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# Research Report

## The Humanitarian as Negotiator: Developing Capacity Across the Aid Sector

Rob Grace 

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*This article examines the dynamics at play in ongoing efforts to cultivate negotiation capacity among professionals working in the humanitarian sector. Based on extensive semi-structured interviews conducted with humanitarian practitioners, this article discusses six particular challenges that aid agencies face. The first is raising awareness across the aid sector that negotiation is a core competency of humanitarian action. The second is grappling with ambiguities around the definition of the term “humanitarian negotiation.” The third is cultivating an appreciation for the holistic range of negotiation capital that is necessary for success. The fourth is navigating the difficulties inherent in the experiential nature of negotiation capacity building. The fifth is discerning which lessons should be learned from past humanitarian negotiation practice. The sixth is mitigating negative unintended effects of directing professional and policy attention toward humanitarian negotiation capacity building. Through this examination, the article aims to assess the landscape of current humanitarian negotiation capacity-building efforts, as well as the difficulties that humanitarian organizations will likely face on the road ahead.*

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## Introduction

She was originally hired to work on a long-term HIV/TB project in a fragile and underdeveloped, yet peaceful, country. But when a civil war erupted, the fluid nature of the field environment necessitated an expansion of her job responsibilities. Given the importance of transporting staff and supplies via airplane, she found herself negotiating with an army captain about how many flights could arrive and depart. Even though she had a limited background in negotiation, she was savvy, reasonable and forceful when necessary, would spend a lot of time understanding what the captain knows and what he doesn't know, and would schmooze him with a couple of cigarettes, ask about his kids, and ultimately get her way. Sometimes, she would ask for twenty-five flights, even though her team could never make them because they didn't have fuel. So the captain would feel great about getting half of them and would feel tough, and she still had two extra flights. But then, due to health issues, she had to be replaced. Her successor would become agitated during negotiations with the captain, was a little more easily intimidated, and was forceful without knowing how to press the captain strategically for his objectives. He was thrown into this role without wanting it, without liking it, and the consequences were substantial: the replacement's lack of negotiation skills relative to his predecessor severely impacted the humanitarian organization's capacity to bring in flights.

Humanitarian professionals are frequently thrust into high-stakes negotiations for which they are completely unprepared. Historically, humanitarian organizations have relied on luck and the hope that aid workers will find their own way toward developing negotiation expertise. As the above vignette—relayed by a former emergency medical fieldworker interviewed for this article—illustrates, humanitarian organizations are sometimes lucky, sometimes unlucky. For the first time in the history of the humanitarian sector, leaders of aid agencies around the world have finally begun to develop and deliver comprehensive training and support materials matched to the challenges of humanitarian negotiations. Humanitarian negotiation, still an underdeveloped domain, is now receiving much needed attention.

Several organizations—including the HD Centre on Humanitarian Dialogue, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and Mercy Corps—have produced guidance materials on humanitarian negotiation (see CCHN 2018; Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004; Mc Hugh and Bessler 2006; Mercy Corps 2018). Another recent development is the launch of the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN),

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an outgrowth of the Strategic Partnership on Humanitarian Negotiation, which involves the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Médecins Sans Frontières, the World Food Programme, the HD Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Building on previous research and policy work on humanitarian negotiation, CCHN aims to create a “safe, informal and neutral space to discuss and review humanitarian-negotiation and conflict-mediation processes” and “to facilitate the emergence of a global community of practice among professionals engaged in” this domain (<https://frontline-negotiations.org/portfolio/whoweare/>).

Additionally, there is valuable case study research that illuminates the numerous challenges and dilemmas that practitioners negotiating in the field have faced (Cutts 1999; Jamal 2000; Richardson 2000; Minear and Smith 2007; Magone, Neuman, and Weissman 2012; Acuto 2014; Carter and Haver 2016). Indeed, humanitarian professionals often struggle in their efforts to engage with recalcitrant governments or non-state armed groups (NSAGs), navigate compromises when humanitarian principles are at stake, address legal uncertainty when negotiating with NSAGs designated as terrorist groups, undertake internal negotiations to cultivate a unified organizational approach toward external counterparts, and coordinate with other humanitarian organizations operating in the same field environment (Grace 2015).

These research and professional development measures constitute merely the first steps in a long-term evolutionary process aimed at embracing the importance of negotiation to humanitarian action and directing sufficient resources and institutional support to the cultivation of negotiation capacity. This article seeks to examine this process. Rather than probe the particular challenges and dilemmas of humanitarian negotiation itself—a topic worthy of further examination and analysis—this article will address several basic but thus far underexplored questions. As the humanitarian sector wades more deeply into cultivating negotiation capital, on what core skills should these efforts focus? What challenges might these professional development efforts face? How can these challenges be surmounted?

The article proceeds in eight parts. Part I explains the methods used for the interviews on which this article is based. As a starting point for examining the difficulties of cultivating humanitarian negotiation capacity, Part II examines the “negotiation cognizance gap” that still pervades the humanitarian sector, which is the point of departure. Subsequent parts build on each other with each part adding another dimension relevant to humanitarian negotiation. Part III probes the difficulties of a key question that arises in discussions about closing the “negotiation cognizance gap”: defining humanitarian negotiation.

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Part IV moves from defining the term toward understanding the holistic range of skills that humanitarian negotiation requires. As this section illustrates, there are many ways that humanitarian negotiation constitutes a distinct domain—with its own peculiar dynamics and complexities—within the broader field of negotiation theory and practice. However, even if humanitarian organizations succeed in raising awareness of the importance of humanitarian negotiation, and even if capacity-building efforts do straddle the full range of necessary negotiation capital, aid agencies still must navigate the experiential nature of developing negotiation skills. Part V examines these issues. There is then the difficulty of discerning which lessons should be learned from past humanitarian negotiation practice. Part VI discusses the conundrum of assessing the causal factors at play. And even if the humanitarian sector succeeds in grappling with all of these challenges, there can still be important unintended effects of directing professional and policy attention toward humanitarian negotiation capacity building. Part VII probes these dynamics. Part VIII provides concluding remarks.

## Methods

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with fifty-four humanitarian workers. The interviewee pool consists of field-based practitioners in senior- or mid-level management or operational roles who have worked in situations of armed conflict, including complex emergencies. Several interviewees (eleven total) also discussed experiences working in nonconflict, natural disaster, or health emergency settings. Additionally, interviewees discussed negotiations in contexts involving the protection of detainees, migrants, and refugees far removed from conflict zones; situations of internal violence that did not amount to armed conflict; and postconflict settings. Two interviewees, although not humanitarian negotiators themselves, have been involved in organization-specific initiatives geared toward policy development, the production of methodological guidance, and/or training. Interviewees discussed experiences working or volunteering for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), U.N. agencies, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (including the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies). The operational contexts where interviewees have worked include humanitarian crises in Africa, the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific region, the Americas and the Caribbean, and Europe.

