

## The impact of diversity on frontline negotiations in the MENA region

### INTRODUCTION

The second annual meeting of CCHN held in December 2017 hosted a rich discussion on the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiations. It was particularly focused on gender, as one of the crucial elements of diversity. While it was agreed that gender particularly be taken into consideration and be better leveraged to gain humanitarian access, participants requested the CCHN to examine the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiations more fully. It was therefore retained by the CCHN as one of the themes it would focus on in the course of 2018.<sup>1</sup>

Diversity refers to all the ways in which we differ. “It includes the difference between individuals in how they identify according to gender, age, disability, cultural background, sexual orientation, and social and economic background, profession, education, work experiences, and organisational role<sup>2</sup>.

Diversity is understood to have both visible and invisible elements to it: Visible elements are the ones that are easily noticeable as inherent attributes such as race, gender, and age. Invisible ones are those differences that are acquired in personality, attitudes and values.<sup>3</sup>

While there are numerous definitions of the term “humanitarian negotiation” in academic and policy circles, the Centre of Competence (CCHN) understands humanitarian negotiations as “interactions 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. They 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<sup>4</sup>.

The European Inter-Agency Security Forum (EiSF) provided a useful framework for reflecting about diversity in the context of humanitarian work, reminding us 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<sup>5</sup>”.

### Impact of diversity in businesses

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<sup>1</sup> CCHN, Second Annual Meeting of Frontline Humanitarian Negotiators, 5-6 December 2017, Geneva, Switzerland, <https://frontline-negotiations.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Final-Report-AM-2017-Online-version.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Center of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), What is Humanitarian Negotiation, <https://frontline-negotiations.org/what-is-humanitarian-negotiation-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>4</sup> Center of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN), What is Humanitarian Negotiation, <https://frontline-negotiations.org/what-is-humanitarian-negotiation-2/>.

<sup>5</sup> European Interagency Security Forum (EiSF), Managing the Security of Aid Workers with Diverse Profiles, 2018, p. 7.

The impact of diversity on leadership and operational effectiveness has been the subject of many studies in the private sector. Recent research has shown that high performing teams have both visible and invisible diversity characteristics. Furthermore, diverse leadership teams are widely understood to generate a variety of benefits, including an enhanced ability to solve complex problems as well as able to draw on their different identities to cross boundaries and to make connections that facilitate more effective communication and response operations. Important to note however that, rather than focusing on one aspect of diversity, these teams are diverse across multiple dimensions. At the same time, studies show that having a diverse workforce does not -in itself-produce the required results. Rather, what is needed is an inclusive environment<sup>6</sup>. In this regard, a study carried out by Boston Consulting Group established the following factors that allow diversity to flourish in a company setting such as employment practices, equal pay; participative leadership, with different views being heard and valued; a strategic emphasis on diversity led by the CEO; frequent and open communication; and a culture of openness to new ideas<sup>7</sup>.

As for the humanitarian sector, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of diversity in in that sector. While there is no extensive empirical research on the matter, anecdotal evidence and research indicate that diverse leadership improves the quality of humanitarian response. Significantly it is thought to contribute to a more meaningful engagement with, and representation of all groups within affected populations This includes: a) understanding and utilising local capacity and institutions and b) ensuring that all people feel that they are both seen and heard.

In this regard, diversity is being explored through research from two angles: The internal diversity of the workforce of the humanitarian organisations; and the diversity of humanitarian actors. With regard to the first representation of diversity, the literature suggests that humanitarian leadership is not adequately diverse across gender, ethnicity, race disability or age. The Humanitarian Report index has described the dominance of “Anglo-Saxon” men in key decision-making positions in donor organisations and the UN. As for the latter, discussion around it gained a particular momentum during the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016, when the need for a greater role by local actors in the design, preparedness and response to humanitarian crises was highlighted. The summit also explicitly identified diversity as critical to the proposed multi-year agenda for change.

## METHODOLOGY

A literature review of articles on the relationship between diversity and negotiations was undertaken. Finding specific articles on this issue was challenging as most of the review writings did not address the link of diversity and humanitarian negotiations, but negotiations more generally. Others addressed the interaction between diversity and humanitarian interventions mostly from the cultural and gender angles.

Moreover an online survey on diversity and humanitarian negotiation was posted on the CCHN website. 19 humanitarian negotiators filled it out. The only condition for their participation in the survey was a) having had previous experience in humanitarian negotiation; and b) having worked in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

A little over half of those that participated (52%) were themselves from the MENA region (2 Lebanese; 2 Syrians; 2 Yemeni, 2 Iraqis, 1 Lebanese-Brazilian, and 1 stateless). The remaining were Swiss (3); French (2); Spanish Colombian (1); Afghan (1) and Benin (1).

The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed questions that tried to gauge their views as to the impact of diversity on humanitarian negotiations.

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<sup>6</sup> HAG, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo et al “How diverse leadership teams boost innovation”, The Boston Consulting Group, January 2018, <https://www.bcg.com/en-be/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation.aspx>.

In addition, longer interviews with more open questions were carried out with 13 humanitarian negotiators that have worked in the MENA region. Of these, 8 were male, and 5 were female. Only 31% were themselves from the region. These had not filled out the monkey survey. The interview allowed for a more free conversation and a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between diversity and humanitarian negotiation.

## **ELEMENTS OF DIVERSITY**

When asked whether-in their view-a greater diversity of negotiation teams is an asset in humanitarian negotiations, 95% of responded that it mattered either a lot or a great deal.

The most common diversity related elements that were identified were gender (90% of the respondents); nationality (79% of all respondents); religious affiliation (74%); age (74%); as well as the person's role in society (63%). Others that were also identified - albeit to a lesser extent - were educational background (58% of respondents); and professional background. Humanitarian negotiators interviewed separately in more depth added to these sexual orientation as well as work experience.

