities. Identify the values your interlocutors genuinely care about (legitimacy, stability, reputation) and frame your protection message in a way that aligns with these.

Example: A counterpart uninterested in "dignified aid delivery" might respond positively to arguments about their legitimacy or local stability.

Step 4. Prioritise Objectives and Frame Messages

Define what you want to achieve. Objectives may include securing protection for civilians, gaining access for protection programming, or enabling safe passage. Clearly prioritise your objectives to keep your messaging focused and avoid turning it into a "shopping list" of issues.

When framing messages:

- Communicate protection risks and solutions in **principled but non-legalistic** language;
- Use verified facts and practical alternatives rather than emotive appeals, while recognising that human stories can enhance empathy; and
- Treat information as **strategic currency** – field insights can strengthen credibility and influence.

Tip:

Use **clear, factual, and coordinated language**. Avoid jargon and check how certain terms are understood – for example, "protection" may be misinterpreted as "security." Prepare two to three specific, actionable requests rather than broad appeals.

During oral briefings:

- Be concise, transparent, and acknowledge limits of information;
- Enact active listening and demonstrate respect for the counterpart's viewpoint;
- Clarify your mandate; do not assume familiarity; and
- Build trust by explaining that humanitarian diplomacy seeks cooperation and constructive engagement, not denunciation.

Step 5. Propose Alternatives

Once priorities and messages are clear, prepare **several possible scenarios** for discussion. Anticipate your counterpart's potential responses and propose **realistic, principled options** to mitigate harm. Humanitarian diplomacy often involves balancing access, sensitive protection concerns with political and/or security objectives – acknowledge these trade-offs openly.

Tip:
Alternatives do not necessarily mean concessions. Consult widely – especially with affected communities – to identify acceptable, context-specific solutions. Their insights are essential to understand the challenges they face, and to inform feasible proposal

Step 6. Develop a Strategy
Develop a humanitarian diplomacy strategy by weighing different approaches such as **confidential vs. public engagement**, or **alliance – building vs. individual initiatives**. Conduct a **risk analysis** to ensure your actions neither legitimise perpetrators nor create reputational or legal exposure.

Timing is crucial: opportunities for influence arise when humanitarian and political interests briefly align. Be ready to seize these diplomatic moments.

Coordinate internally – between headquarters, missions, legal, advocacy, and field teams – to maintain consistent messaging. Where appropriate, engage externally through collective platforms such as **Protection Clusters, Humanitarian Country Teams, or the Global Protection Cluster**, which can help mobilise agency heads and present unified positions.

Tip:
Humanitarian diplomacy is iterative. Maintain engagement through regular follow-up, while continuously revisiting the strategy and assumptions, adapting as necessary:

- Monitor reactions and update your analysis and strategy;
- Offer continued dialogue or technical support;
- Recognise and reinforce positive behaviour or outcomes; and
- Keep contact through staff or counterpart turnover to ensure sustained engagement.

Building and sustaining relationships – rather than one-off meetings – is what makes diplomacy a means to achieve lasting protection gains.

ANNEX II – Illustrative Example on Multi-Layered protection negotiation and engagement. Case Study: Preventing Forced Evictions from an IDP Camp

Context

Local authorities in a conflict-affected region announce the imminent closure of an informal displacement site housing 5,000 internally displaced people (IDP)'s households. The decision, justified on "security grounds", risks exposing IDPs to homelessness, violence, and family separation. Multiple humanitarian actors mobilize to negotiate for the protection of the displaced population.

Field Level: Frontline Protection Outcomes

Actors involved: Field protection officers, community focal points, local officials, and security representatives.

Outcomes Sought:

- Immediate protective measure: a temporary halt to the eviction order;
- Agreed principle: any population movement must be voluntary, safe, and informed;
- Risk reduction: armed patrols around the camp scaled back; checkpoints adjusted to facilitate humanitarian movement; and
- Community agency: recognition of camp committees as interlocutors in decision-making.

Why is this important: This level secured short-term protection (reducing imminent threats and preserving space for further negotiation). The field team's credibility and consistent presence were crucial in transforming confrontation into concrete outcomes.

Operational Level: Systemic and Coordinated Protection Outcomes

Actors involved: Protection Cluster, OCHA, shelter and WASH leads, UNHCR, INGOs, local NGOs.

Outcomes Sought:

- Collective protection position developed and endorsed by cluster members, defining what "safe and dignified relocation" entails (minimum standards, sequencing, site selection);

- Humanitarian space safeguarded: operational access guaranteed during the assessment and relocation planning phases; and

- Joint mechanism established: an interagency taskforce co-led by local authorities and the Protection Cluster to monitor compliance with agreed standards.

Why is this important:
This level transformed individual field negotiations into systemic protection gains: a coordinated humanitarian stance, shared accountability mechanisms, and technical arrangements that institutionalized the principles agreed locally.

Leadership Level: Strategic Protection Outcomes

Actors involved: Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, heads of agencies, donor representatives, senior government officials.

Outcomes Sought:

- Political commitment: a national-level moratorium on forced evictions of IDPs until adequate relocation options are confirmed;

- Policy-level influence: formal adoption of "voluntary, safe, and dignified" language in government directives; and

- Longer-term protection framework: initiation of dialogue on housing, land, and property rights for displaced communities as part of the recovery agenda.

