

Humanitarian Access in Conflict Settings: Strategic Communication as a Pathway to Overcoming Complexities

Fredrick Wilson

School of Media and Communication,
Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA
wilsonfredrick742@gmail.com

Abstract

Humanitarian access in conflict zones is highly complex, influenced by state authority, non-state armed group control, operational constraints, and ethical dilemmas. Legal mandates and logistical capacity alone rarely ensure access, as political interference, territorial fragmentation, insecurity, and misinformation frequently obstruct aid delivery. This study employs a desk review methodology, analyzing secondary sources including scholarly literature, organizational reports, and news articles to examine how strategic communication affects access. Findings reveal that access is a negotiated, relational process, shaped by trust-building, framing neutrality, and managing perceptions with multiple stakeholders. Strategic communication emerges as central to navigating bureaucratic barriers, fragmented authority, operational challenges, and politicization, allowing humanitarian actors to maintain legitimacy, coordinate effectively, and reduce risks. The study concludes that humanitarian access is not solely a legal or logistical outcome but a communicative achievement requiring deliberate, context-aware strategies. Practical recommendations include the adoption of structured communication frameworks that anticipate stakeholder concerns, clarify operational objectives, and foster trust with state authorities, non-state actors, and affected communities. Additionally, agencies should integrate proactive engagement protocols and multi-level messaging to manage perceptions, preempt misunderstandings, and ensure safe, timely, and impartial delivery of aid. These measures strengthen operational effectiveness and ethical compliance in complex conflict environments.

Keywords: Humanitarian, Access, Strategic Communication, Conflict Zones, Negotiation

Introduction

Humanitarian access has long been recognized as one of the most persistent and complex challenges in contemporary conflict zones. Armed violence, fragmented authority, bureaucratic impediments, and deliberate obstruction by both state and non-state actors routinely constrain the ability of humanitarian organizations to reach populations in need (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2017). In protracted conflicts, access negotiations are rarely discrete or episodic; instead, they unfold as ongoing and fragile processes shaped by shifting power relations, insecurity, and contested legitimacy (Fast, 2014). Consequently, humanitarian actors operate in environments where access is neither automatic nor stable, but continuously renegotiated in response to evolving political and social dynamics.

International humanitarian law (IHL) provides a foundational normative framework for humanitarian access, affirming the right of civilians to receive assistance and the obligation of parties to conflict to allow and facilitate impartial relief operations (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2016). Complementing this legal framework, humanitarian scholarship and practice have emphasized logistical capacity such as supply chain management, security protocols, and operational planning as essential to effective access delivery (Van Wassenhove, 2006). Yet empirical evidence from conflict-affected settings consistently demonstrates that legal entitlement and logistical readiness do not, on their own, ensure access on the ground. In contexts characterized by mistrust, fragmented authority, and weak enforcement mechanisms, formal mandates are frequently ignored, contested, or selectively interpreted (Slim, 2015). This persistent gap between normative frameworks and operational realities highlights the limitations of access models that privilege law and material capacity while underestimating relational and interactional factors.

Despite the centrality of negotiation to humanitarian practice, communication remains comparatively underexamined in scholarly and policy discussions of humanitarian access. Much of the existing literature treats communication instrumentally as information dissemination, coordination, or messaging rather than as a constitutive process through which access itself is negotiated, legitimized, and sustained (Orgad, 2013). Even where humanitarian negotiation is explicitly addressed, analyses often focus on ethical dilemmas or technical bargaining strategies, paying limited attention to how meaning, credibility, and neutrality are communicatively produced in interactions with armed actors, authorities, and affected communities (Fast, 2014). This emphasis obscures the everyday communicative labor through which humanitarian actors

justify their presence, manage perceptions, and navigate moral ambiguity in highly politicized environments.

Emerging work in humanitarian negotiation and organizational communication suggests that access is fundamentally relational and discursive rather than solely legal or logistical. Humanitarian actors must engage in sustained dialogue, carefully framing their identities, intentions, and claims to neutrality in ways that resonate with diverse and often skeptical stakeholders (Slim, 2015; Palmer, 2019). Communication, in this sense, does not merely support access negotiations; it actively shapes what forms of access become possible, acceptable, or contestable. Breakdowns in trust, misaligned narratives, or cultural misunderstandings can undermine access even when legal permissions and operational capacity appear sufficient.

This paper advances the argument that strategic communication is central to negotiating humanitarian access in conflict zones. By foregrounding communication as a constitutive process rather than a peripheral tool, the study reframes humanitarian access as an outcome of ongoing meaning-making, relationship-building, and negotiated legitimacy. In doing so, it contributes to humanitarian scholarship by integrating insights from communication theory into debates traditionally dominated by legal and operational perspectives. Understanding access through this lens not only enhances analytical clarity but also offers practical implications for humanitarian actors navigating complex, contested, and volatile conflict environments.

