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Humanitarian Leader

Diversity and Humanitarian Negotiation

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The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present.

Abstract

The humanitarian sector has steadily pushed forward with efforts to cultivate negotiation capacity among aid workers. However, considerations of how the profile of the humanitarian negotiator might shape negotiation outcomes have been, at best, in the background of ongoing professional discussions or, at worst, entirely overlooked. This working paper aims to fill this gap. Based on semi-structured interviews and survey data, this working paper assesses the role of identity characteristics in humanitarian negotiation processes. As the interview and survey results suggest, a negotiator's profile—including identity characteristics and past professional experiences—can shape counterparts' perceptions of humanitarian negotiators; fuel humanitarians' own biases and stereotypes of their interlocutors; and feed into challenging internal organisational dynamics, as humanitarian organisations seek to promote diversity and foster inclusion and belonging among staff.

Leadership relevance

Conducting frontline negotiations is one of the most complex endeavours that humanitarian leaders undertake. The biases and stereotypes that counterparts bring to bear, as well as those that drive humanitarian negotiators themselves, can be a crucial source of strength or weakness during humanitarian negotiation processes. Indeed, an important component of humanitarian leadership is understanding the biases that shape interlocutors' perceptions of humanitarians, the biases (conscious or unconscious) shaping humanitarians' own perceptions and worldviews, and how to harness the diverse traits—due to innate characteristics or acquired experiences—across a humanitarian team to work toward better humanitarian negotiation outcomes.

Introduction

The ability of humanitarian actors to negotiate issues of access and protection hinges to a large degree on the negotiator's identity characteristics and acquired experiences. However, as the humanitarian sector has steadily pushed forward with efforts to cultivate negotiation capacity among aid workers (Grace 2020), considerations of how the profile of the humanitarian negotiator might shape negotiation outcomes have been generally relegated to the background of ongoing professional discussions. This working paper suggests the need to bring notions of diversity from the periphery to the core of how humanitarians conceive of humanitarian negotiation processes.¹

Based on semi-structured interviews, as well as an online survey completed by humanitarian practitioners, this working paper proceeds in three parts.² Part one presents general observations on the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation. Part two details four key dimensions of diversity that interviewees and survey respondents deemed to be relevant to humanitarian negotiation. Part three offers concluding remarks.

General observations on the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation

This section presents five general observations that survey respondents and interviewees offered on the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation. First, there was an overwhelming sense that various dimensions of diversity are important to consider, although a recognition of their relevance varies across contexts. The majority of respondents to the online survey (68%) felt that certain characteristics and profiles could give humanitarian negotiators a clear advantage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, while 11.5% believed there were certain attributes and characteristics that are more likely to put the negotiators in that region at a disadvantage. Meanwhile, 6% believed it was context specific, while the remaining 5% believed identity characteristics did not really matter. When asked whether, in their view, greater diversity in negotiation teams is an asset in humanitarian negotiations, 95% responded that it mattered either a lot or a great deal. At the same time, 95% of the survey respondents believed that any negotiation performance or action brings about more positive results if approached through an ethnic, religious or cultural lens, at least in the MENA region, which was the survey's geographic focus. Interestingly, a majority of survey respondents (63%) felt that diversity in a team brings with it a set of challenges and opportunities that are specific to humanitarian work in the MENA region, while 21% differed with that view, and 15% stated that it was very situation specific.

1 See Appendix for a definition of the term 'diversity'.

2 See Appendix for more details on the research methodology.

On the context-specific nature of these issues, one interviewee's words capture a widely held sentiment: "There are some contexts where, because of who you are, you have more credibility, goodwill or favour. 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." In another interviewee's words: "In some countries it's all about personal relationships, and in other countries, it's completely institutional. The guy in front of you doesn't care if it's you or your colleague [who he works with] if the institution has been there for 20 or 30 years, which is the case in some countries. In others, it's very personalised, very individual." Moreover, humanitarian negotiators can lack access to the right interlocutor. Some interviewees highlighted that, in their experience, it has been 'rare' or 'very rare' that they are able to engage with an actual decisionmaker. Other interviewees noted variations across different negotiation experiences in this regard. "Sometimes you sit across from someone that is clearly responsible and can do something about it, and sometimes that person has absolutely no power over the situation," an interviewee explained.