The interviews were conducted between May and November 2016.<sup>1</sup> An interview guide, available in the annex of this article, shaped the discussions, although the interviews were semi-structured and conversational in nature so they did not always conform exactly to the

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guide—reflecting the exploratory nature of the research. The interviews were undertaken remotely over Skype or phone—except for three, which were conducted in person in Cambridge, Massachusetts—and lasted, on average, approximately one hour each. The interviews were audio recorded, except for that of one interviewee who opted not to be recorded. The author, with the assistance of research assistants, produced interview transcripts or summaries and coded these documents for key themes in Dedoose.<sup>2</sup>

## **Closing the “Negotiation Cognizance Gap”**

Negotiation is an essential component of humanitarian action. In the words of one humanitarian practitioner with experience working for international emergency response NGOs in conflict zones in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, “Negotiations on the ground, in the field, are essentially totally necessary, required for anything you want to do while responding to an emergency.” Another interviewee said of his work in various field environments, “I came across negotiations in all of these different locations but in different forms. Whether it’s at a very local level, negotiating with a local policeman at a camp [for refugees or internally displaced persons], or at the higher strategic level, it’s been applicable in all the places where I’ve worked but at very different levels and circumstances.”

However, despite this acknowledgment of the central role that negotiation plays in humanitarian action, interviewees observed the persistence of a phenomenon that one could call a “negotiation cognizance gap.” The essential problem is that many humanitarians do not have negotiation on their conceptual radar at all, meaning that they lack an awareness of the role that negotiation plays in their work. “We don’t probably realize that it is a negotiation most of the time,” one interviewee stated. “We negotiate many things but often don’t think about it that way. We don’t think we are negotiating,” said another, reflecting on a decades-long career in humanitarian field and policy work.

The process of closing this “negotiation cognizance gap” entails three steps. The first step is simply recognizing the possibility that complications and obstacles might arise during the implementation of a humanitarian field operation. One interviewee’s comments reflect a common professional trajectory for humanitarian workers. He noted that, in the early years of his career, working in conflict settings in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s,

I went into this business really blind as a young, eager beaver, enthusiastic humanitarian worker, thinking I would save the world, and had no concept of the need to do humanitarian

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negotiation, or even what it was. So basically, I've grown to understand the importance of it over time, but originally, I had no training in it, no concept of what it was, no knowledge of the rules, et cetera.

In short, the neophyte humanitarian, driven by a desire to do good in the world, might not immediately recognize that interlocutors in the field—including governmental actors, NSAGs, or other community members with which humanitarians must engage to access populations in need—do not always embrace or accept the humanitarian principles that underpin aid agencies' work. On the one hand, humanitarian action is rooted in impartiality (ensuring that humanitarian programming is based on needs), neutrality (refraining from taking sides in a conflict), independence (operating outside the control of political forces), and humanity (endeavoring to mitigate human suffering regardless of where it arises). On the other hand, interlocutors in the field might perceive humanitarian organizations to be politicized or one sided, leading to access obstacles that can impede the implementation of programming. The access obstacles faced by humanitarian actors include bureaucratic impediments, security risks (including the deliberate targeting of aid workers), and the explicit denial of permission to operate (Labonte and Edgerton 2013).

The second step to closing the “negotiation cognizance gap” is to adopt a strategic approach to grappling with obstacles that interlocutors in the field present. Numerous interviewees stated that they tended not to use the word “negotiation” when discussing access and protection issues with colleagues in the field, and instead used alternate vocabulary, thinking of their interactions and objectives through the lens of an “access strategy”; “how we manage relationships”; marketing, by which humanitarians seek to “sell” the idea of what they are doing to local actors; “getting buy-in”; or “getting someone on board.” As these comments suggest, humanitarian practitioners can certainly plan and think about these engagements in a strategic manner without explicitly considering the interactions to be “negotiation.”

In the third step, humanitarian actors explicitly turn to negotiation as a framework to inform strategic thinking and planning. This third step specifically invites the application of tools, guidelines, and practically applied theories drawn from the broader domain of negotiation studies. Along these lines, one interviewee with over a decade of experience working in various headquarters and field positions stated of the detriments of the “negotiation cognizance gap”:

Another challenge I can think of is that we are probably not very conscious that a negotiation is already taking place. We are a bit callous and reckless. The awareness that you are

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actually engaging in a negotiation sometimes is not there. And because of the lack of awareness, we sometimes don't make use of the tools that we actually have, or we don't do the homework. We don't analyze things. We don't prepare ourselves to enter into the negotiation. I think that is a huge danger.

Conversely, another interviewee who has worked in various conflict settings stated that embracing the notion that access discussions are indeed negotiations “encouraged us to undertake a separate set of activities.” In the words of this interviewee, upon conceptually categorizing these interactions as negotiations, “We started doing actor mapping. We started looking at the different personalities and interests and where they fit into the organizational structure. We started looking at techniques and relationship building.” Several interviewees discussed the particular usefulness, in humanitarian contexts, of the “integrative” model of negotiation popularized by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) and dating back to Mary Parker Follett ([1926]1942) and Richard Walton and Robert McKersie (1965). One of these interviewees, who was involved in developing humanitarian negotiation guidance materials, stated

I believe the seven elements of negotiation—relationship, communication, interest, options, standards of legitimacy, alternatives, and commitment—describe any negotiation that is conducted, whether it's formal, non-formal, verbal, nonverbal, in the humanitarian context, in the private sector, or public sector. It describes what is happening .... There are all sorts of cross-cultural challenges, language challenges, and context differences. And I think that impacts the extent to which different elements are used and prioritized, but I think the essential rubric stays the same .... Yes, there are lots of contextual differences. Yes, there are lots of cultural differences. But I believe that the essential framework is still useful for defining what would be a good outcome of a negotiation, preparing for a negotiation, conducting negotiation, and reviewing the process when it's done to figure out what worked well and what could be done better.

The humanitarian sector appears to be generally stuck on the first or second step. There has been a growing acknowledgment of the need to strategically approach obstacles faced during operations. Nevertheless, the interviewees revealed a trend by which humanitarians are often still surprised when such obstacles arise. The third step—by which humanitarians empower themselves to fully mine the depth and breadth of existing negotiation tools and scholarship to enhance their practice—leaves much more room for growth. As noted, a lot is being done on



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humanitarian negotiation research and capacity building. But training opportunities remain scarce for many humanitarians, in particular national staff, who tend to receive less training overall compared to their international colleagues. The “negotiation cognizance gap” persists. More energy must be directed toward closing it.