Objectives

- To examine the complexities of humanitarian access in conflict settings.
- To examine how strategic communication can enhance humanitarian access in conflict settings.

Literature review

Conceptual

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication refers to the purposeful use of communication to achieve organizational goals through the management of meaning, relationships, and perceptions among key stakeholders. Early foundational work situates strategic communication within organizational and public relations scholarship, emphasizing that communication is not merely informational but relational and goal-oriented (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In this view, organizations operate within complex environments where communication shapes trust,

legitimacy, and cooperation. For humanitarian actors working in conflict zones, these dynamics are particularly significant because access depends not only on legal permission or logistical capacity but also on how organizations are perceived by state authorities, armed groups, and affected communities.

Scholars of strategic communication highlight framing as a central mechanism through which meaning is constructed. Framing theory explains how actors select and emphasize certain aspects of reality to influence interpretation and response (Entman, 1993). In humanitarian contexts, the way needs are framed, whether as neutral humanitarian concerns or as politically charged claims, directly affects acceptance and access. Research shows that framing assistance in terms of shared human vulnerability and lifesaving necessity reduces suspicion and resistance from conflict actors, while politicized or rights-based framing may provoke obstruction in highly sensitive environments (Slim, 2015; Magone, Neuman, & Weissman, 2011).

Strategic communication literature also emphasizes trust-building as a core objective. Trust is developed through consistency, transparency, and alignment between communicated values and observed behavior (Grunig, 2006). In conflict settings characterized by mistrust and violence, humanitarian organizations must rely on sustained dialogue and predictable communication practices to establish credibility. Studies on humanitarian negotiation demonstrate that access is often granted not because of formal legal entitlements, but because organizations are perceived as reliable, principled, and non-threatening communicators over time (Fast, 2014; Toole, 2013).

Agenda-setting scholarship further contributes to understanding how communication shapes priorities and action. Agenda-setting theory posits that communication influences what stakeholders consider important, even if it does not dictate specific decisions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Applied to humanitarian access, this perspective explains how repeated emphasis on humanitarian needs, protection of civilians, and neutrality can gradually shape the expectations and responses of authorities and armed groups. Strategic communication thus helps humanitarian actors define the terms of engagement under which access negotiations occur.

More recent organizational communication research frames legitimacy as communicatively constructed, rather than formally granted (Suchman, 1995; Monge & Eisenberg, 1987). Legitimacy emerges through interaction, narrative consistency, and alignment with shared norms. For humanitarian organizations, legitimacy is closely tied to adherence to humanitarian principles and how those principles are communicated in practice. Misalignment between stated

neutrality and perceived behavior can rapidly erode legitimacy and close access channels, even where operational capacity exists (Slim, 2015).

Taken together, the literature conceptualizes strategic communication as a constitutive process that shapes humanitarian access. Communication does not merely support negotiations; it actively produces the conditions under which access becomes possible, sustainable, or contested. This body of work provides a strong conceptual foundation for examining humanitarian access as a relational and communicative achievement, rather than a purely legal or logistical outcome.

Humanitarian Access

Access refers to the ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations affected by crisis and for affected populations to safely receive assistance and protection. Conceptually, access encompasses more than physical entry into conflict-affected areas; it includes freedom of movement, sustained presence, and the ability to deliver assistance according to humanitarian principles (ICRC, 2016; Slim, 2015). Early humanitarian scholarship framed access primarily as a legal entitlement grounded in international humanitarian law, which obliges parties to armed conflict to allow and facilitate impartial humanitarian relief for civilians in need. Within this view, denial of access is understood as a violation of humanitarian norms and protections (Ferraro, 2012).

Subsequent literature, however, demonstrates that humanitarian access is rarely guaranteed by legal frameworks alone. Empirical studies show that access is shaped by political interests, security dynamics, and power relations between humanitarian actors, states, and non-state armed groups (Fast, 2014; Hammond, 2008). Governments often invoke sovereignty, counterterrorism, or administrative regulation to restrict humanitarian operations, while armed groups use access as leverage to assert control or legitimacy (Slim, 2015). As a result, access emerges as a negotiated and contingent outcome rather than a fixed legal condition. Scholars increasingly emphasize that humanitarian actors operate in environments where authority is fragmented and legitimacy is contested, making access unstable and subject to continual renegotiation (Duffield, 2010).