Second, humanitarians acknowledge the overall lack of adequate diversity across the sector, especially in senior leadership positions, where local staff, women, and people with disabilities are underrepresented (Blackney et al. 2019). Turning to the online survey, 68% of respondents were managers of teams that consisted of five or more personnel; a clear majority of these managers (77%) believed that their teams were sufficiently diverse. At the same time, a little over half of the survey respondents (53%) stated that their organisation's staff involved in humanitarian negotiations were only moderately diverse. Interviewees acknowledged that their organisations were making some efforts, citing different examples, such as having score cards against which headquarters can assess the organisation's move toward a more diverse staff.

Third, it is important to emphasise the dynamics of intersectionality when examining this topic. The European Inter-Agency Security Forum (EISF) provides a useful framework for reflecting on diversity in the context of humanitarian work, noting that "all aid workers have a diverse profile brought about by the intersectionality between the different aspects of their personal identities. This intersectional personal identity furthermore interplays with an individual's organisational role and their relationship to their operational context" (EISF 2018: 6). Interviewees highlighted the value of leveraging different elements that collectively make up one's identity, emphasising the most useful dimensions of their profile that can allow the negotiator to connect with their counterparts and downplaying those that counterparts could perceive as 'problem' points. In the words of one interviewee, "What makes the difference is the blend of different elements, in which you stress interchangeably one element more than another depending on the context you are in. Some people are skilled in how they do that. They are good chefs d'orchestre."

Fourth, the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation flows in two directions, impacting not only how interlocutors perceive humanitarians but also how humanitarians perceive their interlocutors. Available evidence on the relationship between diversity and successful organisational outcomes suggests that biases and stereotyping are rife throughout the humanitarian sector,³ and survey respondents expressed a range of views regarding the extent to which humanitarian actors' biases shape their perceptions of negotiation counterparts. In this regard, 47% of the online survey responders believed that humanitarian negotiators generally tend to stereotype their counterparts in the early phases of negotiation, but quickly adjust their beliefs based on subsequent information collection. Meanwhile, 32% of survey respondents maintained that humanitarian negotiators stereotype their counterparts in general throughout the negotiation process based on the counterpart's behaviour, position and attributes. Finally, only 16% believed that humanitarian negotiators approach their counterparts with a completely clean slate and open mind, while 5% could not be categorical about the approach either way.

All noted, however, that stereotyping also represents a normal fallback position in the face of uncertainty and insufficient preparation. Stereotyping counterparts can be a useful cognitive shortcut in situations when negotiation preparation time is limited, but frontline negotiators are also aware that it can become unconstructive when stereotyping hinders efforts to weigh different options in a systematic and rational manner. One of the common stereotypes among international staff, as one interviewee described, is that the population living in territory controlled by an armed actor is sympathetic to that actor's political views or ideology. In a similar vein, one interviewee recounted an experience in which humanitarian actors initially underestimated a rebel-group commander's sympathies toward child protection objectives:

In one country, we were negotiating with an armed rebel group to get access. We spoke to them about the importance of protecting children. After listening to us, the commander that was present spoke about how he joined the rebel group. He said he joined at the age of 14, so he was in the same age group as the children we were speaking about. He said it had saved his life because they had nothing to eat in his family. Had we known this about him, we could have pitched the matter differently.

Fifth, interviewees discussed challenges related to internal dimensions of diversity, inclusion and belonging, as well as effective participation in tackling unconscious biases.⁴ In frontline settings, context

analysis and decision-making processes are influenced by a confluence of uncertainty and a sense of urgency; the result can be less participatory decision-making. Inclusion and belonging can be casualties of these pressures, an issue that this working paper will examine in greater detail.

Four key dimensions of diversity

This section, drawing from the interview and survey data, discusses four dimensions of identity that humanitarian negotiators themselves have highlighted as worthy of examination. This section groups these dimensions into four overarching categories: sexual orientation and gender identity; nationality, ethnicity and cultural background; age and physical attributes; and professional skills and profile.

Sexual orientation and gender identity

Interviewees for this working paper affirmed—as previous research has also highlighted—that gender can impact a negotiation due to not only the counterpart's perceptions of gender, including bias against females, but also the capacities that the negotiator brings to bear that might be linked to one's gender identity (Du Pasquier 2016). In the words of one interviewee, in some contexts, “You need, as a woman, to prove more or show more or work more on being accepted as an interlocutor.” Some female interviewees discussed experiences when negotiations stalled until a female negotiator was replaced by a man. An interviewee discussed working in a culturally conservative context in the MENA region, stating, “As a woman, you simply will not get the same access that men will get in these places. You won't get the same respect. You're not viewed in the same way. So it's the same question of context and culture. We have to be honest in these places that, if you send a woman in, she's not necessarily going to get the same results as a man.”