## Defining Humanitarian Negotiation

Closing the “negotiation cognizance gap” necessarily entails cultivating an understanding of the definition of humanitarian negotiation. However, a certain lack of conceptual clarity persists about what humanitarian negotiation actually means. Various documents—the OCHA and HD Centre handbooks on negotiation, as well as the “Concept Paper” of the CCHN—have offered definitions of the term. But the interview findings show that the perspectives of humanitarian negotiators themselves do not necessarily align with how these documents have conceptually carved out humanitarian negotiation’s definitional ambit. As a starting point, the HD Centre handbook defines humanitarian negotiation as an activity undertaken

- *by humanitarian actors*, such as members of appropriately mandated and impartial organizations such as U.N. agencies, NGOs or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- *for humanitarian objectives*, including humanitarian access, protection, assessment, and assistance, as set out in international humanitarian law;
- *in countries affected by armed conflict*, either of an international or noninternational character; and
- *with the parties to the conflict*, that is, those with power and responsibility for the conduct of war, for the humane treatment of civilians and those *hors de combat* and for the distribution of assistance (Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004: 19).

However, examining each of the above four elements in light of the interview findings illuminates the difficulties of defining humanitarian negotiation in precise terms. The first element—“by humanitarian actors”—is complicated by the fact that one might dispute whether certain organizations are “appropriately mandated and impartial,” as the HD Centre definition specifies. Indeed, one interviewee spoke about the difficulties of “working with people who like to call themselves humanitarians and yet don’t understand humanitarian principles.” Such disputes about who truly understands and abides by humanitarian principles—in particular, impartiality, neutrality, independence, and humanity—can



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be hotly debated. Consequently, such a contested notion is unlikely to serve as a reliable, objective marker for specifically delineating the concept of humanitarian negotiation. It seems that this lack of clarity stems directly from the contestable nature of what constitutes humanitarian action itself. In this sense, the enduring conceptual predicament is an outgrowth of the fact that the field of humanitarianism, unlike, for example, the medical or legal professions, has imprecisely defined the contours of its professional jurisdiction.

One could adopt a qualification articulated in the OCHA handbook, that being that humanitarian negotiations must be “undertaken by *civilians* engaged in managing, coordinating and providing humanitarian assistance and protection” (Mc Hugh and Bessler 2006: 21, emphasis added). The importance of the civilian nature of humanitarian actors is reflected by the words of one interviewee who articulated concerns about governments “trying to rebrand their military as humanitarian agents.” This interviewee expressed a widely held view that “there is something inherently incompatible with the implied principles of humanitarianism and the armed nature of this delivery.” However, one could argue that drawing this conceptual line risks discounting the role that military actors have played, and continue to play, in humanitarian action, whether or not one views this reality as desirable in normative terms.

The second element—“for humanitarian objectives”—can also leave ambiguity about which specific activities should fall under humanitarian negotiation’s conceptual umbrella. Should this domain encompass negotiations focused on shaping laws and policies on the diplomatic level? In this sense, many interviewees interpreted “humanitarian negotiation” broadly to include not only operational engagements directly related to humanitarian assistance and protection but also negotiations with governments on health policies, with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members on drafting resolutions relevant to humanitarian assistance and/or protection, and with governments on creating new international law aiming to facilitate humanitarian action. Furthermore, should one also consider negotiations relevant to the general operations of humanitarian organizations? For example, certain interviewees discussed experiences negotiating donor contracts and dealing with human resource issues.

The CCHN “Concept Paper” places focus on field-based negotiations by articulating the term “frontline negotiations.” However, the specific delineation between “frontline” and other types of negotiations remains unclear. In this sense, the CCHN definition seems to draw from a typology of three different levels discussed in the HD Centre handbook. The first is “high-level strategic,” which entails working with “parties to the

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conflict at the highest political level of the state” (Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004: 21) The second is “mid-level operational,” meaning “regional or district level authorities” (21). The third is “ground-level frontline,” which means “junior level state and armed group authorities or community leaders” (21). Although, turning back to CCHN’s definition of “front-line negotiation,” which encompasses negotiations that “take place at the field level for the most part” (CCHN 2018: 1), the term appears to encompass negotiations that would fall under the HD Centre’s “mid-level operational” and “ground-level frontline” categories.

The third element—“in countries affected by armed conflict”—appears too restrictive in light of the interview findings. As mentioned in this article’s introduction, interviewees also discussed negotiations that occurred in nonconflict, natural disaster, or health emergency settings, or even other nonconflict environments, such as urban contexts. One interviewee discussed his work in a nonconflict urban setting in explicitly humanitarian terms, citing many of the same issues that he had encountered, and that other interviewees discussed, in relation to more traditional humanitarian settings:

When you work in big cities, violence is high ... there are drug trafficking groups and weapon dealers ... in such areas within a big city, the government doesn’t provide any service. No health, no education, nothing. It’s like an island in the middle of the city. So these communities have to fill in these gaps on their own. We were trying to negotiate to obtain a permit from the government to enter and access these areas, which, for them, are considered the enemy. You really have to defend your neutrality and your humanitarian mandate. ... Once you are there, you also have to negotiate with the people managing these isolated areas. They have to understand that you are not coming from the government, that you have nothing to do with the official actors in that country, that you are an international trying to help their community, the community that they are trying to protect with their own law. It’s a game on both sides.

The fourth element—“with the parties to the conflict”—also appears too restrictive. Indeed, interviewees discussed negotiations with a wide array of interlocutor types, including the following:

- Governments or NSAGs that control territory of concern to humanitarian actors
- Community leaders or other prominent local actors
- Other humanitarian organizations (e.g., related to reaching consensus on a coordinated approach or even common “red lines” when engaging with counterparts)

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- Members of affected communities
  - Colleagues within the same organization (related not only to human resource issues but also a wide array of other issues, such as developing an internal consensus regarding an approach on an external negotiation, and coordinating approaches across different units of the same organization)
  - Donors (e.g., turning to donor governments as a source of leverage when obstacles with external counterparts emerge, as well as negotiating donor contracts)
  - Other international actors involved, or with a stake in the context (e.g., a U.N. peacekeeping mission operating in the same field environment)

Furthermore, a lack of clarity exists about the nature of negotiation as an activity. In this sense, the OCHA handbook provides a useful definition of negotiation: “a process of communication and relationship building undertaken with the objective of arriving at an agreed outcome around a particular set of issues, in situations where the parties are not in complete accord on those issues to begin with” (Mc Hugh and Bessler 2006: 5). The three key aspects of negotiation that this definition captures are that the process involves (1) at least two people, (2) who initially disagree, and (3) engage in an interpersonal exchange to try to reach an agreement.