More recent conceptual work reframes humanitarian access as a relational and processual phenomenon, produced through ongoing interaction, communication, and negotiation. From this perspective, access is understood as something that is actively constructed through dialogue, trust-building, and perception management with multiple stakeholders, including authorities, armed actors, and communities (Toole, 2013; Magone, Neuman, & Weissman,

2011). Access is therefore inseparable from how humanitarian actors present themselves, justify their presence, and demonstrate adherence to humanitarian principles in practice. This shift in the literature moves the concept of access beyond logistics and law toward a broader understanding of access as a dynamic, communicative, and ethical process shaped by relationships and meaning-making in conflict environments.

Humanitarian Access and Conflict

Research consistently shows that humanitarian access in conflict settings is shaped less by humanitarian need and more by political power, security concerns, and negotiated relationships. Studies from Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, and Somalia show that both state and non-state armed actors often use access as a tool to assert control, gain legitimacy, secure resources, or influence how the conflict is viewed internationally (Fast, 2014; Jackson, 2018). Denial of access is therefore rarely accidental; it is often a deliberate tactic used to punish communities, control population movement, or manipulate humanitarian presence for political purposes (de Waal, 2015). Field research further indicates that humanitarian organizations are frequently forced to negotiate with multiple power holders at the same time, each with different demands and expectations, making access unstable and uncertain (Metcalf et al., 2012). Under these conditions, access is not experienced as a legal right guaranteed by international humanitarian law, but as a negotiated outcome built through communication, relationships, and credibility.

Another body of research highlights the ongoing tension between humanitarian principles and the realities of operating in conflict zones. Interviews with aid workers show that principles such as neutrality and impartiality are often tested when access depends on engaging with actors involved in violence or human rights abuses (Donini et al., 2012). Evidence from South Sudan and Somalia shows that humanitarian organizations sometimes rely on practical communication strategies such as silence, ambiguity, selective information sharing, or careful framing to maintain access and avoid expulsion or attack (Hofmann & Gordon, 2019). While these approaches may help operations continue, they often create ethical discomfort, showing that access negotiations are not just technical tasks but deeply moral and communicative processes shaped by unequal power relations (Barnett & Weiss, 2011). As a result, humanitarian access is increasingly understood as a form of communicative work that requires constant adjustment, interpretation, and strategic positioning.

Insecurity and risk management practices further complicate humanitarian access by changing how organizations interact with affected communities. Evidence from Nigeria, Iraq, and Gaza shows that increased securitization such as armed escorts, fortified compounds, and remote management can actually reduce access by distancing humanitarian actors from communities and weakening trust (Duffield, 2010; Egeland et al., 2011). Field observations suggest that communities often see heavily protected aid agencies as being aligned with military or political actors, which can lead to suspicion or resistance (Fast & O'Neill, 2010). These findings support the view that access is shaped through everyday interactions, local perceptions, and communicative presence, rather than by logistics or security measures alone. Humanitarian access is therefore limited not only by violence but also by how organizations communicate their intentions, independence, and accountability in contested environments.

The challenges of humanitarian access are especially visible in Northeast Nigeria, where humanitarian actors operate amid ongoing violence by Boko Haram and ISWAP, alongside strict military regulation. Attacks on aid convoys, including ambushes and kidnappings, have repeatedly disrupted operations and delayed life-saving assistance to internally displaced persons (AP News, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2020). At the same time, state-imposed requirements such as mandatory armed escorts and restrictive permit systems create bureaucratic delays that affect the speed and effectiveness of response (Reuters, 2025). Community mistrust, often fueled by armed groups portraying humanitarian workers as aligned with government forces, further complicates access (Slim, 2015). In this context, successful operations depend heavily on ongoing communication with local leaders, continuous negotiation, and community engagement strategies that build acceptance and reduce risk (Toole, 2020).

Similar challenges are seen in South Sudan, where humanitarian access is limited by active conflict, fragmented authority, and government-imposed administrative controls. Convoys and air operations are often delayed due to armed clashes, checkpoint interference, and permit restrictions, disrupting the delivery of essential health, nutrition, and water services (OCHA, 2025; MSF, 2026). Humanitarian actors must engage in complex negotiations with government officials, local commanders, and community elders to gain consent and ensure safe passage (Fast, 2014). These interactions show that access is created through continuous dialogue and relationship-building, even when logistical capacity is available, reinforcing the importance of communication in sustaining humanitarian action.