Responders to the online survey felt that having certain characteristics and profiles could give the negotiator a clear advantage (68%); while (11.5%) believed they could put the negotiator at a disadvantage. 6% believed it was context specific; while the remaining 5% believed it did not really matter.

All those interviewed highlighted that they put the different elements that collectively made up their identity to the service of the negotiation process, emphasising the most useful ones that would allow them to connect with their counterparts and downplaying those that could be perceived by their counterparts as a "problem" point.

***"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 chef des orchestras".***

There was an agreement among interviewees, however, that a diverse workforce is seen to improve the perception that the interlocutor had of the organisation and to increase the level of trust.

Interestingly, the majority of those who participated in the online survey (63%) felt that diversity in a team brings with it a set of challenges and opportunities that are specific to humanitarian work in the Middle East. 21% differed with that view, and 15% stated that it was very situation specific.

At the same time, 95% of respondents to the online survey believed that any negotiation performance or action brings about more positive results if approached through an ethnic, religious or cultural lens in the MENA region.

Below is a description of the way in which specific elements making up diversity were seen to affect frontline negotiations and be affected by it:

### **Socio-economic background**

A number of interviewees pointed out that there is insufficient recognition that most of the humanitarians in international organisations are part of the "elites" and that these organisations keep attracting the elite (particularly persons who are from a certain socio-economic background). The system tends to reproduce itself. This brings with it a certain set of problems. Humanitarians can be perceived as elitist and inaccessible. This research did not sufficiently explore this issue however, and subsequent research will need to delve into more detail on it to fully understand its influence.

### **Cultural background**

One of the most extensively researched areas is cultural identity and how it influences behaviour. In this respect, a number of researchers have highlighted the differences between individualists<sup>8</sup> and communal cultural paradigms.<sup>9</sup>

In communal cultures, communication -including negotiations - are highly context-sensitive and dependent on the relationships involved, as well as the overall circumstances in which communication occurs. In contrast, communication within individualistic cultures is deemed to be evaluated more based on objective criteria, rather than complex circumstantial factors. They are also likely to be straightforward and results-based<sup>10</sup>.

As for what this means for negotiations, researches do confirm a relationship between national culture and negotiation style and success<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, some research suggests that in communal or collective cultures, negotiating teams focus on developing relationships both within the team and across the table, and thus are less likely to challenge each other. The result is greater harmony and less of the friction needed to generate novel alternatives<sup>12</sup>.

Some practitioners, such as Slim have also looked at the impact of the cultural background on the individual behaviour of a negotiator, particularly when it comes to formality, time, emotional expression, risk taking, notions of justice, and the interpretation given to events<sup>13</sup>. Relating more specifically to behaviour that may affect the negotiation approach of humanitarians, Slim points out that it also affects selling style; expectations regarding reward and incentives; attitudes to bargaining and pricing; as well as approaches to ambiguity<sup>14</sup>. To these, Grace adds that certain cultures stress the importance of a contract, or agreement as the final product of negotiations, other cultures perceive that building a relationship holds greater value<sup>15</sup>.

Cultural views also affect choices. An ongoing project sponsored by Northwestern University's Dispute Resolution Research Center explored the link between process and outcomes - specifically how cultural tendencies lead to certain process choices, which in turn can lead to better or worse negotiation results<sup>16</sup>. The important contribution of this research is that cultural differences in negotiation do not hinge precisely on where a negotiator was born. Rather, they depended on what the negotiator does at the bargaining table. The ability to engage in constructive communication, by revealing and interpreting information - matters much more than the negotiator's nationality<sup>17</sup>.

While participants in the interviews appeared to accept the notion that the cultural backgrounds of those involved in the negotiations had an impact, these interviews did not shed more light on how, and the extent to which they impact them. This is an area that will need to be explored in

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<sup>8</sup> Individualist cultural paradigms hold freedom, the development of the individual personality, self-expression and personal enterprise and achievement as supreme values".

<sup>9</sup> Communal cultural paradigms on the other hand have the welfare of the group and cooperative endeavour as its guiding themes...individual freedom is constrained by duties to family and community. (Grace, p. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Rob Grace, *Understanding Humanitarian Negotiation: Five Analytical Approaches*, Humanitarian Academy at Harvard, 2015, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> *Cross-cultural negotiation skills*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Program on Negotiation Harvard Law School: *International Negotiation and Cross-Cultural Communication Skills for International Business Executives*, 2012, <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/freemium/international-negotiations-cross-cultural-communication-skills-for-international-business-executives/>, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Grace, p. 14

<sup>14</sup> Some cultures find it easier to live with greater levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (Slim, p. 22-24).

<sup>15</sup> Grace, p. 14

<sup>16</sup> *International Negotiations*, p.3

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

more detail, particularly since research carried out so far would suggest that humanitarian organizations have devoted limited resources to promoting an understanding of the local culture in the environments in which humanitarians operate, hindering the ability to adopt well informed, culturally sensitive negotiation approaches<sup>18</sup>.

This said, and as some writers have pointed out, it is important not to fall into the trap of trying to ascribe too many characteristics to certain cultures, as this is a subjective exercise and can often be the result of oversimplification.<sup>19</sup>

### **Linguistic skills**

It was noted that having notions of Arabic in the MENA region, or even mastering it was helpful. Speaking the language conveys to the counterpart that you have made an effort to engage and communicate. It also allows for the engagement with the affected population more easily, particularly when the frontline negotiator has only a few minutes to speak with them, and they take ad hoc approaches rather than structured ones.

At the same time, the inability to speak the language and resorting to an interpreter can “buy time” to think about one’s response or next intervention during a negotiation. This can be useful when the conversation with your counterpart is tense or delicate.