But what “counts” as negotiation and what does not? Interviewees expressed uncertainty and conflicting viewpoints on this question. As one interviewee stated, “I see there being something of a spectrum, and perhaps not all of it can properly be described as negotiation. But where the line exactly falls, I’m not sure.” Another interviewee—a field-worker with experience in conflict and nonconflict settings—elaborated on the notion that the fluid nature of the field environment makes definitional specificity difficult:

I guess I wouldn’t strictly go into a certain situation and say, “now it’s negotiation” or “now it’s touching base.” It kind of merges into a bit of everything. And in different contexts, you often have to engage in a discussion that might turn into a negotiation but you certainly wouldn’t always go into it with that mindset in terms of: “Okay, today we’re negotiating this or that.” Those strict labels, if you think in those terms, you would just get frustrated because it’s constantly changing.

The task of defining humanitarian negotiation in precise terms appears far from simple. Not only can the line that divides humanitarian actors

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from other types of actors prove to be gray and contested, but also, given that humanitarians conceive of humanitarian negotiation in expansive terms, it might not be feasible to specify an exhaustive list of relevant objectives, contexts, and counterparts, as well as a precise notion of what distinguishes negotiation from other types of field-based engagements and activities. Cultivating consensus on this issue would likely prove to be a merely academic exercise with limited practical value. What really matters is whether the conceptual embrace of negotiation yields more proactive and strategic thinking across the humanitarian sector about how to engage most effectively with interlocutors in the field. The rest of this article will examine in more depth the challenges inherent in this process.

### **Cultivating Holistic Negotiation Capital**

What exactly are the skills that humanitarian negotiation requires? This section answers this question by examining the interview findings through the lens of Michael Benoliel's (2017) framework that articulates four types of negotiation capital: cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural. According to Benoliel, cognitive capital "refers to the negotiator's ability to understand, analyse and synthesise the substance or the issues of the negotiation" (56). Emotional capital is "the value inherent in the negotiator's ability to perceive, comprehend, analyse and regulate emotions in the face of emotional challenges in negotiation" (56). Social capital "refers to the inherent value in the negotiator's ability to develop relationships, nurture trust, show respect, be flexible, play fair and build a positive reputation over time" (56). Cultural capital entails "the inherent value in the negotiator's ability to understand the nuances of the stated and unstated values and norms of different cultures and negotiate effectively in complex cultural contexts" (57).

The value of disaggregating negotiation capacity in this manner is suggested by an observation that Benoliel made about the general state of organizational approaches to building negotiation capabilities, that being that "[t]he modern rational approach to negotiation overemphasises the value of logic and rational decisions," giving less attention to other dimensions of negotiation capabilities (56). Although Benoliel focused primarily on corporate organizational environments, the consideration he mentioned is highly relevant to the humanitarian sector as well. The interview findings particularly elucidate the importance of a holistic approach to negotiation capacity building. Humanitarian organizations cannot simply focus on building up one type of negotiation capital. The full range of capital is necessary for humanitarian negotiation success.

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## ***Cognitive Capital***

Cognitive capital is crucial for the humanitarian negotiator. Interviewees stressed a wide spectrum of analytical activities that are important for success. One could dissect these activities into three components. The first component is intensive contextual analysis. As one fieldworker emphasized of his experience working in conflict zones,

Context is everything. To understand access and your ability to have access comes down to your intellectual knowledge of where you're working. You need to divert countless resources, more than would be traditionally seen, to understand the context of where you're trying to work. You have to live and breathe these conflicts. You have to live and breathe the dynamics. If you're going to argue with someone, you need that standpoint to be justified, and that's something that is hard to maintain, to keep that level knowledge. We really need that level of intellectual understanding to be able to position ourselves.

The second component consists of the interests and motivations of the counterpart. As another interviewee, informed by decades of fieldwork in various types of humanitarian crises, stated

The idea of trying to understand the motivations of the other actors, is just standard across all negotiations of any type. It's a big leg up to try and imagine in your mind what are the key factors that are making them act the way they do, in order to try and come up with arguments or reasons that will persuade them towards your position or what you're trying to achieve, and that goes for anything from negotiating at a roadblock to very formal negotiations with a non-state armed actor in the field.

A third component is the substance of the negotiation itself. In this regard, one interviewee highlighted the importance of diligent preparation in a wide range of types of humanitarian negotiation, including negotiating with NSAGs on access, with community leaders on distributing humanitarian assistance, and with states on headquarters agreements. He stated,

You have to come prepared. You have to do your research. You have to do your homework, basically. You cannot go there and have only a basic understanding of a few elements. That means you're going to fail. You have to go there and be as prepared as possible because no matter how prepared you are, you will always face enormous difficulties.

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A key obstacle to leveraging cognitive capital is that governmental and NSAG counterparts, as residents in the country, tend to know more about the context than international staff. As one interviewee mentioned of working in a protracted conflict setting, “They know you better than you know them. They know better how your organization works. They’re usually very good at knowing your limits, and they know how to push your buttons, when you might not know anything about that for them.” In relation to this issue, interviewees highlighted the importance of leveraging national staff, and building relational linkages with other local actors, who are likely to have more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the relevant actors and the overall context.

The high turnover rate prevalent throughout the humanitarian sector further fuels the difficulties, on the humanitarian side, of adequately analyzing interlocutors, as well as the context more broadly. In the words of one interviewee, “We don’t pass along the institutional knowledge of who the players are, and what power lies where.” Therefore, the route toward promoting cognitive capital is twofold, involving, at the individual level, practitioners deepening their analytical skills, and at the organizational level, devising processes to retain institutional memory and offering opportunities for peer-to-peer support to cultivate context-specific cognitive capital during particular negotiation processes.

Moreover, an analysis of an interlocutor can reveal inherently incompatible interests. Interviewees spoke about the difficulties of negotiating with autocratic governments and terroristic NSAGs. As one interviewee explained, “In some environments you’re negotiating with a government that does not want you to work in an area, regardless of the impact of your activities. In fact, the impact can be a negative thing because they want these people to suffer, they want these people to die.” Another interviewee mentioned that his NGO, after exploring the possibility of engaging in humanitarian negotiation with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), concluded that it would be impossible to establish a dialogue. These comments illustrate the divide that can occur between humanitarian negotiators and counterparts who do not appear to have an interest in or appreciation for humanitarian action. Still, other interviewees discussed some negotiation progress with dictatorial regimes and extremist NSAGs, suggesting that negotiation tools do exist that humanitarians can employ with such interlocutors.

### ***Emotional Capital***

Regarding emotional capital, many interviewees spoke about the importance of remaining calm and controlling their emotions during negotiations. However, emotions are not only problems to be managed. Rather—as Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (2006), for example,

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emphasize—emotions can also be actively leveraged to move a negotiation forward. One interviewee spoke about the importance of passion in this regard. “This can be contagious,” he said. “That’s important. It also helps motivate you to find a solution to go the extra mile, to be creative.” Empathy is also crucial. As one interviewee stated—indicating the mutually reinforcing nature of empathy, as emotional capital, and analytical abilities, as cognitive capital—“That means you are able to put your feet in the shoes of the other party. If you cannot understand the rationale behind your interlocutor’s behavior, it will be very difficult.”