Furthermore, gender can become an ‘aggravating’ factor when combined with other dimensions of a negotiator's profile. For example, a young woman may not be taken seriously in certain situations. Similarly, being an unmarried woman can also be a disadvantage in other situations, as some counterparts may make the assumption that there is ‘something wrong’ with the individual. Nevertheless, several interviewees highlighted that gender is not as important as other factors: for example, the negotiator's competence, experience and suitability for the position in question. Another decisive factor, particularly with culturally conservative armed groups, is whether the woman was perceived to be respectful of local norms. Interestingly, as one interviewee pointed out, being a foreign woman also had its advantages as they were considered in some parts of the MENA region as a ‘third gender’ that did not fit into the perceived male or female gender boxes and for which the usual social and cultural norms and rules were suspended.

³ See Appendix for definitions of the terms ‘bias’ and ‘stereotyping’.

⁴ See Appendix for definitions of the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘belonging’.

Female interviewees discussed many instances in which they were able to overcome their counterpart's biases. In this sense, even in culturally conservative contexts, gender can be more of a surmountable challenge to navigate than a definitive impediment. When some female negotiators felt that their gender could be perceived as a weakness, they would try to restore the balance by casually mentioning the numerous 'tough duty stations' where they have served in the past, in order to stress the point that they had enough relevant experience and that they were competent to do the job.

Many interviewees were of the view that the female gender does not necessarily constitute a 'disabling' factor at all. Several interviewees made the point that Middle Eastern cultures had women leading negotiation teams at different moments throughout history (for example, in Iran and Palestine, et cetera). Various interviewees also pointed out the distinct advantage that women have in frontline negotiation settings. In particular, a woman can be in a better negotiating position because she can 'disarm' her counterpart. She may not project the same sheer force or flex muscles like a man; therefore, she can appear less threatening. Additionally, there can be a 'surprise effect' linked to a biased counterpart's low expectations of a female humanitarian negotiator. As one interviewee stated, "Since I am a woman, my counterparts do not expect me to carry a deep and thorough conversation. At the beginning of a conversation, I spend some time discussing general humanitarian issues. Then I take them through the military and political issues. They come along with me, but they are always a bit surprised." A humanitarian aid worker mentioned that she would deliberately put on make-up when she went to meet local authorities, as she felt that she would be better received. One especially interesting issue that emerged in the interviews was the special place that pregnant female negotiators occupied, at least in the MENA region, where the position of a mother is revered. One interviewee stated, "In one country, a woman was able to negotiate an access document. The national counterparts said that they had liked the fact that she was a pregnant woman. This is a respected role."

A woman can be in a better negotiating position because she can 'disarm' her counterpart

There can also be a gendered dimension to information gathering. One interviewee specified that, especially in a conservative country where females are 'invisible' outside of domestic environments, it can be easier for a woman to go deeper in relation to cultural understanding. Interviewees pointed out that women can be better situated to assess the humanitarian needs of the households of affected populations, as they can speak with the females in the households who are mothers and wives. Even men would feel more comfortable raising

certain personal issues with female humanitarian staff than with males. For example, during prison visits (such as those carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross), male detainees have sometimes been more comfortable opening up about their relationships with their wives and other female relatives when engaging with female delegates.

In light of these dynamics, interviewees recommended that humanitarian organisations undertake thorough analyses of counterparts' profiles to more effectively anticipate interlocutors' reactions in advance. When navigating such decisions, though, a humanitarian organisation risks becoming complicit in discriminatory behaviour. Some interviewees stated that it was important for humanitarian organisations to continue to include female negotiators, even when it is not comfortable for their counterparts, so as not to 'feed the beast' and become 'accomplices' in counterparts' biases. There is a view that a responsibility exists to represent the values for which the organisation stands and to 'push the envelope further' in order to demonstrate that the organisation supports women and is committed to empowering them.

Gender can be more of a surmountable challenge to navigate than a definitive impediment.

These issues are particularly pertinent because, as a number of interviewees pointed out, sexist behaviour remains prevalent inside many organisations across the humanitarian sector. An interviewee described how proposals made by a competent woman were not taken on board when she made them; however, they were taken on board when a man made the same suggestion. Being local and a woman can be challenging when attempting to impose one's authority over the males in a team, particularly when male colleagues are older than a female supervisor.