### **Family reputation and family connections**

This is an important and often underrated element. Local staff in particular sometimes resort to invoking the names of a family member to “buy good will”.

**“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.”**

**“I am married to a woman that is from the population where I work. I do bring it up when I deal with local authorities as it opens doors for me.”**

### **Religious beliefs**

Almost all interviewees agreed that there were no negative consequences to a frontline negotiator being a non-Muslim. The only exception was a limited number of situations involving very conservative non-state armed actors. Frontline negotiators adapted accordingly. One interviewee mentioned that her local colleague, a Christian, would adopt a Muslim name when he operated in a rebel controlled area in the country he worked in.

Interestingly, it was the view of at least two interviewees that the sectarian divisions within the Islamic religion are not sufficiently taken into consideration. Some humanitarian organisations just assume erroneously that it is sufficient to send a Muslim to a Muslim country regardless of their sect.

At the same time, frontline negotiators indicated that it is problematic to be openly atheist, and recommended that this be avoided.

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<sup>18</sup> Grace, p. 13

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 13

***“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”.***

### **Being of a certain nationality**

All interviewees agreed that nationality had a clear influence on the frontline negotiation process. As such, being a national of a country that “does not trigger strong negative reactions” in the counterpart can be very useful. Being a national of a country that is associated with “positive” impressions can also be helpful in tricky situations.

***“In Yemen, being half North-African would open doors. They would tell me “you are one of us”.***

***“ We were stopped at a checkpoint manned by local authorities in a Middle Eastern country. They said that we did not have the right license plates on our cars and asked us to turn around. I got out of the car, and I told them that I was Egyptian. The men manning the check-point responded with a smile, saying that they really liked Adel Imam, the actor. They then let us through”.***

***“I met a minister in country X to negotiate access to a certain region in the country I served in. When he found out that I was German, he told me that he appreciated very much Germany’s medical services, as his wife was sick and was seeking treatment in Germany. This was positive as the Minister gave me the bigger benefit of the doubt when discussions got difficult. It also allowed him to overcome his skepticism of us working together. We got the access eventually. If course it was not only down to my nationality, but having a nationality that was associated with something positive in his head opened the door for me”.***

In other instances, being a national of a country that has influence over the actors to a conflict can be helpful as the counterparts to a negotiation know that they can send certain messages to these countries. Looking at the negative implications of this, one interviewee claimed that it is sometimes more complicated to be an Arab national in humanitarian settings in the MENA region, than being from outside of it, given the involvement of many Arab governments in conflicts in the region

On the more negative side, being a national of a former colonial power can be taken against the frontline negotiator. An interviewee said that this was a challenge doing humanitarian work in the 1990s in particular. He had to constantly remind his counterparts that he was not part of it nor responsible for the military and political actions of his government.

### **Being a national staff**

There was a consensus that being a national staff can have a very positive effect on the negotiation process on so many levels. For one, local staff are able to cultivate relations with locally based actors quicker and more effectively. International staff recognise that the local knowledge

of national staff allows the latter to raise the issues in a more effective manner, as they know how to best pitch these issues and from which angle to raise them.

***“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 road 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.”***

The other side of the coin is that if too many sensitive issues are delegated to national staff, it could become a source of risk for them. Asked how they navigated this complex situation, one interviewee responded by saying that they continuously expressed empathy with the suffering of the civilians, while sticking to the line that they are impartial and non-political.

Others interviewed felt that national staff are not sufficiently consulted on aspects of the frontline negotiation, even when they clearly have the expertise.

***“ 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.”***

Furthermore, there is a negative power relation between the counterparts to a negotiation and the frontline local staff that is not sufficiently recognised. Organisations do not sufficiently provide a “duty of care”.

A number of national staff that were interviewed for this study also added that there is no atmosphere of mutual trust and openness, they would not automatically volunteer their views on whether a certain idea or course of action would be good, especially if they hold views that would go against that of their senior management. Instead, they sometimes then try to quietly “repair the damage” that has been caused in their view.

At the same time, some interviewees noted that humanitarian organisation tend to always promote the “same local staff”. One a local staff consolidates his or her favourable position, s/he tend to remain there. Opportunities for other local staff become reduced. At least one interviewer also mentioned that some senior management tend to keep those local staff close to them that will mirror their views about a certain issue.

## **Mannerism**

Mannerism is very important. When combined with other issues it can either be a disabling or an enabling factor.

***“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 at the counterpart a lot, almost lecturing him 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”.***

One important element relating to mannerism is the degree of emotions that frontline negotiators show. The general view was that a level of emotions was useful. On the one hand, displaying too much emotions however gives the impression that one is unpredictable or easily influenced. Finally, some were of the view that making a passionate plea for the reassertion of a humanitarian principle can be useful at times.

Given that it is a double-edged sword, frontline negotiators also realise that they can use this element to offset any negative impact that their other personal attributes may have created.

***“Being a blonde young western woman can potentially work against me. I offset the impact of that by the way I speak and dress. I make a point to dress appropriately for the occasion. I am humble, I show my counterparts respect. I also respect the power dynamics although I do not let them push me over.*”**

In this respect, it was also noted by one interviewee that coming from a non-Western society, means that she could identify with the way of thinking and behaviour in the MENA region, which was similar to her own culture’s approach.

***“The fact that I do not come from a Western society is an advantage in the Middle East. I understand how their societies here function as our Central Asian societies is similar. We do not have this strong regulatory function. Our minds are not fixed. Rather than win-lose we prefer win-win situations.*”**

Finally, there was general agreement that conveying empathy gets the frontline negotiator very far in the MENA region and beyond. A humanitarian negotiator noted that he often moved with cigarette packs even though he did not smoke and handed cigarettes out to the military personnel he would meet. It would help him in establishing rapport.