In Somalia, humanitarian access is shaped by the combined effects of Al-Shabaab control and clan-based governance systems. Armed group interference, including attacks on aid facilities and movement restrictions, directly limits humanitarian operations (Critical Threats, 2025; AP News, 2026). At the same time, clan dynamics require humanitarian actors to carry out culturally sensitive negotiations with elders and local leaders to secure convoy protection, establish distribution sites, and gain community acceptance (Fast, 2014; Toole, 2013). These layered negotiations show that access depends on trust-building, framing neutrality, and maintaining legitimacy with multiple audiences, rather than on security arrangements alone.

The Gaza Strip offers another example of how humanitarian access is shaped by overlapping controls from state and non-state actors. Border closures, permit systems, and checkpoint restrictions regularly delay the entry of essential supplies, worsening humanitarian and public health conditions (OCHA, 2024). Armed groups within Gaza also affect access by monitoring humanitarian activities and controlling distribution points (OCHA, 2025). In this highly political environment, humanitarian actors rely on ongoing negotiation, coordination, and careful management of perceptions to secure temporary access corridors (Toole, 2020). This again highlights that humanitarian access is fundamentally relational and communicative.

Across these different contexts, the literature consistently emphasizes the central role of communication in humanitarian access. Negotiating access depends on how humanitarian actors present their neutrality, explain their mandates, manage relationships, and demonstrate accountability to a wide range of stakeholders, including armed groups, state authorities, and affected communities. Communication is not just about sharing information; it is a core process through which access is created, challenged, and maintained. However, the evidence also shows that traditional humanitarian communication often reactive and focused on principles and messaging alone is increasingly insufficient in environments marked by fragmented authority, strategic access denial, and deep mistrust.

In response to these challenges, the literature points to the need for a more strategic approach to communication. Such an approach goes beyond ad hoc negotiation and principle-based messaging to include careful analysis of context, identification of key stakeholders, deliberate framing of narratives, and flexible engagement strategies. Strategic communication allows humanitarian actors to anticipate resistance, manage perceptions, and navigate political and moral constraints without abandoning humanitarian principles. As such, the literature positions strategic communication not as an optional addition to

humanitarian work, but as a critical capacity for sustaining access in today's complex conflict environments.

Overall, the literature shows that humanitarian access is not just a matter of logistics or legal permission, but the result of ongoing negotiation shaped by ethics, communication, and power relations (Fast, 2014; Jackson, 2018; Barnett & Weiss, 2011). Access is created and sustained through continuous interaction with different actors, where trust, legitimacy, and perceptions are constantly negotiated (Slim, 2015; Hofmann & Gordon, 2019). However, many studies examine these issues separately, focusing on principles, communication, or negotiation in isolation rather than as connected processes (Donini et al., 2012). To respond to this gap, this study uses an integrated theoretical framework that combines humanitarian principles as an ethical foundation (ICRC, 1949; Slim, 2015), strategic communication as a way of shaping meaning and credibility (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Entman, 1993), and negotiation theory to explain how humanitarian access is continuously discussed and agreed upon in conflict-affected settings (Fisher et al., 1991; Lewicki et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarian action is anchored in the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which serve as ethical and operational guides for organizations working in conflict zones (ICRC, 1949; Slim, 2015). Neutrality requires that humanitarian actors do not take sides in hostilities, impartiality ensures that assistance is provided solely based on need without discrimination, and independence mandates that decisions remain free from political or military influence. These principles shape both the goals and the communicative strategies of humanitarian actors, determining how they interact with state and non-state actors to negotiate access. In this study, these principles provide the normative lens through which the legitimacy and acceptability of humanitarian presence are assessed, emphasizing that access is not simply logistical but also moral and ethical.

Strategic Communication Theory

Strategic communication theory emphasizes how communication is intentionally used to shape perceptions, build trust, and influence behavior. Grunig and Hunt (1984) conceptualized communication as a tool for managing relationships between organizations and stakeholders, highlighting the importance of framing and messaging. Complementary work on agenda-setting

(McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing (Entman, 1993) underscores that communication actively constructs meaning, prioritizes certain narratives, and shapes stakeholder understanding. In conflict environments, humanitarian actors leverage strategic communication to present themselves as neutral, impartial, and trustworthy, thereby legitimizing their presence and facilitating access. This study situates itself in this framework by examining how communication acts not as a peripheral support function but as a constitutive process that enables access to populations in contested zones.