Why is this important:
This level elevated the issue from a local crisis to a strategic protection priority. It secured top-level assurances and institutional follow-up that outlasted the immediate emergency, consolidating field-level gains into policy coherence and legitimacy.

Key takeaway:
Each layer negotiated a different but complementary protection outcome — from averting an immediate threat, to embedding safe relocation mechanisms, to influencing national policy. Coordination between the layers ensured that no level worked in isolation: leadership reinforced frontline messages, operational coherence lent legitimacy to advocacy, and field engagement grounded the entire negotiation in community realities.

Annex III - Case Study: Negotiating for Safe Civilian Access and the Prevention of Violence

Protection case category: Access to property land and prevention of excessive use of force

Type of negotiation: Engagement with civil and military authorities to enable safe access and reduce harm

Protection outcomes:

- Enable civilians to access and cultivate their land safely; and
- Prevent the use of live ammunition and other forms of excessive force against unarmed individuals.

1. Context Overview
In a divided and militarized area, a roadblock separated rural communities from their agricultural land and workplaces. This roadblock (built for security purposes) also cut across long – established civilian livelihoods, leaving many families unable to reach their fields without formal authorization.

Over time, people began to cross informally to maintain their livelihoods, which exposed them to arrest or direct violence from security forces tasked with enforcing the boundary. The humanitarian organization operating in this area had long documented incidents of civilian harm linked to these movements and sought ways to reduce risks while upholding affected people's right to access their property and means of income.

2. Protection Concern and Objective
The main protection concern was threefold:

1. **Restricted access to land** that was essential for the livelihoods of hundreds of households;
2. **Risk of excessive or unlawful use of force** by security forces toward unarmed civilians attempting to cross the roadblock; and
3. **Prevention of excessive use of force:** engaging the security forces in discussing the application of measures when the roadblock is trespassed. Emphasizing that use of live ammunition should be used only when a serious threat is posed to the guarding personnel, underlying that wounding/injuring a farmer and preventing him/her to generate income from their land would likely turn the person into an additional threat to the effective control of the area.

The humanitarian objective was to create predictable, safe, and dignified access for farmers to reach their land while reducing the likelihood of violent confrontations.

3. Preparation and Analysis
Before engaging counterparts, the organization conducted a protection analysis focusing on patterns of harm and constraints to civilian movement. It identified the key authorities responsible for administering access permissions and those overseeing the enforcement of the roadblock's security rules.

The team mapped relevant stakeholders, including local administrative offices, security units, community representatives, and local mediators. Understanding the bureaucratic process behind permission issuance proved crucial, as did clarifying the division of responsibilities between civilian and military branches.

Information was collected through direct testimonies, incident monitoring, and coordination with other humanitarian and legal actors. This evidence helped build a credible picture of the humanitarian risks and the operational gaps in the existing access system.

4. Engaging the Counterpart
Negotiations unfolded along two tracks:

1. **Administrative engagement** with the civilian authority managing permissions, to simplify and accelerate the renewal process. The humanitarian organization offered to help applicants compile the required documents, provided data on delays, and advocated for regular updates on pending requests; and

2. **Operational coordination** with security forces responsible for controlling the roadblock, to ensure that gates were opened at predictable times and that crossing arrangements were communicated clearly to local communities.

Building trust required repeated, low – profile engagement. The organization deliberately used pragmatic rather than legalistic language, emphasizing livelihood stability, local security, and predictability rather than rights violations. Over time, the counterpart began sharing schedules in advance and designated focal points for coordination.

5. Dilemmas and Adaptive Choices
The team faced a recurring dilemma: raising protection concerns, especially incidents involving live fire, risked jeopardizing access for the very communities they aimed to protect. To maintain dialogue, the organization used indirect framing, focusing on "preventing misunderstandings and unnecessary escalation."

Internally, there were discussions about whether engaging with the authorities could be seen as legitimizing restrictive policies. The team mitigated this by maintaining transparency with affected communities, setting clear boundaries on what could be negotiated, and documenting every interaction.

6. Outcomes and Follow-Up
The sustained engagement led to incremental yet meaningful results:

- Farmers were able to obtain permissions more regularly and predictably;
- Security forces coordinated gate openings in advance, reducing ad hoc and risky crossings;
- Reported incidents of shooting toward unarmed civilians significantly decreased during the period of active coordination; and
- The farmers could benefit from an increased livelihood, less dependency

While these improvements were fragile and dependent on continued communication, they demonstrated that consistent humanitarian dialogue could mitigate harm and create better living conditions for the civilian population, even without structural policy change.

7. Reflection and Practitioner Insights
This case illustrates how **protection outcomes can be achieved through incremental, behaviour – focused negotiations** rather than advocacy based on legal frameworks alone. The negotiators' credibility rested on a combination of persistence, pragmatic framing, and local presence.

Key reflections include:

- **Framing matters:** Positioning the issue as one of safety and predictability created space for dialogue where legal or political arguments might have been rejected;
- **Incrementalism works:** Small operational gains (regular schedules, designated points of contact) can yield significant protection and livelihood dividends over time; and
- **Balancing principles and pragmatism:** Maintaining humanitarian independence while cooperating on practical solutions required constant internal alignment and reflection.

Key Takeaways

- Negotiating for protection often starts with an *administrative* entry point but succeeds through *behavioural influence*;

- Protection outcomes may not always be visible, but reduced harm and improved predictability are meaningful results; and
- Consistent, low – visibility engagement can open channels for addressing sensitive protection risks.