## Gender

Most of the respondent of the online survey felt that certain negotiations bring more positive results in the MENA region if approached through a gendered lens (79%) which goes a long way to show that gender is an important factor.

On the other hand, humanitarian negotiators that were interviewed at length were of the view that the female gender does not necessary constitute a “disabling” factor as some may have anticipated. Several interviewees made the point that Middle Eastern cultures had women leading negotiation teams at different moments throughout history (e.g., Iran, Palestine, etc). Research supports that position: A recent study by UN Women that looked at the role of women in frontline negotiation and conflict resolution in three MENA countries found that women were engaged in a very dynamic manner in these activities across the region. In other words, women were able to manage, de-escalate, and resolve conflicts at the local level in important ways. This is not to say that it was easy, as it required them to “defy patriarchal boundaries and gender roles, overcoming significant social and structural barriers to bolster local stability and security<sup>20</sup>”.

While some radical armed groups in the Middle East were more resistant than others about dealing with female frontline negotiators, it was not possible to generalise either. In this respect, it was noted that even among these, the military personnel were more wary about engaging with women that the political wing or “civil” representatives of the armed group. Moreover, their rejection of the presence of women negotiators did not manifest itself in a hostile manner. They would simply ignore them; not look at them; or ask for them to be replaced by men.

<sup>20</sup> Tabbara and Rubin, Women on the Frontlines of Conflict Resolution and Negotiation: Community Voices From Syria, Iraq and Yemen, UN Women, June 2018, p. iv, <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/8/women-on-the-frontlines-of-conflict-resolution#view>.



**“ We accessed an area under the control of an armed group that was religiously very conservative. While we were trying to enter the area, the soldiers manning the checkpoint would not talk to the women among us. However once we were inside, they allowed us women to sit with the men and women, and would even pull out their women to speak with us.”**

Gender becomes an “aggravating” factor when combined with other important factors: 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 you”.

This said, interviewees agreed that other elements seemed to be more important per se than the negotiator’s gender such as, for example, the person’s competence, experience and suitability for the position in question. What was also a decisive factor (particularly with conservative armed groups) is whether the woman was perceived to be respectful of their norms.

Many interviewees pointed out the distinctive advantage that women have in frontline negotiation settings: In addition to the different point of view that women bring in analysing a situation, a woman can be in a better negotiating position because she can “disarm” her counterpart. She does not project the same sheer force or flex muscles like a man, and therefore appears less threatening to counterparts in a negotiation. Women seem to be generally more skilled in drawing out information through the use of open questions, as well as being better listeners. Being more feminine would at times also work in favour of the frontline negotiator in question, while appearing more masculine would not. 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.

**“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”.**

Interestingly - and as pointed out by one interviewee - being a foreign woman also had its advantages as they were considered in some parts of the MENA region as a “third gender” for whom the usual social and cultural norms and rules were suspended.

At the same time, when some female negotiators felt that their gender could potentially be perceived a weakness, they would try to restore the balance by casually mentioning the numerous “tough duty stations” that they have served in the past, to stress the point that they had enough relevant experience.

It was also pointed out that women were able to better assess the humanitarian needs of the households of affected populations (as they speak with the females in the households that are mothers and wives). Even men would feel more comfortable raising certain personal issues with female humanitarian staff than with males. For example, in conducting prison visits (such as the ones carried out by ICRC) being a woman had clear advantages to it: Female delegates were able to discuss the relationship of the detainee with his wife and female relatives.

One interesting issue that emerged in the interviews was the special place that pregnant female negotiators occupied. As the position of a mother is revered in MENA, the benefits of being one (or becoming one) translated positively in the frontline negotiation scene.

***“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”***

Some interviewees stated that it was important for 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 behaviour that puts women down. It was a responsibility to represent the values that the organisation stands for and to “push the envelope further”. It also shows that the organisation is supporting women, empowering them, and believes that they can be the best suited for this job. When this happens however, it should be clear to the organisation that in such a case it is using this card for advocacy purposes and not only to serve the negotiation process. Given the potential impact that imposing a female frontline negotiators on counterparts that are not open to that on the negotiation with that counterpart, it was recommended that an organisation carries out a thorough analysis of profile of the counterpart and tries to anticipate the reaction in advance to such a move and its potential impact on the negotiation process.

A number of interviewees pointed to the fact that sexist behaviour is still tolerated inside of humanitarian organisations. An aid worker described how proposals made by a competent woman were not taken on board when she made them. They were however taken on board when a man made the same suggestion. Being local and a woman can sometimes be problematic when attempting to impose one’s authority over the males in her team, particularly if the male colleagues are older than the 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”***

Some senior women also perpetuate these gender dynamics themselves. They are part of the “boys club” i.e. behaving like men or undermining women themselves. The feeling that women are judged by different yardsticks puts female frontline negotiators under enormous pressure.

***“Women’s failures speak for all women while a man’s failure speaks for himself”***

***“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”***

Some female negotiators also “fall into the trap” by embodying the roles that are expected of them and which limit them from reaching their full potential as frontline negotiators.

***“Because women tend to be pushed into roles of policy makers, law makers, etc., some of them tend to use a very legalistic language rather than relying on their instincts and nature. So they end up using complicated jargon that is unwelcome. Men tend to do that less because they are groomed early on not to do that.”***

## **Education**

Conversations showed that the level of education of the frontline negotiator was not deemed to be very important. It was assumed that if the person occupied a certain position it must have

been for a good reason. At the same time, it was also common in the MENA region to find actors (either from the authorities or non-State actors) that were occupying high positions regardless of their level of education.