Emotional capital can also refer to managing the emotional and psychological strain that can result from the intense nature of the field environment. One interviewee with extensive field experience working on issues related to displaced persons discussed the importance of “making sure you’re in the right state of mind going in and also physically—if you didn’t sleep the night before, or you have malaria and you’re on medication, I wouldn’t advise you to start negotiating. I would advise you to take rest and send somebody else.” This interviewee also discussed the psychological resilience required in high-stakes humanitarian negotiations, in particular, when human lives are on the line. Speaking about one drawn-out negotiation involving the movement of a group of people, many of whose lives were at risk due to deteriorating health conditions, this interviewee stated,

I was challenged to a point which I didn’t think I could do it anymore. I think it took a lot of soul searching to try to get up the next day after being told, for whatever reason, you couldn’t move the people the next day. You had to dig deep. You had to look inside yourself and find whatever power you could find and get yourself back out there to negotiate again. And I think that comes both from inside you, it’s an innate type thing, but it’s something you can learn over time.

Another fieldworker highlighted humanitarian negotiators’ lack of control over the ever-present possibility of failure in negotiation, saying,

Keep it in the back of your mind—at least, what I have learned, through many negotiations where I have failed—that this is not the end of the world. Obviously, you know whatever negotiation in which you’re engaging might affect the lives of people. Yes, that is true. But that does not mean that you control the negotiation. And once you understand that, the frustration and the psychological effects of that will be less harsh and less devastating. You have to understand that failure is always an option and that you have to learn to work around it. You have to understand it and see how to move around it and look to the next level, the next round of negotiations.



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Mitigating the psychological toll that humanitarian negotiation can take on a fieldworker is a multidimensional process. As suggested by the quotes above, there is an individual aspect in that one can consciously cultivate this dimension of emotional capital. But also important are the organizational aspects: namely, facilitating an organizational environment conducive to mindfulness about self-care and the creation and/or maintenance of institutional support mechanisms for staff working in stressful contexts. And finally, there is a sector-wide aspect. Indeed, a community of practice such as that envisaged by CCHN can be oriented toward not only analytical processes of learning lessons from past experiences but also emotionally processing particularly vexing field experiences.

### ***Social Capital***

The social element is a core aspect of humanitarian negotiation. In the words of one interviewee, “The more that we can build relationships of trust and respect and credibility, it really does position us for a stronger negotiation.” Another interviewee, in comments that indicate the particular relevance of Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese’s (1975) theoretical examination of different stages of developing interpersonal relationships, highlighted the importance of the relationship-building process as a means toward opening up space for a fruitful negotiation:

Your first meeting is always role-playing. You’re both playing a role. He or she will be playing the role of representing the government. You are playing the role of the humanitarian. That’s how it goes initially. Once you start to peel away some of those layers, through personal relationships, in those conversations, you show an understanding .... You break the ice. You build a bond, build rapport. From there, at times, you have situations where space opens up. To build that connection, to show that understanding, and to get out of that initial role-playing that you both engage in from the beginning. Once you’re able to shed that role to a certain extent and just connect on a personal level, then that’s when the space opens up.

As a core aspect of this relationship-building process, many interviewees emphasized the importance of exhibiting respect and humility. As one interviewee recommended, “Even if you personally don’t like who they are or what they stand for, recognize that they are a group that’s potentially powerful. And whether you like that or not, if you don’t show respect, they’re not going to listen to you.” However, this interviewee also mentioned that, in his field experience, he has sought to strike a balance between forging a personal bond built on mutual respect and demonstrating firmness to make clear that “We’re not just going to give you everything you want.” As he stated,

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We rely on them, partly for security, partly for permission to deliver a project and to sign off on your project. But at the same time, you don't necessarily want to give them everything that they want. That's really difficult, treading that fine balance between keeping them on your side and understanding they also have to deliver on certain things .... What I usually do moving into a new area with a new government actor is, the first thing they ask for, I push back. Just to say, "Okay, let's be clear that we're not just going to give in on everything." ... But it's a very tricky balance. You don't want to upset them either.

Furthermore, social capital can encompass the skills required not only to forge fruitful relationships, foster trust, and build a positive reputation but also to mitigate the potential negative effects of undertaking these activities effectively. One interviewee highlighted the fact that forging a strong personal bond can carry significant risks:

In some situations, having a relationship is also problematic in the same context. When they feel that, because they have a relationship with you, they can basically ask anything—to the point that another counterpart in the authority was almost hinting, basically actually asking for a bribe. And during those kinds of situations, it becomes more difficult, when you have a relationship with that person, to say no.

These comments make evident the fact that social capital entails the ability not only to develop, but also to set boundaries around, the relationships that one forges with counterparts in the field.

### ***Cultural Capital***

Cultural knowledge is another essential asset for success in humanitarian negotiation, especially for international staff entering into a foreign context. In the words of one interviewee, an international staffer who has worked in Africa and Central Asia, "Cultural awareness is key, and it's actually not necessarily outward stuff, very visible stuff, like not shaking hands with women. It's whatever is lying underneath, and developing cultural awareness, taking time to learn that when you're going into a new country program."

Context specificity is important, as one interviewee stated: "You cannot negotiate the same way with Asians, Africans, states and armed groups with different identities. You have to be culturally sensitive." Furthermore, missteps can set a negotiation back, as another interviewee mentioned: "If you're a Westerner coming into a conservative society and are offensive on a number of cultural levels, that can be very hurtful. Basic respect, basic understanding of the patterns, of the habits is important."

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Various interviewees discussed experiences entering a country where he or she had not previously worked, and even in light of peer-to-peer and organizational support received, found a dearth of guidance in terms of the particular cultural dynamics of negotiation processes in that context. It is thus especially crucial for international staff to develop working relationships, and even partnerships, with people—including national staff and other local actors—who have an in-depth familiarity with, and experience in, the cultural environment. One interviewee stated of this point,

In these environments, international staff will not speak the right language. Whilst there's a lot of criticism of the humanitarian sector for not having language specialists or cultural specialists, I think that's just a reality, and part of the strength of the sector is that you can share experience between cultures, between environments and contexts, and that's actually hugely rich. So I don't necessarily see it as something which has to change. I just see it as something that we have to manage. So getting that marriage right between nationals and internationals, in every part of the business, but particularly negotiations, is critical.

