HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

# Humanitarian Mini MBA: leading a humanitarian organisation

## Course handout · Week 11 : Strategic negotiation, advocacy and coordination

A leadership programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours): leadership, strategy, project cycle, MEAL, finance and donor budgets, compliance and fraud, resource mobilisation, supply chain, HR and safeguarding, risk and security, negotiation and advocacy, change and governance. Corrected numerical exercises, three demanding monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

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# Week 11 : Strategic negotiation, advocacy and coordination

**Objectives**

- Prepare and conduct high-stakes negotiations (access, donors, authorities, partners) with the tools of principled negotiation and the CCHN.
- Design an evidence-based advocacy strategy: objective, targets, allies, messages, channels and risk management.
- Exert influence within the humanitarian architecture: clusters, programme cycle, NGO forums and coordination with development and peace actors.

## Principled negotiation applied to humanitarian leaders

The method of **Fisher and Ury** (Getting to Yes, 1981) rests on four principles: separate the people from the problem, focus on **interests**, not positions, invent **options** for mutual gain, use **objective criteria**. It adds a central concept: the **BATNA** (best alternative to a negotiated agreement). You never accept an agreement worse than your BATNA, and you try to improve yours before negotiating.

The **zone of possible agreement** (ZOPA) is the space between the two parties' limits. Example: a donor offers to cover 5% indirect costs; the NGO cannot go below 9% without a deficit; the donor can in fact go up to 10% with justification. The ZOPA runs from 9 to 10%; an argument based on objective criteria (rates applied by comparable donors, audited real costs) makes it possible to reach the top of the zone.

Humanitarian leaders negotiate with very different counterparts: donors (budgets, conditions, flexibility), authorities (registration, permits, exemptions, access), armed groups (access, safety of staff and beneficiaries), partners (division of roles and costs), unions and staff. In every case, the **humanitarian principles** set red lines that negotiation cannot cross: selecting beneficiaries according to need, the organisation's control of aid, no participation in hostilities.

## Access negotiations: the CCHN method

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) offers a framework with three roles and three stages. The **roles**: the frontline negotiator, the mandator who sets the mandate and red lines, and the support team. The **stages**: analyse the environment (island of agreement, iceberg of positions, reasoning and motives, network of influence), plan (objectives, limits, scenarios), then negotiate and follow up on the agreement.

At leadership level, the challenge is **consistency**: several teams within the organisation, and several organisations, often negotiate with the same actors. Separate concessions (accepting a tax on convoys, an imposed list) weaken everyone. Hence the value of **joint operating**

**principles** and coordinated positions within the access working group or the humanitarian country team.

OCHA guidance and sector practice recommend documenting each negotiation (who, when, what, commitments), clearly distinguishing the dialogue with armed groups needed for access from any form of support, and informing donors of the organisation's policy on the matter.

> A leadership mistake: sending a negotiator alone without a clear mandate, then disowning the agreement obtained. This destroys the credibility of the negotiator and of the organisation with the counterpart for a long time.

## Designing an advocacy strategy

Advocacy aims to change **policies**, **practices** or **funding decisions** for the benefit of affected people. An advocacy strategy includes:

1. **A problem and evidence**: field data, testimonies collected with consent, legal analysis.
2. **A precise objective**: "that the Ministry of the Interior lifts the requirement for prior authorisation of every distribution trip in provinces X and Y within six months", rather than "improve humanitarian access".
3. **Targets**: decision-makers (who can change the situation) and influencers (who can convince them), identified through power analysis.
4. **Allies**: other NGOs, agencies, local organisations, women's networks, media.
5. **Messages** adapted to each target, with a clear ask.
6. **Channels and tactics**: quiet diplomacy, position papers, bilateral briefings, public statements, campaigns. You generally start with the quiet channels.
7. **A risk analysis**: safety of staff and sources, access, registration, relations with donors.
8. **Progress indicators**: changes in discourse, commitments obtained, actual implementation.

The dilemma between **public denunciation** and **operational presence** is a classic. Médecins Sans Frontières has historically claimed public witnessing; the ICRC favours confidential dialogue with the parties. Each organisation must decide according to its mandate and principles, but always by assessing the effect on affected people and on exposed staff.

## The coordination architecture and how to carry weight in it

Since the 2005 humanitarian reform, the **cluster approach** organises coordination by sector (health, nutrition, water and sanitation, protection, shelter, food security, logistics, education, camp coordination and camp management, emergency telecommunications, early recovery), under the leadership of the **humanitarian country team** chaired by the humanitarian coordinator. The **humanitarian programme cycle** (humanitarian needs overview, response plan, resource mobilisation, monitoring, evaluation) structures the year.