Negotiation Theory

Negotiation theory examines structured interaction between parties with potentially conflicting interests, focusing on methods to reach agreements and manage perceptions. Fisher, Ury, and Patton (1991) introduced principled negotiation, advocating for separating people from the problem, focusing on interests rather than positions, and generating options for mutual gain. Lewicki, Saunders, and Barry (2015) further emphasized the role of trust, relationship management, and cultural awareness in achieving sustainable agreements. In humanitarian contexts, negotiation extends beyond transactional exchanges to include ongoing relational and ethical considerations, where access is granted or denied based on credibility, neutrality, and perceived legitimacy. This study draws on negotiation theory to explore how humanitarian actors manage interactions with diverse stakeholders in highly volatile settings, showing that successful access requires both strategy and moral credibility.

While each theoretical framework offers distinct insights, their integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of humanitarian access. Humanitarian principles supply the normative basis for legitimacy, strategic communication theory explains how that legitimacy is communicatively constructed and sustained, and negotiation theory clarifies how access emerges through interaction under conditions of conflict and power asymmetry. Together, these perspectives conceptualize humanitarian access as a constitutive communicative process, produced through ongoing negotiation, framing, and trust-building rather than guaranteed by legal mandate or logistical capacity alone.

By integrating these theories, this study advances an analytical framework that captures the relational, discursive, and negotiated nature of humanitarian access. This approach not only deepens theoretical understanding but also offers practical insights for humanitarian actors seeking to navigate contested environments where access is continuously at stake.

Method

This study employs a desk review approach to examine how strategic communication influences humanitarian access in conflict zones. A desk review involves systematically collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing existing documents, reports, policy papers, and secondary literature relevant to the research topic (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019). This approach enables the study to draw on multiple sources of information, including humanitarian agency reports, United Nations documents, news articles, and scholarly publications, without the need for direct field data collection.

The desk review is particularly appropriate for this study as it allows for a comprehensive and efficient synthesis of evidence across multiple conflict settings while minimizing risks associated with field research in insecure environments (Webster & Watson, 2002). Moreover, it facilitates the identification of patterns, trends, and thematic insights regarding the role of communication in negotiating access, aligning with the study's aim of highlighting strategic communication as a constitutive process rather than relying solely on legal or logistical frameworks (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019). By integrating information from diverse secondary sources, the desk review supports a holistic understanding of humanitarian access challenges and the communicative strategies employed in complex conflict zones.

Thematic Insights

Building on the desk review approach, the study organises the evidence into thematic insights aligned with the stated objectives. These insights highlight both of humanitarian access complexities and the role of strategic communication in enhancing humanitarian access in conflict settings

Complexities of humanitarian access in conflict settings.

State Actors: Sovereignty, Political Control, and Administrative Barriers

Humanitarian access is deeply shaped by the role of state actors, whose authority, policies, and bureaucratic practices can significantly facilitate or hinder aid delivery. Even though international humanitarian law (IHL) obliges states to allow and support humanitarian assistance, in practice, states often prioritize sovereignty, political objectives, or security concerns over humanitarian imperatives. This creates multiple layers of complexity for aid organizations operating in conflict-affected areas.

Sovereignty and Political Control

States often assert control over humanitarian operations as a way to safeguard sovereignty and maintain political authority. In conflict or politically sensitive environments, governments may perceive independent humanitarian activity as a potential challenge to their legitimacy or as interference in internal affairs. This can manifest in overt restrictions, such as prohibiting access to certain regions, controlling the timing and distribution of aid, or requiring formal government oversight for operational decisions. Such measures are not merely procedural; they are strategic tools that enable states to assert influence over populations, restrict external scrutiny, and shape the political environment in which aid is delivered (ACAPS, 2025).

The exercise of political control also intersects with broader power dynamics. Governments may condition access on specific concessions, such as aligning humanitarian operations with state priorities, limiting the visibility of sensitive operations, or privileging certain areas or populations for political gain (Ferraro, 2022). For humanitarian actors, these interventions transform what should be neutral, need-driven assistance into a highly politicized process, where access becomes contingent not only on security and logistics but also on navigating state interests and negotiating legitimacy.

Administrative and Bureaucratic Barriers

Bureaucratic processes represent another dimension of state control. Administrative requirements such as complex registration procedures, movement permits, customs inspections, reporting obligations, and financial approvals often serve dual purposes. While they may appear as routine regulatory measures, they frequently function as levers through which authorities can slow operations, retain political leverage, or impose conditions on aid activities (ACAPS, 2025). These barriers can cause delays in the delivery of food, medicine, and emergency services, which in turn heightens the vulnerability of affected populations.

Administrative hurdles are particularly pronounced in politically fragmented, legally unstable, or conflict-affected states, where governmental structures are inconsistent, overlapping, or weakly accountable. In such environments, the unpredictability of bureaucratic processes compounds operational risks: permits may be delayed without explanation, approvals may be rescinded arbitrarily, and local officials may demand compliance with unwritten rules or informal expectations. For humanitarian actors, this creates a landscape where operational planning and resource allocation are continuously

disrupted, making timely access to populations in need extremely challenging (Ferraro, 2022).