## Age

Regarding the impact of being a young frontline staff versus an old one, there was no consensus among frontline staff that participated in the study. The impact was very situation specific. 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 this would be a scenario where "catching them by surprise" could work by proving one's competence and authority despite one's young age. Others also noted that high positions, particularly at military checkpoints, were often occupied by very young men, who had a lot of decision-making power - which shows that age is not viewed as a requirement to elicit respect.

## Having darker skin

Many of the frontline negotiators that were interviewed agreed that the colour of one's skin can influence the way one is perceived by counterparts in the MENA region - even if the counterparts try to hide it or are not even aware that they are influenced by it. One interviewee mentioned that staff could be dark but they had to be "the right colour of dark". In this respect, it was noted that when a frontline negotiator had darker skin it was all too often assumed by the counterparts that s/he was the more junior member of the team. One interviewee noted that his colleague who was Ethiopian felt looked down upon in countries of the Arabian Gulf.

Others felt that while darker skin colour was a disadvantage at first sight, negative consequences would be mitigated if the person in question demonstrated his/her competence. Interestingly, Muslim black people were better received than non-Muslim black persons (in part because of the fact that the first caller to prayer in Islam was a black man).

While having darker skin colour can complicate relations with the counterpart, one interviewee noted that it can be a good security asset. In some conflicts a darker skinned frontline negotiator would "blend" in easier with the local population and not be as easily identifiable.

## Sexual orientation

Interviewees noted that being a member of the community of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Intersex (LGBTQI ) is still frowned upon in official circles in the MENA region- in part because it is also a capital offence in most countries. While organisations can hire LGTBI staff, the latter cannot be open about their sexual orientation in this region. This is not limited to the MENA region, as other research such as that carried out by Feinstein and EISF, shows that staff who identify as LGBTQI have generally felt the need to conceal these aspects of their identity in their job<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, a staff that is perceived to be condoning or promoting LGTBIs could suffer negative consequences.

***"In front of our office we have security that has been assigned by the host government to protect our premises. I used to have a good relationship with them, and we would often joke in the morning. Then, they found out from other colleagues that I was the LGTBI focal point in the office. Their behaviour changed and they became more formal and more serious. I know this because one of the security guys hinted to me that he knew".***

At the same time, organisations should not try to be too vague about their positions and interests when it comes to this with counterparts, as it could be interpreted as an attempt to mislead them, leading the counterpart to take offence, and raising suspicion that there is a bigger agenda behind it.

<sup>21</sup> EISF, p. 24.

***“ In one country, our agency wanted to interview a gay migrant. The authorities that had him in custody knew that he was gay (he had been charged with prostitution). My organisation assumed that the government was homophobic and the we should not suggest that we knew he was gay. We therefore denied knowing about it in the meeting. This did not go well with the government who thought we were not being sincere nor honest”.***

### **Having a military background**

An underrated but important skill set or attribute is when the frontline negotiator possesses previous military experience. It was pointed out that in some situations this could be very useful when interacting with representatives of these institutions or the military wings of armed groups.

**“In one country, we wanted to negotiate access at the airport to refugees. We sent one of our staff who used to be a police officer as we felt he would be more readily accepted by the immigration officers”**

### **CONTEXT ANALYSIS**

Context analysis in frontline settings is particularly influenced by two aspects: a) uncertainty; and b) a sense of urgency.

Uncertainty will influence individuals in different ways, and different individual decision-makers will use different tactics as a result<sup>22</sup>. Decision makers may attempt to gain more information to decrease the uncertainty. However, in humanitarian situations where there are also time pressures, this can be somewhat defeating, because the requirement for analysis can be overwhelming and put pressure on information management systems leading to an analysis paralysis where important decisions are not made. Rather than recognising that the ideal set of information would be impossible to obtain, decision makers may seek superfluous information and become distracted by information that carries little relevance.

Pressure to take faster decisions reduces the time available to the information processing system to convert or gather enough accurate information, as well as to convert assumptions to facts. This was described by some humanitarian staff to be the lack of brain space. This sense of urgency can mean compromises such as, for example: Less participatory decision making which can reduce potential options available to decision-makers, as a decision-maker may make the sometimes wrong assumption that group decision making will take longer<sup>23</sup>. It also intensifies some of the biases which are said to distort “rational” decision making, such as immediacy bias. This is to say that in urgent situations, most decision-makers cease to consider the rate of possible options and rather rely on mental shortcuts, including biases. These shortcuts reduce the mental effort and time required for problem solving<sup>24</sup>.

While almost all of the interviewees recognised the importance of context analysis, some pointed out that it was not sufficiently done ahead of frontline negotiations. Asked in the online survey whether their own organisations have structured processes for analysing the culture, background and other diversity related issues that pertain to the counterparts they were negotiating with, only 21% said this was the case; while 42% said it happened sometime, and 37% said never.

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell and Clarke, Making operational decisions in humanitarian response: A literature review, 2018, <https://www.alnap.org/our-topics/leadership>, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 28

Furthermore, many interviewees felt that some frontline negotiators do not go beyond trying to understand the official counterparts with whom they work, as opposed to also mapping the persons influencing these counterparts. What was particularly common was the perception that a government or de facto authority was a homogeneous body. Moreover, analysis of context is all too often a one time exercise; static; rather than continuous.

As for preparing upcoming meetings/encounters, most of the interviewees noted that due to lack of time, meetings were often prepared “in the back of a car”. A number of interviewees also felt that some high ranking international staff assume that because they are high ranking they know what they are doing and therefore no other input is needed.

While it is recognised that advance preparation is not done sufficiently, there is effort underway in some countries to change that. In one country, the humanitarian country team is mapping the counterparts. A number of interviewees also expressed the view that the frontline negotiator of one particular organisation - the ICRC - usually do a thorough job in researching and understanding their counterparts. In order not to lose that knowledge, even if a delegate leaves, he is often tracked and debriefed.