Female interviewees stated that it takes 'thick skin' not to be discouraged by such behaviour and to insist on being taken seriously and treated fairly. "Women have to fight for space to be in frontline negotiations, as there is a tendency to try and limit the space that they have gained in that respect," one interviewee stated. Some women in more senior roles also perpetuate these gender dynamics themselves; they are part of the 'boys club' (that is, behaving like men or undermining women themselves). The feeling that women are judged by different yardsticks places female frontline negotiators under enormous professional pressure. An interviewee stated of this dynamic, "Women's failures speak for all women while a man's failure speaks for himself." According to one female interviewee, "The realisation that we are judged differently puts a lot of pressure on us. When I was younger, I was very anxious and always expected to be judged strictly even if it was not the case.

It became a self-fulfilling prophecy at times.” Indeed, some female negotiators ‘fall into the trap’ by embodying the roles that are expected of them and that limit them from reaching their full potential as negotiators.

With sexual identity and gender identification issues, there can be a clash between key organisational values and needs

Interviewees also noted challenges that can arise for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or asexual (LGBTQIA) humanitarian negotiators. Homosexuality is a capital offence in several countries in regions where humanitarian organisations operate, meaning LGBTQIA staff cannot be open about their sexual orientation in such contexts. Previous research has illuminated the discrimination and violence directed toward LGBTQIA staff from within their organisations (Mazurana and Donnelly 2017). One interviewee asserted that his organisation was trying to push diversity without sufficient sensitivity or understanding of the context on the ground: for example, sending two people who were gay to a location such as Darfur. In his view, while this may have served the organisational and politically correct agenda, it was ultimately counterproductive. In this sense, with sexual identity and gender identification issues, there can be a clash between key organisational values and needs. On the one hand, organisational efforts to promote diversity, inclusion and belonging as values include adopting an approach of equity during hiring processes. On the other hand, there can be a need to bring profile considerations into staffing decisions for reasons of staff security and effectiveness, given biases prevalent in the area of operation.

Nationality, ethnicity and cultural background

Nationality can have a clear influence on humanitarian negotiation processes. Interviewees relayed that being a national of a country that “does not trigger strong negative reactions” or that is associated with “positive” impressions in the counterpart can be very useful. One interviewee mentioned, “In Yemen, being half North-African would open doors. They would tell me, ‘you are one of us.’” Conversely, being a foreigner can be a liability. An interviewee discussed that difficulties can arise from “being labelled as a Western organisation, or potentially a Christian organisation,” a challenge when engaging with “different communities who have not been in touch with us or connected to our work and our mandate”.

Interviewees discussed similar dynamics for other dimensions of ethnicity, considered here in broad terms—reflecting the expansive definition that many political scientists have adopted of the term “ethnicity” (Varshney 2003: 4–5)—to include elements such as race, skin colour and religion. At least two interviewees asserted that their organisations have not sufficiently

considered religious differences within a given country, particularly those that may exist within the same religion (for example the sectarian divisions in Islam). Some humanitarian organisations erroneously assume that it is sufficient to send a Muslim to a Muslim country, regardless of their sect. One interviewee discussed the perceived benefits of sending a non-Muslim to a Muslim country beset by sectarian violence:

I was a representative for a particular protection agency in Iraq. In 2003, when I was about to leave, I discussed with my senior managers who should come to replace me. My recommendation was that they should bring a Christian Iraqi to replace me so that the person could deal with both Sunni Iraqis and Shiite Iraqis. Being one or the other would not in my view enable the person to be firm with his/her constituencies. They did not listen to me, and in my view that compromised their role in the country after that.

Adaptability, when possible, can be an asset. One interviewee mentioned that her local colleague, a Christian, would adopt a Muslim name when he operated in a rebel-controlled area.

Many of the negotiators interviewed, specifically in relation to experiences in the MENA region, agreed that the colour of one’s skin can influence counterparts’ perceptions. One interviewee mentioned that dark-skinned staff had to be “the right colour of dark” from the perspective of the counterpart. Interviewees also noted that counterparts all too often assume that negotiators with darker skin are the more junior members of the team.