Another important aspect of leveraging cultural capital relates to understanding the impact of diversity in terms of the negotiating team's profile. As one interviewee stated about the role of gender, depending on the cultural context, "Your gender can help ... but it can go both ways. It can put you in a more disadvantaged position. Sometimes it's more advantageous." On the one hand, in some conservative contexts, interlocutors have refused to engage with female humanitarian practitioners. One female interviewee recounted working in a country where "the other person would rather talk to my driver, who is a male, than talk to me, even though I'm the country representative or the project leader, simply because I'm a woman and it's degrading for him to speak to me." On the other hand, there can be an advantageous "surprise effect" when operating in male-dominated contexts, due to the fact, as one interviewee stated, "that you're such an anomaly that sometimes you get different access."

These findings confirm earlier research in the nascent field of humanitarian negotiation studies that has examined the "double-edged sword" in humanitarian negotiations (Du Pasquier 2016: 14). As Federica du Pasquier has highlighted, females have found their gender to be advantageous when negotiating with male counterparts in certain contexts, due to the fact that—in addition to the aforementioned "surprise effect"—there seemed to be an absence of a sense of rivalry, a greater

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potential to use charm in the negotiation, and a sense that a female negotiator had more credibility in carrying the humanitarian message (14). Conversely, though, female negotiators discussed contexts in which counterparts perceived them as naïve or as interlocutors without credibility (14–15). There can also be greater challenges in terms of setting boundaries to establish the purely professional nature of the relationship (14–15). Additionally, women discussed negotiations with female counterparts in which gender appeared to facilitate forging a bond with the interlocutor (16). However, in other contexts, negotiators found that the approaches that had worked with male counterparts were ineffective when engaging with females, and as a result, progress in negotiations was more difficult to attain (14–15).

The interviews also reveal the relevance of other aspects of diversity. One interviewee, reflecting more broadly on the role of diversity in this regard, stated, “There are some contexts where, because of who you are, you have more credibility, goodwill, or favor. Sometimes that’s because of what country you come from, because of what faith tradition you’re in, because of ethnicity, or because of the language you speak.” Regarding nationality, one American interviewee worked in a country where “they found it very difficult to say no to an American. That’s why I had to do all the negotiations.” In contrast, another interviewee discussed negotiations in a different country where “some nationalities—for example, Americans—are a non-starter, no matter the personality of the negotiator. They will simply not negotiate with certain nationalities.” In terms of the ethnic composition of the negotiating team, one interviewee relayed an experience in which, when engaging with counterparts, due to the ethnicity of one member of the negotiating team, “People wouldn’t even shake his hand. You take him out of the negotiation, the negotiation goes in an entirely different direction. We just had the wrong person in that role, based on what was happening culturally, contextually in that place. Those nuances are often not recognized.” These comments suggest the need for diversity in the field team and mindfulness about determining whom on the humanitarian side will lead, participate in, and be present for the negotiation.

### **Managing the “Experiential Learning Paradox”**

Even if organizations direct sufficient resources to closing the “negotiation cognizance gap,” and even if attention is paid to cultivating the full range of negotiation capital, another issue remains: the “experiential learning paradox.” Humanitarian organizations that invest heavily in training will still need to navigate this issue.

The “experiential learning paradox” arises due to a key tension inherent in humanitarian negotiation. On the one hand, in the words of

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one practitioner, negotiation is “really important, and you can’t undercut it at all. Every word has an importance, and the way you deal with people has a lot of value and impact. Even unspoken signs are really important.” For this reason, ideally, only skilled negotiators would undertake the task. On the other hand, cultivating negotiation competency is an experiential learning process in which failure, and learning from mistakes, plays a key role. As one interviewee said simply, “We get skills by doing it .... All of my skills, I have learned by doing it.” Another interviewee stated, when asked about how humanitarians have developed their negotiation skills, “One discovers that a lot of it is simply individuals who have been thrown into situations and have somehow learned to swim and fly by themselves.”

The “experiential learning paradox” thus refers to the fact that, in light of the inherently experiential nature of developing negotiation capacity, humanitarians will need to engage in negotiation before they possess expertise to do so. Even if aid agencies commit themselves to training, the real training comes from doing. This paradox is aggravated by the fact that, although it might be ideal to have a select coterie of expert negotiators solely responsible for negotiations, the realities of the field environment require negotiation from a broader set of aid workers. Such a scenario is by no means unique to negotiation. Indeed, experiential learning is an essential component of professional development in a wide array of professional fields. However, considered in tandem with the persistence of the “negotiation cognizance gap,” the risk is that humanitarian organizations will not effectively mitigate the “experiential learning paradox.”

There was indeed great variation across interviewees in terms of their exposure to capacity-building activities. Some had participated in trainings, workshops, or on-the-job mentorships that they had found to be incredibly valuable. Others had received no professional development related to negotiation whatsoever. One such interviewee stated that negotiation training would be helpful to learn “just the fact that it happens, and at all levels,” noting that simply “getting it on the radar” would be useful. Echoing this sentiment, another interviewee stated, “I’m surprised that there’s not more training on negotiation, even as a way of thinking about what the conversation is.” Interviewees’ comments indicate the importance of a multipronged approach toward capacity building that involves a combination of adequate induction training, on-the-job mentorships, opportunities to observe negotiations before participating in them, debriefs in which professionals can reflect on their negotiation experiences, and trainings offered on an ongoing basis.

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One interviewee emphasized the long-term nature of the negotiation learning curve, stating, “You can’t just study a book on negotiation or read a Harvard study on negotiation and then immediately begin to apply that in a complex environment.” For this interviewee, “a lot of practice and gaining confidence” was crucial to his process of developing skills. Comments from another interviewee confirm this notion. After decades of field experience, she had recently participated in her first one-day negotiation workshop and said of the experience, “I saw a whole lot of tools. You know when someone takes your thought process and partitions it out for you so you become more deliberate about it? To me, that was really, really useful.” Indeed, cultivating negotiation competency requires that training be placed in conversation with practitioners’ trial-and-error experiences, in order to feed into a career-long process of learning lessons from past successes and mistakes. In short, just as Hallam Movius and Lawrence Susskind (2009) have emphasized about approaches to cultivating negotiation capacity, it is important to view “negotiation as a core organizational competence, not just as one more individual skill” (2).

### **Confronting the “Puzzle of Generalizability”**

Even if the “negotiation cognizance gap” has been closed, the importance of holistic negotiation capital has been embraced, and practitioners, with sufficient organizational support, direct substantial energy toward learning lessons from past experiences to mitigate the “experiential learning paradox,” it is difficult to know what lessons one should learn. One interviewee expressed frustration with colleagues whom she has observed reading material on negotiation but then proceeding to make the same mistakes in future practice. These practitioners, she noted, had trouble linking this material to their own experiences and would erroneously blame their failures on irrelevant factors, thus avoiding critical self-reflection. Taking this notion further, another interviewee asserted that it is sometimes impossible to accurately discern which factors drive outcomes. Given the vast array of factors that can potentially shape negotiation processes (e.g., negotiation skills, organizational reputation, or personal connections), this interviewee stated that, upon evaluating an effective negotiation, “You don’t know what the piece is that has made that work, which makes it hard to identify the skills and hard to train for it.”