One interviewee noted that the whole way in which front-line negotiations worked in most organisations is based on the notion that you negotiate in one location. The reality is however is more complex: The counterparts of frontline negotiators are not confined to one location. They are extremely mobile and travel a lot. Humanitarian organisations have not adapted to this reality and generally shy away from “going where they have to go” to influence a counterpart.

It was also pointed out that the high rotation among humanitarian staff is one of the problems that leads to the loss of historical and institutional knowledge. As such, new staff arriving in a frontline negotiation situation have to often start building their knowledge from scratch.

## STEREOTYPING

It is not uncommon for decision makers to fill gaps in their understanding by using assumptions drawn from their previous experience. This can be successful, to the degree that their previous experiences matches the current situation; however that will not always be the case<sup>25</sup>.

Negotiators tend overuse stereotypes that arise from cultural differences and these stereotypes block them from using important personal information. Thus, they often act as if the person on the other side of the table represent the cultural stereotype expected. From the counterpart’s statements and behaviours, the frontline negotiator seeks confirmatory information to back up these stereotypes. Perhaps most problematic, when a negotiator’s counterpart uses ethically ambiguous negotiation tactics, we adopt sinister explanations for their motives.

Stereotyping carries with it many elements of bias<sup>26</sup>. It is thought to be general to all human beings and is demonstrated when people attempt to weigh up options to arrive at the most rational decision, but these shared thought processes prevent a systematic or rational weighing of options<sup>27</sup>. While little research has been done on bias in emergency situations, some have suggested that biases may be more relevant to humanitarians than other decision-makers, as they become more pronounced in situations of uncertainty stress and unknown outcomes<sup>28</sup>.

All those interviewed agreed that it is human to stereotype. Many frontline negotiators catch themselves doing it, and make a mental note.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 26

<sup>26</sup> Bias can be defined as a systematic discrepancy between the rational best answer and the decision-maker’s actual answer. Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 35

***“ I was in an emergency training as a trainer. We asked the participants for their feedback on the course. A big woman from an African country took the floor. I expected her to complain about how tough the course was. She surprised me by saying that the part on evacuation should have been tougher. She then told her story how in the country she served in, she was fired at by a rebel group. I realised then that I had stereotyped her.*”**

***“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”.*”**

The interviewees differed, however, on the extent to which humanitarian negotiators stereotype. In this regard, 47% of the online survey responders believed that humanitarian negotiators generally tended to do so in the early phases of negotiation, but would quickly mitigate these by subsequent information collection. At the same time, 32% of the online respondents maintained that humanitarian negotiators stereotyped their counterparts in general throughout the negotiation process, based on that counterpart's behaviour, position and attributes. Finally, only 16% believed that humanitarian negotiators approached 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 fall back position in the face of uncertainty and helps in preparation.

While it is recognised that stereotyping your counterparts can be useful in particular when you have limited time, frontline negotiators are also aware that it can become negative when stereotyping limits your options.

One interviewee suggested that the old school of humanitarians tended to stereotype their counterparts more often than the younger generations of frontline negotiators. They were more hierarchical and did not see enough of a need for empathy and understanding your counterpart.

The more recent wave of humanitarians is the young and upcoming one that appreciates more the role and importance of diversity. It is also more diverse in its make-up.

Humanitarians know that their counterparts can also stereotype them. This means they are trying to actively dispel some of the misplaced assumptions that they know their counterparts make about them in relatively short time. Frontline negotiators know that you have a small window of opportunity. Some of them therefore slip fairly early on in the conversation elements that counter the negative stereotype that they think their counterparts made about them.

***“My family comes from a town that is known to be brave and that had suffered a lot. So when I am in opposition controlled areas, I allude to the fact that my father is originally from there. It buys me good will.”*”**

Sometimes a humanitarian can use a particular stereotype to their advantage. Other times, not fitting a particular mould can also be useful.

***“The fact that I do not fit any of the typical profiles of humanitarian workers throws my counterparts off. They do not know what to expect as it is rare to find persons from my country in the field, particularly women, so they do not engage with me the usual way they would. They realise that they have to tread more carefully and slowly figure me out”.*”**

One of the common stereotypes among internationals - according to one interviewee-is that the population that is controlled by an armed actor is sympathetic to the views of an armed actor. It was also mentioned that international staff tend to stereotype their own national staff, particularly in where they imagine their "loyalties". Some national staff that were interviewed did not feel that the international staff sufficiently trusted them to do their work with impartiality and independence.

## **USE OF INTERPRETERS**

There was consensus that a translator is never just a translator. Hence, it is no surprise that 77% of those that used translators in their work (roughly 54% of all those who took the online survey) used them to better understand the counterpart's cultural background. There were however degrees in the extent of enlisting them for that purpose as only 53% used them a lot or a great deal.

Nevertheless, the results of the online survey goes to show the extent to which it is accepted that the interpreter becomes a part of the negotiation team and process. It was felt that a good interpreter can pass messages to the counterpart in a way the foreign frontline negotiator cannot. If one engages properly with the interpreter, the latter can be instrumental in helping the frontline negotiator understand the culturally specific reactions of your counterpart. A good interpreter will also pick up on any signs of disagreements between members of the counterparts and share them with the frontline negotiator, which could help in the post-mortem analysis. On the downside, if there is no "chemistry" between the interpreter and the counterpart in a negotiation, it is likely to negatively affect the outcome of the negotiation. Therefore, it is very important to have a good interpreter and to cultivate a relationship of trust between them and the counterpart.

In terms of joint preparation with the interpreter, some frontline negotiators do take the time to prepare well with them and to agree on a "division of labor". Some negotiators use scenario role plays with their interpreters ahead of sensitive meetings. Not everyone, however, invests this amount of effort.