For international staff, there is the ever-present difficulty of cultivating an in-depth understanding of the local cultural context. Cultural dynamics can impact how negotiations unfold, including in relation to levels of formality and emotional expression, appetite for risk-taking, notions of justice, how negotiators interpret events or behaviours during the negotiation, selling styles, expectations regarding rewards and incentives, and preferences in terms of written formal agreements versus more informal oral understandings (for example, see Slim 2003; Pottier 2006; and Grace et al. 2015). One interviewee explained, “You cannot negotiate the same way with Asians, Africans, states and armed groups with different identities. You have to be culturally sensitive.” Another interviewee relayed a not uncommon occurrence relevant for humanitarian negotiators from Western countries, stating, “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.” Cultural awareness also extends beyond matters of decorum, also playing into the negotiator’s ability to analyse the context, the interlocutor and the issues at stake. In one interviewee’s words:

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. It's key to not rush into a negotiation but to spend the time and develop those skills ... I have seen, in Afghanistan, courses to guide people in the cultural awareness, and not just about the physical stuff, but about how a business transaction is done, the honour/shame element, how contracts are agreed, all of those kinds of issues. There are some trainings that exist, but there probably should be more to develop people's skills in that aspect, so they know what's going on in the room, what's not being said, so they can assess how to approach a situation.

Relatedly, interviewees discussed the impact of linguistic barriers. A language gap can be beneficial. For example, resorting to an interpreter can 'buy time' to think about one's response or one's next intervention during a negotiation. This can be useful when the conversation with your counterpart is tense or delicate. However, interviewees emphasised the detriments of a language gap. One interviewee explained:

Many things can get lost in translation. And that also limits the ability to cultivate a good discussion. For example, in some cases you can crack a joke. There was one example where the person was citing a poem, and how do you translate that? The translator didn't know what to do with that. But the fact that the other person was citing a poem, I believe he was trying to set the tone or the atmosphere of the discussion.

The interview and survey results show a widespread acceptance of the primordial role that the interpreter plays in the negotiation team and process. A skilled interpreter can pass messages to the counterpart in a way that the foreign frontline negotiator facing a language barrier cannot. If a humanitarian negotiator engages effectively with the interpreter, the latter can be instrumental in helping the negotiator understand the culturally specific reactions of the counterpart. On the downside, a lack of 'chemistry' between the interpreter and the counterpart in a negotiation is likely to negatively affect the outcome of the negotiation. Therefore, it is very important for the interpreter to be given the opportunity to cultivate a relationship of trust with the counterpart, which is not always done in practice, nor is it always possible. In terms of joint preparation with the interpreter, interviewees pointed to the importance of agreeing on a "division of labour" and using role-playing exercises with their interpreters ahead of sensitive meetings.

These dynamics of cultural awareness and language point toward the inherent value of national staff in humanitarian negotiation processes. One interviewee recounted the usefulness of local staff in a particular challenging context, stating:

We needed to discuss the text of a humanitarian appeal with a certain government that we knew would be tricky. Hence, after we would have our first official round of talks with them, we would send a seasoned local colleague who would explain to the government that certain things they wanted funded would not fly and that if they were to insist it would not help their interests.

Indeed, local staff can be best placed to use arguments rooted in norms that are relevant to the local population. A Western interviewee with extensive knowledge of Islamic studies discussed integrating norms rooted in the Quran into the discourse of his negotiations. He said, "Sometimes, even though I have studied Islamic studies, I don't have the legitimacy to persuade, to convince people of my point. The fact that it's me, a Westerner, saying it is the main reason why it's not convincing enough." The ultimate insight in such contexts is, he noted, "Who says something is at least as important as what is being said."

Local staff also sometimes resort to invoking the names of family members to 'buy goodwill'. As one interviewee recounted, "One of my close family members was a head of a political group, though he was not a member of the government. Still, everyone knew that he was a clean person and had an excellent reputation. I would sometimes say that I am his relative. It helped us to get access." But there is a delicate balance to strike in this regard, as one interviewee highlighted, "When we engage with communities [it is important] that we don't engage too closely that we become part of their internal decision-making process and lose the perception that we are independent and neutral in relation to them."

As these comments suggest, the embeddedness of local staff within the communities that humanitarian programs aim to serve can be a liability. As one interviewee said pointedly, "Your national staff can also have bias, that's another thing of which you have to be aware. They might be more biased towards some parts of the community than others, maybe because of similar ethnic backgrounds or because they think some people are more affected than others."

The converse challenge is that international staff can exhibit bias, as well as an unwarranted lack of trust and consideration, toward their local colleagues. Several interviewees felt that national staff have not been sufficiently consulted during negotiations, even when they clearly have useful expertise. One interviewee recounted:

I have been in a situation where we arrived at a checkpoint with two male international staff. I am a senior national staff who knows the area well. They got out of the car and started to talk to the persons manning the checkpoints without even consulting me on what to do, when it was clear that I was the most knowledgeable among them. I think this happened because I am a national staff and a female.