Security Measures and Restrictive Movement

In addition to political and administrative barriers, states may enact security policies that limit the movement of humanitarian personnel and supplies. Measures such as curfews, restricted zones, checkpoints, and convoy escorts are often justified as protecting civilians and staff, yet they can unintentionally block or slow the delivery of aid. In practice, these measures may leave entire regions out of reach, even in emergencies, effectively denying vulnerable populations access to essential services (Ferraro, 2022). Humanitarian actors must navigate these restrictions carefully, balancing compliance with operational objectives while ensuring the safety of staff and beneficiaries.

These security-driven limitations create a tension between legitimate state concerns and humanitarian imperatives. Decisions about where aid can be delivered, which routes can be used, and how staff can operate are heavily influenced by state-imposed restrictions, often requiring negotiation, repeated clarification, and ongoing engagement with authorities.

The complexities created by state actors through political control, bureaucratic barriers, and security measures are exacerbated by a lack of strategic communication. Humanitarian actors often respond reactively to these constraints instead of anticipating state intentions, framing messages for clarity, or systematically managing perceptions. This absence of deliberate, context-aware, and stakeholder-sensitive communication intensifies operational delays, increases vulnerability, and makes access far more difficult to secure consistently.

Non-state Armed Groups: Fragmentation, Mistrust, and Control of Territory

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) are central actors in many contemporary conflicts, directly influencing humanitarian access through control of territory, enforcement of local rules, and strategic interaction with aid providers. Unlike state actors, NSAGs operate outside formal governance structures, yet their authority often rivals that of governments in contested areas. Their presence, strategies, and territorial control create significant operational challenges for humanitarian organizations, as access, security, and trust must all be continuously negotiated.

Fragmentation

NSAGs rarely function as a single, coherent organization. Instead, multiple factions or splinter groups often operate simultaneously within the same region, each with its own leadership, rules, and priorities (ICRC, 2025). For humanitarian actors, this fragmentation creates a highly unpredictable environment: access negotiated with one faction may be irrelevant in another territory controlled by a rival group. The overlapping and sometimes conflicting claims to authority mean that humanitarian operations must be customized to each actor's expectations, increasing the complexity of planning, monitoring, and resource allocation.

Additionally, shifting alliances and temporary coalitions among NSAGs further destabilize operational predictability. Humanitarian organizations cannot rely on past agreements to ensure future access, as alliances may dissolve, leaders may change, or territories may be redefined by force. These dynamics not only delay aid delivery but also create ethical and logistical dilemmas, as agencies must constantly reassess whom to engage with, how to negotiate safely, and how to maintain impartiality across multiple areas of control.

Mistrust

Trust or the lack thereof is a central factor in access negotiations with NSAGs. Armed actors often interpret humanitarian presence through a political or strategic lens, suspecting aid organizations of advancing the agendas of rival factions, governments, or foreign actors (ICRC, 2025). This perception of alignment can lead to restricted access, harassment, threats, or attacks on aid personnel and convoys. Even when aid is delivered neutrally, a failure to manage perception effectively can provoke resistance, undermine cooperation, or create tension with local populations aligned with NSAGs.

The challenge is further intensified by limited communication channels and the secrecy inherent in NSAG operations. Humanitarian actors must find ways to convey neutrality, demonstrate ethical standards, and maintain credibility while operating in environments where any misstep in messaging can have immediate operational consequences. Continuous, adaptive engagement is essential to prevent misperception from escalating into violence or further access denial.

Control of Territory

Territorial control is perhaps the most tangible factor affecting humanitarian access. NSAGs exercise authority over roads, distribution points, villages, and population movements, often enforcing rules that determine

where, when, and how aid can be delivered (ICRC, 2025). These restrictions may be explicit, such as forbidding access to certain zones, or subtle, such as imposing local fees, requiring escorts, or monitoring movements. In many cases, these controls are strategic: they consolidate the group's influence, reinforce legitimacy among civilians, or extract concessions from aid agencies. For humanitarian actors, navigating territorial control requires careful operational planning, risk assessment, and negotiation. Access decisions are constantly influenced by shifting frontlines, threats, and local power dynamics. Even well-resourced agencies with extensive logistical capabilities can be delayed, rerouted, or temporarily blocked when territorial authorities impose new restrictions, making aid delivery unpredictable and highly resource-intensive.