Finally, an important issue that came up is the assumption by international staff that their national staff are always readily available to translate in frontline negotiation settings. Sometimes national staff are not comfortable to translate. Managers just assume that national staff when asked should take on this role.

## **LEVEL OF DIVERSITY IN ORGANISATIONS**

### **On whether teams are sufficiently diverse**

68% of the humanitarian negotiators that took the online survey 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 respondents (53%) to the online survey stated that their organisations only moderately built on the diversity of their staff in humanitarian negotiations. On the other hand, only 26% stated that their organisations did so strongly.

Most interviewees felt that organisations generally take a restrictive definition of diversity (counting gender, language skills and nationality at most). Some monitor the degree of including persons with diverse sexual orientation. Work or life experiences however do not generally feature in the definition of diversity. These views echo conclusions made by some researchers. For example, a recent EISF research paper found that many organisations approach their staff as a homogeneous

group, which can have negative implications for key issues, such as an effective management of their security<sup>29</sup>.

Participants in the interviews acknowledged that their organisations were making some efforts. They cited different examples such as having score cards against which their Headquarters assess their move to a more diverse staff. Others included initiatives on how to better harness the language, nationality and expertise of staff. There are also those who meticulously examine the profiles of candidates and assess how these can be useful to respond effectively to a humanitarian situation.

Much remains to be done and there is the feeling that the field of frontline negotiations is still dominated by Western men.

One humanitarian worker claimed that his organisation was trying to push diversity without sufficient sensitivity or understanding of the context on the ground e.g. sending two persons who were gay to a place like Darfur. In his view, while this may have been serving the organisational and politically correct agenda but not necessarily the target/society and was therefore counter-productive.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following is a list of recommendations that was made by the interviewees on how their organisations could enhance the diversity of their frontline negotiators and harness it better:

### Human Resource Management

- In order to better meet the duty of care to staff, decision-makers should practice ‘inclusive risk management’:
  - Deepen their understanding of the diverse personal profiles of their staff;
  - Improve measures that are in place to protect staff on the basis of this knowledge and the risks identified;
  - Consider adopting action that may discriminate on the basis of personal profiles if this discrimination is required to keep the humanitarian staff safe<sup>30</sup>;
- Adopt diversity of teams as a de facto modus operandi by using the ‘inverted proof’: *“Prove to me that a diverse team would not work in this context”*.
- *Related to the above, lead by example in adopting a diversity sensitive and respectful approach even vis-a-vis counterparts;*

***“ I was serving in a particular country where the head of our mission was a woman. One day both of us went to meet the senior aide to a Minister. The Minister received us. In the course of the conversation, he would only look at me while he spoke, although my***

<sup>29</sup> EISF, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> EISF, p. 21.



***female colleague was my boss and more senior. So what I did was that I would look at her every now and then when I was listening, but particularly when I spoke. The aide realised what was happening. He then began to also look at her while he spoke. He understood who was in charge”***

- Improve the Human Resource databases that would allow for an in-depth recording of negotiation practice and experience;
- Include very concrete parts on the skill of “negotiation” in the recruitment assessments and performance evaluations as a skill set in the positions for staff to apply to;
- Adopt a more structured way to explore which staff are more suitable to certain negotiation processes and have a more systematic approach to enlisting these staff;
- Invest in finding out more about the experience that staff bring before joining a given organisation and record this in a tangible and visible manner;
- Take into considerations the needs for mothers/fathers and persons with families, if the aim is to get/encourage more women from the MENA region on board. “We need to put them in an environment where this would work for their husbands and families”;
- Make a conscious effort as an organisation to mix teams of old and young frontline negotiators;
- Drill further down the score cards that organisations keep regarding gender sensitive recruitment. A second and third layer analysis should be made, including at the levels of functional responsibility; geographical location, etc.;
- Enlarge the use of score cards from gender score cards to true diversity score cards;
- Promote more rigorously competent national staff that are skilled negotiators, and offer them more opportunities carry out missions abroad so they can get more experience and exposure.
- Recognise the efforts of national staff and to groom the good negotiators among them;
- Ensure better coordination between staff pool managers and humanitarian decision makers on the ground to ensure that the right person with the right skill set is sent to a negotiation situation.

### **Understanding of the context and preparation ahead of the negotiation**

- Ensure that cultural awareness briefings for incoming staff are sufficiently thorough and detailed in recognition of the fact that it is important for negotiators to show respect for culture by engaging in negotiations in a manner that will be understood and appreciated by the other party<sup>31</sup>;
- Research the counterpart’s background and experience. If this proves to be challenging, it could be useful to enlist an intermediary with contacts to discreetly make inquiries<sup>32</sup>.
- Enlist an advisor from the counterpart’s culture. An advisor may help humanitarian organisations size up the situation in advance;

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<sup>31</sup> Grace, p. 14

<sup>32</sup> International Negotiation, p. 4

- Clarify the organisational “red lines” to staff ahead of a negotiation;
- Take the time to prepare a meeting more thoroughly in advance (and include the translators in such preparations);
- Encourage more role-play with translators as a way to prepare for complex situations that may arise in the course of translation;
- Develop a simple checklist in an organisation on how to prepare for negotiations. It should explicitly include as one of its action points the dropping of one’s biases; as well as systematically gathering information about the personal attributes of the counterparts.