Furthermore, negotiators cannot know what would have occurred if other options in a negotiation—for example, using a different approach or replacing the negotiator with one who had a different identity profile—had been pursued. In this sense, the “fundamental problem of causal inference” is relevant to analyzing past negotiation experiences



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(see Holland 1986; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Dunning 2012). This “fundamental problem” is that negotiators, obviously, cannot go back in time to test the possibility that a different approach would have been effective. Therefore, if a negotiation fails to reach a satisfactory outcome, it is impossible to know with certainty whether success was ever possible at all.

Can useful generalizations be drawn at all from negotiation experiences? In response to this question, interviewees fell into three camps. The first camp leaned toward context specificity. One interviewee fitting this category had over a decade of experience working in various humanitarian crises in Africa and stated, “I’m not sure you can make a generalization. I think that every context is different and every actor you have before you is different.” Another interviewee with decades of experience working in the field forcefully concurred: “What makes negotiation particularly complicated is that it will never be the same .... This is an important point: trying to replicate and impose those models in a different context, thinking that it’s going to yield the same result because it’s the same situation. That’s a recipe for failure, I’m afraid.”

A second camp expressed a more mixed viewpoint, accepting that some lessons can be carried forward, while noting that others cannot and that these two aspects can be difficult to untangle. In this vein, one interviewee stated, “I think there’s a lot that can be taken from different contexts. But also, assumptions I’ve made here [based on past experiences] have been completely wrong.”

A third camp leaned heavily toward the value of informed generalizations. In the words of one interviewee, “I’m always a bit wary of people who cite context as being so special. In my experience, and I can say after twenty years, I can make extrapolations based on my experience: the similarities are far, far greater than the differences.” Another interviewee, squarely in agreement, criticized the “context-specificity” perspective:

The problem in my work is, everybody will say ... “Unless you’ve worked here a long time, you don’t know how to negotiate here.” That’s actually not the case. A lot of people who have been here for years are just so burned out, somebody should just give them a pension. They’re just really burned out. It’s a mixed bag to have been here a long time. There are principles that work really well here that worked well [elsewhere] .... They’re not unique. People in my line of work want to say, “It’s unique. That was context-specific.” It’s really not.

Hence, the “puzzle of generalizability” constitutes the final link in the negotiation capacity-building chain. Two particular approaches—in



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addition to the capacity-building measures already mentioned (e.g., induction trainings, on-the-job mentorships, opportunities to observe negotiations before undertaking the task, and trainings and workshops offered on an ongoing basis)—are likely to move the humanitarian sector closer to a more informed approach to this puzzle. First, organization-wide, or even sector-wide, peer-to-peer engagement could offer the potential for practitioners, through professional exchanges across contexts, to gain insight into which elements are generalizable and which ones are not. Indeed, such an effort could assist in discerning trends in negotiations across different contexts and involving different substantive issues and interlocutor types. Second, scientific research and analysis of past negotiations, or even experimental studies that model humanitarian negotiation processes, will infuse a greater degree of rigor into this process. It is important that the pathway forward is rooted in an informed assessment of what has transpired in the past.

However, when envisioning efforts to share professional perspectives on past experiences, the confidentiality of humanitarian negotiations presents an obstacle in need of surmounting. On this point, numerous interviewees highlighted the sensitive nature of their negotiations. One interviewee said, “People are more comfortable moving their positions if it is confidential,” a comment that indicates that confidentiality can be an essential component for success. Interviewees also discussed a range of possible repercussions if confidentiality is not maintained. An interviewee spoke of the importance of maintaining confidentiality in order to avoid the risk of “a security issue for your counterparts.” There is also the possibility that confidentiality can be driven by concerns about legal repercussions due to counterterrorism restrictions encompassing NSAGs with which humanitarians have engaged. There is, as one interviewee stated, “a culture of secrecy” that can inhibit interorganizational coordination. This interviewee perceived, “I think that’s due partly to the fact that it’s a process where you compromise your identity, you negotiate things which you know you shouldn’t be giving away but you have to give away, and you probably don’t want to do that openly.” In at least one context, a lack of trust inhibited information sharing with colleagues even within the same organization.

Thus, there is a tension between the confidentiality demands at the operational level and the information sharing required for an effective organization- and sector-wide professional development process. As David Fairman (2016) has stated, one can envisage this issue in terms of two interrelated tensions. The first, related to the “puzzle of generalizability,” is the tension between the need for “situational judgment” (the elements of negotiation that “must be dealt with case by case”) and “standard negotiating procedure” (the “elements of negotiation strategy

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[that] can be specified in guidance”). The second is the tension between “constructive ambiguity” (by which humanitarian actors adopt a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to their negotiation experiences) and “organizational coherence and learning” (by which humanitarians seek to “orchestrate strategy and roles” and “learn together”) (Fairman 2016). The words of one interviewee eloquently summarize this tension:

Especially in the extreme, extreme situations where you need to be very secretive and very confidential, and you cannot share the information even with your peers—for example, in a hostage negotiation situation, you cannot share that information—it comes with a lot of loneliness. Sometimes, you need the emotional and psychological support of someone who’s been there, who’s done that, and who can tell you, “Listen, this is how I did it.” So all of these assets, I think, today are very important.

These comments indicate that, on the one hand, various aforementioned operational considerations can lead humanitarians, as one interviewee stated, to keep “our cards close to our chest.” On the other hand, this “culture of secrecy”—even if driven by legitimate operational, security, and/or legal concerns—can stand in the way of efforts to provide negotiators with much needed professional support.

### **Rejecting the Temptation to Deflect Introspection**

A final consideration for humanitarian practitioners as they traverse the negotiation capacity-building pathway is to continually embrace professional reflection regarding broader aspects of their work. The professional discourse on humanitarian negotiation risks assuming the duality that the humanitarians are “good” and the interlocutors blocking access or driving civilian protection concerns are “bad.” Indeed, focusing on surmounting externally imposed obstacles can deflect attention away from much needed internal policy reflection across the humanitarian sector.