Strategic Communication Gap

Across all these dimensions, fragmented authority, mistrust, and territorial control—the lack of strategic communication emerges as a central source of complexity. Humanitarian actors often respond reactively to access constraints rather than proactively anticipating the perceptions, priorities, and concerns of armed groups. Communication tends to be ad hoc, inconsistent, and focused only on immediate operational needs, rather than designed to manage relationships, build trust, or influence understanding over time. Without deliberate, context-aware, and multi-level communication strategies, humanitarian operations remain vulnerable to disruption, uncertainty, and uneven access to populations in need. Strategic communication is not just a supportive function it is central to navigating the fragmented and high-risk environments controlled by NSAGs.

Operational Barriers: Insecurity, Misinformation, and Logistic Constraints

Humanitarian access is not only shaped by state and non-state actors but also by operational realities on the ground. Even when permission is granted, aid delivery can be disrupted by insecurity, logistical limitations, and information gaps. These operational barriers complicate planning, reduce the speed of response, and increase the risk to both aid workers and affected populations, making access a highly fragile achievement.

Insecurity

In conflict-affected settings, insecurity remains one of the most immediate and dangerous obstacles to humanitarian operations. Attacks on convoys, health facilities, and staff are frequent, forcing organizations to

reroute, delay, or even suspend operations entirely (Reuters, 2025). Shifting frontlines and unpredictable hostilities exacerbate these risks, as areas previously considered safe can rapidly become inaccessible. Humanitarian actors must constantly monitor security conditions, update risk assessments, and make rapid operational decisions. These challenges strain resources and reduce the predictability of aid delivery, leaving civilians in certain regions without timely access to essential services.

The impact of insecurity is not limited to physical threats; it also erodes trust among communities and local authorities. Populations may perceive aid as aligned with one side of the conflict if staff movements are restricted or uneven, which can further limit operational effectiveness and compromise humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality (ICRC, 2025).

Logistical Constraints

Beyond insecurity, logistical challenges significantly constrain access. Damaged roads, destroyed bridges, and limited transport options can prevent supplies from reaching the most vulnerable populations, even when security conditions allow travel. Administrative hurdles, such as checkpoint delays, customs inspections, and permit requirements, compound these challenges, slowing operations and reducing efficiency (ACAPS, 2025). Humanitarian actors often have to plan around these obstacles, relying on alternative routes or temporary storage sites, which increases costs and operational complexity.

Logistical constraints are further complicated by resource limitations and coordination challenges among multiple actors. For instance, the lack of reliable transport, communication equipment, or storage facilities can make aid distribution unpredictable. This unpredictability is especially critical in emergencies, where delays can lead to preventable suffering or loss of life (Operational Challenges Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice, 2025).

Misinformation

Accurate information is essential for an effective humanitarian response. However, misinformation, rumors, or gaps in situational awareness often undermine operations. Miscommunication with local authorities, community leaders, or partner organizations can result in duplicated efforts, mistrust, or operational misalignment. In some cases, staff are unaware of local dynamics, such as territorial control by armed groups or recent incidents of violence, which can jeopardize safety and impede access (Ferraro, 2022).

The combination of insecurity, logistical barriers, and misinformation creates a highly complex operational environment. Humanitarian actors must constantly adapt, make decisions under uncertainty, and communicate rapidly across multiple stakeholders to maintain access and ensure aid reaches those in need (ACAPS, 2025; ICRC, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Strategic Communication Gap

The challenges posed by operational barriers, shifting security, logistical constraints, and misinformation are intensified by the absence of strategic communication. Humanitarian actors often respond reactively to emerging obstacles rather than proactively managing relationships, anticipating operational bottlenecks, or framing information for multiple stakeholders. Without deliberate, context-aware, and coordinated communication strategies, insecurity and logistical complexity are amplified, operational decisions become fragmented, and access remains inconsistent. Strategic communication is therefore central to navigating operational barriers and maintaining a reliable humanitarian presence in conflict-affected environments.

Risk of Politicization

A major challenge in conflict settings is the persistent risk that humanitarian aid will be perceived as favoring one faction over another. This perception is not hypothetical; it is shaped by the deliberate actions of state and non-state actors who monitor, control, and manipulate aid flows to serve political agendas. For example, in Gaza, both state authorities and armed factions have occasionally restricted access to communities perceived as aligned with opposing parties, or used aid as leverage to assert legitimacy or influence local perceptions (OCHA, 2022). These manipulations create operational uncertainty, as humanitarian actors must constantly anticipate shifting political priorities and interpretations.