A number of national staff interviewed for this study added that, in the absence of an atmosphere of mutual trust and openness, they would not automatically volunteer their views on the viability of a certain idea or course of action, especially if their views conflicted with those of senior management. Instead, they sometimes would afterward try to quietly “repair the damage” that, in their view, had been caused. Especially given that international staff hold the vast majority of senior humanitarian leadership positions (Blackney et al. 2019: 10), national staff with valuable insights about the local context, on many occasions, feel they have been excluded from pertinent decision-making processes. Respondents believed there have been many occasions in which biases have led internationals to underestimate the competencies and capabilities of local staff. Interviewees also highlighted that international staff tend to stereotype their own national staff in terms of how they imagine their web of ‘loyalties’. Some national staff who were interviewed did not feel that the international staff sufficiently trusted them to do their work with impartiality and independence.

Several interviewees emphasised that the onus is on international staff to be proactive in this regard. As one interviewee elaborated, “From the perspective of someone coming into a different culture, it’s not realising that you need that partnership with national colleagues. And I don’t mean just working with a national colleague. I really think it’s a partnering up with national colleagues that will help you out.” And yet, “Sometimes people are afraid to ask,” an interviewee mentioned of international staff, adding, “And don’t just ask once. Ask everyone you can ask and collate the information. Also, sometimes people will only discuss these things if you are close with them, so it is important to make friends.” Compounding this challenge is the sense, as a number of interviewees pointed out, that there is insufficient recognition that most of the humanitarians in international organisations are part of the ‘elite’ and that these organisations keep attracting the elite (particularly people who are from a privileged socio-economic background). The system tends to reproduce itself; this brings with it a certain set of problems, including the fact that humanitarians—international staff, in particular—can be perceived as elitist and inaccessible.

Overall, a common dynamic between international and national staff—and the long route that humanitarian organisations still need to traverse in terms of inclusion and belonging for national staff— is captured in the following interviewee’s words:

We put so much pressure and so much authority and responsibility on the shoulders of our national staff in many of these places, and I think that they really do not get the credit or the respect or the attention that they deserve. Who that person knows, what family they come from, what their ethnic or religious background is can be deciding factors in the negotiation.

One interviewee highlighted that, when tensions arise with a counterpart in a negotiation, “The international has to be the one where the credit or the frustration, the anger, is directed, not the national staff member.” The challenge for national staff in this regard, the interviewee continued, is to “carefully balance being seen to be merely a translator when the messages are hard, while also being an intermediary that is able to build trust with our counterparts”.

Age and physical attributes

Perceptions varied among interviewees about the role of age in humanitarian negotiation. In some situations, being young can work in one’s favour, as counterparts can assume that a young frontline negotiator is less competent. Respondents pointed out that ‘catching them by surprise’ could work by proving one’s competence and authority despite one’s young age. In other situations, younger negotiators perceived that age predisposed counterparts to take the negotiator less seriously in ways that complicated the negotiation process. Other interviewees noted examples of military checkpoints manned by very young men who had a lot of decision-making power, which shows that age is not necessarily viewed as a requirement to elicit respect.

One interviewee pointed toward his physical fitness, among many other elements, as an attribute that has appeared to aid in his efforts to exert firmness in negotiation with armed actors. Conversely, another interviewee mentioned a colleague’s physical appearance as an element that fed into an overall aggressive—and hence, counterproductive—approach. This interviewee explained:

Together with an international staff, I went to see a local counterpart. The international staff I was with already looked like a body builder from an American movie. Then when we arrived, he started to talk down to the counterpart a lot, almost lecturing him [about] what he should do or not do. Our counterpart was very upset by the way he talked to him, which, if we add it to the way he looked, just exacerbated the situation.

It is also worthy to note the policy attention that humanitarian organisations have granted in recent years to promoting inclusion and belonging of differently abled people in humanitarian response programming. For example, the Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, developed in the context of the lead-up to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, articulates a commitment to meaningfully involve people with disabilities in every aspect of humanitarian program design and implementation (Handicap International n.d.).