However, the actions of humanitarian organizations themselves can actually play a role in driving access obstacles faced in the field. In a given context, a humanitarian organization might actually align itself with a particular party to the conflict, thus straying from the fundamental principles that supposedly guide humanitarian work. Such a dynamic—in addition to insufficient engagement with local actors, as well as a securitized approach to programming given prevalent attacks against aid workers—has fueled access obstruction in Somalia, for example (Tronc, Grace, and Nahikian 2018). Humanitarian programming can also feed into a war economy, prolong a conflict, and fuel insecurity

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for civilians in the field of operation (Lischer 2007; Pérouse de Montclos 2014). Moreover, humanitarian organizations, in their engagements with local actors, have sometimes been exclusionary, paternalistic, and even abusive toward the local population that they are mandated to serve (Tronc, Grace, and Nahikian 2019).

The challenge for humanitarian organizations in this regard is, concurrent with ongoing humanitarian negotiation capacity building, to continually grapple with the vast array of ethical considerations inherent in humanitarian action. Humanitarian negotiation is about implementing what humanitarian organizations have planned. But it is also important for humanitarian organizations to interrogate what exactly it is that they are planning, with a strategic view of consequences of their work in the environments where they operate. These important strands of policy discourse must continue alongside one another.

These comments suggest the peculiar dilemmas that humanitarian negotiation brings forth, distinguishing this class of negotiations from negotiations in other spheres, whether political, legal, or economic. Humanitarian action is driven by the desire and duty to alleviate suffering. But organizations across the humanitarian sector fiercely debate where the line lies between, first, a negotiation outcome that alleviates suffering, and second, an outcome that ultimately inflicts more suffering on civilians. For example, when an aid agency seeks to operate on the territory of a dictatorial regime bent on controlling access and manipulating humanitarian activities for its own ends—as in Syria—is it worth it to remain and serve whatever segment of the civilian population can be assisted? How much of a compromise is too far? These issues, which humanitarian organizations perpetually debate with one another, live at the core of humanitarian negotiation as a process. All negotiations involve dilemmas, but the dilemmas that humanitarian workers face are sharpened by the crisis contexts—beset by human suffering and violence—in which humanitarians operate.

## **Conclusion**

The humanitarian sector cannot rely on luck for successful humanitarian negotiation outcomes. As the vignette presented in the beginning of this article illustrates, luck ran out when the original negotiator's replacement, equally untrained but lacking natural negotiation instincts, was less effective at pressing the captain to maximize the humanitarian organization's influence over the flight schedule. The humanitarian sector has begun to take control of and steer the much-needed process of professional development. The findings of this article aim to inform questions about how and where humanitarian organizations should direct negotiation capacity-building resources moving forward.

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A holistic approach is necessary. In terms of conceptualizing the scope of humanitarian negotiation, the interview findings indicate that one should not view this domain as applicable only to engagements with governments and NSAGs in the context of armed conflicts. Indeed, practitioners face difficulties when negotiating with numerous types of interlocutors about a wide range of substantive issues in several different types of contexts, including not only armed conflicts but also non-conflict, natural disaster, and health emergency settings, and even other contexts such as urban settings beset by gang violence.

It is also clear that humanitarian organizations should not limit trainings, workshops, and guidance to the cognitive dimension. Other types of negotiation capital—emotional, social, and cultural—are also crucial aspects of negotiation competence. Furthermore, the process of cultivating capital is both individual and organizational in nature. On the individual level, it is important for practitioners to devote themselves to a career-long process of developing, sharpening, and maintaining a negotiation skill set. At the organizational level, it is important to devote sufficient resources to facilitate this process and to develop sufficient institutional memory, so that lessons learned can be carried forward.

Furthermore, the pathway forward should be multifaceted. Induction trainings, guidance documents, workshops offered on an ongoing basis, informal and formal professional mentorships, and postnegotiation debriefs will all need to play a role in the negotiation capacity-building process. The aim should be to sufficiently equip practitioners with relevant tools before they negotiate, facilitate the process of learning lessons on an ongoing basis over the course of practitioners' different negotiation experiences, and ensure that forums exist where past negotiation experiences can be shared. And finally, all of these efforts should not distract attention from other important policy discussions centered around mitigating unintended consequences of humanitarian work. Indeed, humanitarian negotiation is only the “how” portion of the discussion. Simultaneous investment in the “what” portion of the policy discussion will keep humanitarians oriented toward the overarching aim of maximizing the impact and effectiveness of their work.

An entirely novel field of negotiation has arisen. It remains to be seen how successful the humanitarian sector will be in realizing the creation of a fully developed humanitarian negotiation ecosystem. Negotiation scholarship offers a wealth of lessons from which humanitarians can learn. The next phase in the growth of this field—as humanitarian negotiation moves from infancy to the next step in its maturation process—will be to probe these analytical synergies more deeply. The challenges of humanitarian negotiations arise in time-sensitive, fragile, and contentious contexts, where human lives are at stake, deep values

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are salient, and cultures collide. Humanitarian negotiations will benefit as negotiation scholars and practitioners bring their expertise into this context, and in turn, humanitarian negotiations hold great promise for advancing theory, policy, and practice in the broader field of negotiation scholarship.

## NOTES

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## Annex

### Interview Guide

The below questions shaped the structure of the interviews conducted for this article. It is important to note that the interviews were semi-structured and conversational in nature so did not always exactly conform to the guide.

1. Can you begin by providing us with an overview of the contexts you have operated in where humanitarian negotiation has been relevant to your work?
2. What have been the objectives of the negotiations in which you have engaged?
3. When you first began in the humanitarian sector, to what extent did you perceive that negotiation would be relevant to your work?
4. What is your perspective now on humanitarian negotiation, in terms of its importance and the role it plays in humanitarian action?
5. What accounts for a successful negotiation? Is there a key ingredient? Or key ingredients? (Ask follow-up questions to flesh out details if necessary.)

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6. If you had to identify the top three to five key challenges/dilemmas you have experienced in your negotiations, what would they be? (Ask follow-up questions to flesh out details if necessary.)
  7. How would you describe your approach to grappling with these challenges and dilemmas? (Go through each challenge/dilemma one by one.)
  8. Looking at the different contexts in which you have worked, do these factors (challenges, dilemmas, key ingredients) vary from context to context? What are the similarities and differences across different countries or regions?
  9. Do you perceive that these factors vary depending on whether you are negotiating with a government versus an armed group?
  10. Do these factors vary based on the type of negotiation being conducted?
  11. What are the key skills that you perceive to be most important for practitioners to develop in order to hone their negotiation skills?
  12. How have you acquired the skills that you have in negotiation? (If necessary, follow up asking specifically about professional development, informal mentorships, trainings).
  13. What would you want to see develop (if anything) in terms of the professionalization of negotiation practices?
  14. What would you want to see in terms of research on the practice of humanitarian negotiation? If you could propose your dream research project in this area for Harvard to undertake, what would that be?
  15. If you could give advice to a new humanitarian negotiator, what would that advice be?
  16. Is there anything else you would like to add?