For an NGO leader, coordination is a **strategic investment**: it gives access to information, to priority-setting, to pooled funds (whose allocations rely on cluster analysis) and to influence.

National NGOs are still under-represented in decision-making bodies; NGO forums and the Grand Bargain encourage their participation and cluster co-leadership.

The **humanitarian-development-peace nexus**, promoted by the 2019 OECD DAC recommendation, calls for better links between emergency response, reducing long-term risks and needs, and conflict prevention, without compromising humanitarian principles. This involves other counterparts (line ministries, development banks, peace actors) and other time horizons.

## Influence, communication and organisational diplomacy

A leader's influence rests on **credibility** (reliable data, field presence, consistency), on **relationships** (a network built before you need it) and on the ability to **put forward solutions**, not just problems. The six principles of influence described by Cialdini (reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity) help explain why some arguments land, but they must be used ethically.

An effective **position paper** fits on two pages: the problem in three sentences with a strong figure, its human consequences, the causes, and three precise recommendations addressed to named actors. A **briefing** for a diplomat or a donor takes five minutes: situation, stakes, precise ask, what you bring.

Leaders' public communication follows rules: check every figure, protect people's identities, never endanger staff who remain on site, coordinate with other organisations when the message is collective, and prepare the difficult questions (targeting, fraud, security) before any interview.

## Exercise: negotiating with a donor and an advocacy plan

**Part 1 – Negotiation.** A donor offers USD 1.5 M of funding for 12 months, with 5% indirect costs, no budget for the security of local partners and a requirement to vet beneficiaries by name against sanctions lists. Your BATNA: pooled fund financing of USD 600,000 with 7% indirect costs, high probability. Your real indirect cost rate is 11%. Prepare the negotiation: both parties' interests, likely ZOPA on indirect costs, objective criteria, creative options, red lines, and what would make you refuse.

**Part 2 – Advocacy.** The authorities of a province require prior authorisation for every distribution, with an average delay of 19 days; 31% of the quarter's distributions were delayed by more than two weeks. Build a one-page advocacy strategy following the eight elements covered this week.

**Answer key.** Part 1: vetting beneficiaries against lists is a red line (impartiality): propose instead vetting of partners and suppliers, in line with sector practice. On indirect costs, rely on the rates of comparable donors and on the audited real rate; propose that certain costs (security, field support) be recognised as shared direct costs, which can satisfy the donor's interest in showing a low indirect rate. Refuse if the agreement remains worse than the BATNA once the cost deficit is taken into account. Part 2: a quantified objective (annual authorisation per programme or a maximum delay of 72 hours), targets (governor, ministry, humanitarian coordinator), allies (NGO forum, cluster, donors), evidence (delay data and human consequences), quiet channels first.

## Key takeaways

- Interests rather than positions, options, objective criteria; never accept less than your BATNA.
- ZOPA: the space between the two parties' limits; objective criteria help reach its top.
- Access: clear roles (negotiator, mandator, support), red lines, coordinated positions between organisations.
- Advocacy: evidence, precise objective, targets, allies, messages, channels, risks, indicators.
- Coordination is a strategic investment: information, priorities, pooled funds, influence.

## Quiz

1. An NGO can accept a minimum of 8% indirect costs; the donor can go up to a maximum of 7%. What is the situation?
   A. The ZOPA runs from 7 to 8%
   B. There is no ZOPA on this criterion alone: the negotiation must be widened (shared direct costs, duration, other lines) or the BATNA used
   C. The NGO must accept 7%
   D. The donor must accept 8%

2. Which is a well-formulated advocacy objective?
   A. Improve humanitarian access
   B. Raise the authorities' awareness of the importance of aid
   C. Obtain from the governorate of province X a maximum delay of 72 hours for distribution authorisations by March
   D. Denounce administrative obstacles

3. Several NGOs separately agree to pay a "contribution" at an armed group's checkpoints. The main problem is:
   A. The cost for each NGO
   B. These separate concessions fund a party to the conflict, breach the principles and weaken the position of all organisations; a common position is needed
   C. The lack of receipts
   D. Slow convoys

4. The humanitarian programme cycle starts with:
   A. The response plan
   B. The humanitarian needs overview
   C. The final evaluation
   D. The funding appeal

5. The 2019 OECD DAC recommendation on the nexus aims to:
   A. Merge humanitarian and military budgets
   B. Better link humanitarian action, development and peace, without compromising humanitarian principles
   C. Replace humanitarian aid with loans
   D. Abolish clusters

**Quiz answers :** 1. B · 2. C · 3. B · 4. B · 5. B