Professional skills and profile

Whereas the dimensions of diversity thus far discussed relate to identity characteristics, much of the broader literature on diversity in organisations also considers issues such as past and present professional profile,

as well as professional skills (Miller, Burke, and Glick 1998; Mohammed and Ringseis 2001; Olson, Parayitam, and Bao 2007; Mello and Delise 2015). The interviews revealed four particular issues relevant to this dimension of diversity. First, interviewees discussed how their past professional work predisposed them to acknowledge and appreciate the role that negotiation plays in humanitarian action. One interviewee grew up in a household where family members worked in international development. As a result, the interviewee understood “that humanitarian work is all about negotiation and the difficult dilemmas that that entails. Yes, I was ready, in that sense, compared, perhaps, to colleagues who enter the humanitarian world completely new to that context and might have different assumptions in the beginning.” An emergency medical practitioner who was interviewed noted that, in her medical work before entering the humanitarian sector, she was always negotiating with, and for, her patients. She said, “As a professional, you negotiate for the benefit of your patient. It is natural to think that negotiation would be a part of your career.”

Second, past professional history can lend legitimacy to a negotiator’s profile and make it easier to forge an interpersonal connection. This can be the case, for example, when a frontline negotiator with previous military experience negotiates with armed actors. One interviewee articulated the view that military-to-military or police-to-police connections can transcend national and cultural divides.

Third, there can be benefits to assembling a team that cognitively complements one another. One interviewee discussed his experiences working with the same colleagues in multiple contexts. Their varying skillsets and approaches to analysing information and problem-solving proved to be a great asset. He said of his colleagues:

They knew my quirks, they knew my strengths and weaknesses ... My friends and colleagues who have followed me have strengths that I don’t have. They see things differently. Some of them are more deliberate. Some of them are fluent in languages that I’m not fluent in. Some people are experts in particular parts of the world. Some people know a heck of a lot more about a health or nutrition program than I do ...

Fourth, the level of the negotiator’s organisational seniority can be an important dimension of the negotiator’s profile. In this sense, bringing a senior colleague to the negotiation can be a show of respect. One interviewee explained:

When you go to talk to big actors in a country, you need to ensure you come to the table with the biggest director of your organisation, because that shows respect. If I go somewhere to talk to the vice minister of a national department, and I am not the director of my organisation, that person will probably be disappointed because they didn’t meet my boss.

Conversely, having a more senior colleague present can inherently lead to a more tense or charged interaction. One interviewee stated, “Having a foreigner, having senior management there, there are just fewer opportunities, I think. It closes certain doors. It makes it a bit more, not uncomfortable, but as if you have to come to a deal.”

Conclusion

The humanitarian community is simultaneously reflecting on how to best capacitate its staff in negotiation and how to foster diversity, inclusion and belonging in terms of internal organisational policies, as well as approaches to program design and implementation. This working paper has sought to feed into both of these strands of reflections, illustrating how these two issues are, in fact, inherently intertwined. Humanitarian practitioners recognise the relationship between their profile—including their personal characteristics, as well as past professional experiences—and the humanitarian negotiation processes in which they engage. During negotiations, many humanitarians play up or down certain dimensions of their profile, depending on whether they perceive it to be beneficial or a hindrance.

This working paper concludes by highlighting two overarching challenges regarding the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation. One overarching challenge for humanitarian organisations is the potential trade-off between effectiveness and equity. On the one hand, a rights-based approach to working means treating employees in an equitable manner, meaning that one’s competencies should matter and one’s identity characteristics should not. On the other hand, effectiveness could entail making decisions about whom to engage for a negotiation based on the potential biases and stereotypes that counterparts have toward humanitarians and the potential ‘breakthrough’ in negotiations that can be realised through selecting one humanitarian rather than another, based on the aid workers’ identity characteristics. Given that humanitarian organisations will continue to grapple with how far to take the process of bending toward their counterparts’ biases, it is important that empirical research better understand the limits and opportunities of these decisions, and that the results of this research are brought into policy conversations.

A second overarching challenge is how to foster not only diversity but also inclusion and belonging. Promoting diversity is not enough. The more diverse the workforce, the more effort must be placed into building internal cohesion. The tensions that this working paper has explored between international and national staff show clearly the long path ahead for the humanitarian sector in this regard. This challenging process will entail bringing to the surface the biases and stereotypes that humanitarians harbour toward their own colleagues and their counterparts, in order to expose and work through these impediments to effective engagement.

The overall policy implication of this working paper is that humanitarian negotiators should approach the 'diversity' part of the puzzle in a more methodical and structured manner. Diversity is not only skin deep, but it requires a total rethink of the approach to negotiation capacity-building. Profile-blind approaches that ignore the important role of identity characteristics in negotiation processes will only have limited efficacy. Moreover, humanitarian organisations will need to truly make space at the policy-making table for their diverse workforce. A cohesive investment in negotiation capacity-building, diversity, inclusion and belonging will more effectively empower humanitarian organisations to adopt a strategic approach to negotiation processes, better enabling organisations to achieve their ultimate objective: improved assistance to and protection of persons of concern.