### **Negotiation process management**

- Determine the costs of bad decisions, i.e. the cost of renegotiating issues or results that were negotiated badly;
- Use a “reverse burden of proof” with counterpart that are averse to diverse teams. In other words send them a diverse team -that goes beyond the gender divide- and wait to see if they will object to the team composition, rather than automatically assuming upfront that they will reject it;
- Document approaches to negotiation and use decontextualised case studies to train incoming staff can also be very useful;
- Systematically ensure that handovers between incoming and departing frontline negotiators are done, and done well. One interviewee suggested that organisations could have a centralised focal point at the headquarters of each organisation to ensure that these briefings and hand-overs are done (it does not need to be an additional person or unit, as long as someone formally assumes that responsibility);
- Increase the use of external experts to understand counterparts and do the counterpart mapping;
- Institutionalise the analysis of decision making to increase the use of lessons learned and their incorporation into future decision making approaches in frontline negotiations<sup>33</sup>;
- Increase the use of debriefs on what facilitated a successful or a less successful negotiation. Look at the make up of a team and see whether that had any bearing at all.
- Encourage seasoned senior humanitarian negotiators to lead by example, by talking to everyone when they do a context analysis. Sometimes the lady preparing the tea may know a lot if she has lived in an area long enough, likewise with the driver or the guard;
- Recognise that one becomes a good negotiator by practising negotiation and allow for mistakes. This worries middle and junior staff so organisations need to give them the support they need;
- Collect good practices in negotiations that can feed into the learning process.

### **Working with translators**

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<sup>33</sup> It is not clear how good humanitarian organisations are at learning and how much learning is actually feasible following operational decisions - as the complexity of these decisions may make it impossible to know the outcome of a specific decision (Campbell and Clarke, p. 53).

- Make your choice carefully regarding the translator you intend to hire if s/he is from outside your organisation and determine their skill and experience from an independent source;<sup>34</sup>
- Know enough about your translator to determine any potential conflict of interest<sup>35</sup>;
- Get feedback from your staff about the quality of translation from the other side;
- Brief your interpreter thoroughly beforehand on the background of the negotiation.
- When you negotiate in consecutive translation, speak in short bite sized chunks pausing after each one to give the interpreter a chance to translate your words<sup>36</sup>;
- Pay close attention to the unfolding negotiation dynamics. If you are dissatisfied with the answers received, reframe the question and try again. Briefly restate and summarise what was understood. It is safe to assume that people living and working in different cultural settings often view or interpret the same events differently. At the same time, it is also true that we have more in common on the person-to person level than we might expect.
- Have a clear division of tasks between translator and negotiator.

## Conclusion

Consultation with humanitarian frontline negotiators reveals that they believe that diversity is an important asset in negotiations. They also recognise that diversity in frontline negotiations in the MENA region, brought with it a specific set of challenges and opportunities. In fact, all of them would stress specific elements of their identity, skills, and background- playing up those that allowed them to establish a rapport more easily with their counterparts, and mitigating those that are perceived to be detrimental. Many would do so through adopting appropriate mannerism, including empathy.

A detailed discussion of a wide range of diversity related elements lead to interesting results: The impact of culture on frontline negotiations was the most difficult to quantify, as opposed to nationality, where many interviewees felt that the consequences of being a national of one or the other country were clearly and widely felt. As for language, speaking Arabic, or having notions of it, was seen as helpful in the MENA region. A close examination of the element of family reputation and connections showed that it was of crucial importance, yet often underrated.

In what may appear as surprising to some, being a non-Muslim frontline negotiator did not appear to have negative consequences for that person. What mattered more, was the sect that the negotiator belonged to if s/he were Muslim - a reflection of the schism between shiite and sunni Islam in today's Middle East.

Moreover, the centrality of gender to frontline negotiations was reaffirmed. Most interviewees consulted agreed that certain negotiations bring more positive results if approached through a gender lens. This is not to say that being a woman is disabling in such negotiation contexts - on the contrary. It was widely acknowledged that women were active participants in frontline negotiations (including from the side of the affected population), and that being a woman can have a positive impact on the outcome of a negotiation. Interestingly, most interviewees also rejected the stereotype that armed radical groups would not agree to engage with a female frontline negotiator. At

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<sup>34</sup> International Negotiation, p. 5

<sup>35</sup> Some interpreters because of personal interests or egos will try to take control of negotiations or slant them in a particular way. The risk may be particularly high if the translator also works as a middle man, agent, or business consultant, and is hoping for future business opportunities from your deal. So you need to know enough about your translator as well as determine potential conflicts of interest (Ibid, p. 5-6).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 6

the same time, female frontline negotiators were always conscious of their gender, and always navigating its implications in a frontline negotiation.

The research also shed light on the insufficiently explored issue of skin colour and its relation to frontline negotiations. On this point, the overriding view was that it influenced negotiations a great deal in the MENA region. Negotiators thatched darker skin colours were more at a disadvantage.

As for sexual orientation, the research confirmed that being a member of the LGTBIQ community continues to be problematic in the MENA region. Frontline negotiations is no exception.

The research also looked at the differences between being a national or international staff, and how being one or the other influenced negotiations. There was widespread agreement that involving national staff in frontline negotiations is essential and valuable. Unfortunately, this did not systematically happen. At times, too many complex and sensitive issues of a negotiation process were offloaded on the shoulders of the national staff, jeopardising their safety.

The research also looked at some common behaviour patterns and approaches that are linked to diversity such as contextual analysis, and the influence of stereotyping. Most interviewees agreed that more needs to be done in understanding the full context of the negotiation and profile of the counterparts. As for the extent to which frontline negotiators resorted to stereotyping their counterparts and each other, the research established that this happened, though the extent to which it did remained unclear. Discussions also examined the role of translators, who - by all accounts - are never "only" translators. There was a recognition however that more in-depth preparation with the translators ahead of the negotiation can be undertaken.

Finally, the research also looked at the extent to which organisations to which interviewees belong harness the diversity of their staff. While interviewees acknowledged that some efforts were done, they remain insufficient. Hence, they provided numerous recommendations on what their organisations need to do, to capitalise on the diversity of their staff. These recommendations fall mainly in the areas of human resource management, as well as the management of the negotiation process itself.

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