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Appendix

Methodology

This working paper is empirically rooted in three sources of data. First, extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with 77 humanitarian actors about their negotiation experiences. These interviews were conducted by Rob Grace in collaboration with Anaïde Nahikian. The interviews were broad in scope, focusing on various aspects of humanitarian negotiation processes and capacity-building, allowing interviewees to raise issues of diversity as they deemed relevant. The interviewee pool includes practitioners with field experience working for United Nations (UN) agencies; international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs); the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement; and professional fora and associations in the humanitarian sector. Interviewees discussed their experiences in multiple contexts, allowing for reflections on how lessons learned in one country may or may not be applicable in other contexts. Interviewees discussed humanitarian operations undertaken around the globe: in Africa (54 interviewees), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (40 interviewees), the Asia/Pacific region (42 interviewees), Europe (13 interviewees) and the Americas (14 interviewees). The numbers presented here reflect the fact that interviewees discussed experiences working in multiple locations.

Second, an online survey focusing specifically on diversity and humanitarian negotiation—and with a geographic focus on the MENA region—was circulated to humanitarian practitioners via the online portal of the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN). The CCHN online portal is accessible by humanitarian actors who are part of CCHN's professional network. The conditions for participation in the survey were that respondents: a) had previous experience in humanitarian negotiation, and b) had worked in the MENA region. The focus on the MENA region allowed for an examination of this issue in a context-specific manner in an area of the world facing numerous complex humanitarian crises. The survey was designed by Reem Alsalem and benefitted from substantive input from Claude Bruderlein, CCHN Director, and Andreas Kaufmann, CCHN Communications Officer. Andreas Kaufmann also provided generous technical support for the development and circulation of the survey.

Eighteen humanitarian negotiators completed the survey. A little over half of the participants (52%) were themselves from the MENA region. Respondents from the MENA region were Lebanese (2 respondents), Syrian (2 respondents), Yemeni (2 respondents), Iraqi (2 respondents), Lebanese-Brazilian (1 respondent), and stateless (1 respondent). The remaining respondents were Swiss (3 respondents), French (2 respondents), Spanish Colombian (1 respondent), Afghan (1 respondent) and Benin (1 respondent). The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed questions seeking to gauge their perspectives on the impact of diversity on humanitarian negotiations.

Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 humanitarian negotiators that have worked in the MENA region. Reem Alsalem conducted these interviews.

Of these, eight were male and five were female. Only 31% were themselves from the region. These interviewees constituted a distinct pool of respondents that had not also filled out the survey. The interviews allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation.

Key terms

Bias: This working paper understands biases to be “mental errors that skew reasoning and typically produce sub-optimal outcomes” (Adler 2005, p. 699).

Diversity: For the purposes of this working paper, borrowing the definition articulated by van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan (2004)—scholars who have examined diversity in other professional settings—“Diversity refers to differences between individuals on any attribute that may lead to the perception that another person is different from self” (1008). As van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan also note, “In principle, diversity thus refers to an almost infinite number of dimensions, ranging from age to nationality, from religious background to functional background, from task skills to relational skills, and from political preference to sexual preference. In practice, however, diversity research has mainly focused on gender, age, race/ethnicity, tenure, educational background, and functional background” (ibid). An important point to highlight is that this conceptualisation of diversity leaves open the question of which identity characteristics are actually relevant, an issue that this working paper probes.

Humanitarian negotiation: Drawing from the definition offered by the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), “[I]nteractions with parties to a conflict and other relevant actors aimed at establishing the presence of humanitarian agencies in conflict environments, ensuring their access to vulnerable groups and facilitating the delivery of assistance and protection activities” (CCHN n.d.). The CCHN definition further elaborates, “These negotiations take place at the field level for the most part and involve a host of both state and non-state actors. They encompass an advocacy component relative to the protection of affected populations as well as a transactional component in setting the logistical and tactical parameters of humanitarian operations” (ibid).

Inclusion: One can understand inclusion to mean “the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore et al. 2011: 1265). The concepts of diversity and inclusion, as the growing body of research on diversity in the humanitarian sector has acknowledged (see Blackney et al. 2019), go hand in hand. The concept of ‘belonging’, referring to “creating a sense of community”, has also entered into the lexicon (McGregor 2019).

Stereotyping: This working paper understands stereotyping to mean “when people automatically assign specific traits or behavior to individuals based on” assumptions about the group (Adler 2005, p. 705).