The complexity of politicization is compounded by the fragmented nature of authority in many conflict settings. Humanitarian organizations often must negotiate simultaneously with multiple actors: government officials, local commanders, and community leaders, each with diverging interests and expectations. Delays, denials, or selective access are frequently used strategically to influence populations or send political signals, rather than being incidental obstacles (Fast, 2014; Jackson, 2018). Even when resources and logistics are adequate, the ability to deliver aid is constrained by these contested power dynamics, making access highly unstable.

These observations indicate that political contestation is not merely about authority or control; it is also about how aid is perceived and interpreted. Repeated misinterpretations and contested legitimacy suggest that the absence of strategic communication, careful, deliberate messaging that anticipates perceptions and frames humanitarian action as neutral and need-driven (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McQuail, 2010), intensifies these challenges and leaves aid operations vulnerable to politicization.

Neutrality and Advocacy

Maintaining neutrality while advocating for vulnerable populations is another complex challenge. Humanitarian actors frequently face situations where speaking out about human rights violations or protection gaps risks being interpreted as partiality, which can undermine access or even provoke retaliation. In South Sudan, agencies advocating for civilian protection had to engage in repeated, delicate negotiations with both government forces and non-state armed groups to ensure their actions were tolerated and not perceived as favoring one side (Toole, 2013). These negotiations are complex and ongoing, as interpretations of neutrality differ across actors and evolve.

The complexity is heightened by the multiplicity of actors involved and the cultural, historical, and social context of each community. Local commanders, elders, and government officials may have differing thresholds for acceptable advocacy, while communities may interpret messages in ways shaped by past experiences, rumors, or perceptions of the conflict. Inconsistent or poorly timed communication can therefore trigger suspicion, reduce trust, and restrict operational access, even when humanitarian principles are strictly followed. The study finds that navigating this tension requires constant attention to timing, framing, and the relational dynamics of different audiences.

These findings highlight that neutrality and advocacy are not simply ethical or operational challenges; they are deeply intertwined with communication. The difficulties become more pronounced when messaging is reactive, ad hoc, or lacks strategic planning. Across conflict settings, these tensions point to the critical importance of strategic communication deliberate, planned messaging that anticipates perceptions and maintains credibility across stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) even if it is not explicitly implemented, as its absence amplifies misunderstandings and complicates access.

Security Versus Transparency

Balancing operational security with demands for transparency is a further source of complexity. Humanitarian organizations must provide accountability to donors, governments, and affected communities, yet full disclosure of operations can put staff, assets, and beneficiaries at risk. In northeast Nigeria, agencies intentionally limit public information about supply routes and beneficiary locations to reduce the risk of attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP, while still trying to maintain donor confidence and community trust (Fast, 2014; OCHA, 2023). This balancing act requires constant evaluation of threats and careful judgment about what information to share and with whom.

These pressures are compounded by the unpredictability of conflict. Humanitarian actors often operate in environments where ambushes, kidnappings, bureaucratic delays, and shifting alliances are common. Maintaining both transparency and safety is not straightforward: too much openness can compromise security, while too little can erode trust, legitimacy, and support. The study finds that these tensions generate a persistent dilemma that slows operational response and increases stress for field staff, illustrating the complexity of access management in high-risk settings.

The analysis suggests that these challenges are not only about safety procedures or logistical arrangements; they are closely tied to how humanitarian information is shared and perceived. The difficulties are intensified in the absence of deliberate, strategic communication, an approach that plans for audience segmentation, anticipates misperceptions, and manages information flow across competing actors (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Entman, 1993).

How Strategic Communication can enhance Humanitarian Access in Conflict Settings.

Humanitarian access in conflict zones is often obstructed by political, security, and operational challenges that make aid delivery unpredictable and risky. In such environments, effective communication is not just supportive; it is central to navigating these complexities. This discussion positions strategic communication as a key pathway for enhancing humanitarian access, showing how deliberate, context-aware messaging can overcome barriers and foster trust with all stakeholders.

State Actors: Using Strategic Communication to Navigate Sovereignty, Political Control, and Admirative Barriers

Humanitarian access in conflict zones is often complicated by state actors' assertion of sovereignty, political priorities, and bureaucratic oversight. Rather than restating these challenges, the focus here is on how strategic communication can help humanitarian actors navigate and mitigate these constraints.

Strategic communication enables aid agencies to anticipate state concerns and frame interventions proactively. By clearly articulating the humanitarian imperative, agencies can present assistance as neutral, impartial, and complementary to state objectives, reducing perceptions of interference or political threat (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McQuail, 2010). For instance, tailored briefings, official correspondence, and pre-negotiated engagement plans can demonstrate respect for sovereignty while reinforcing operational legitimacy. Agencies can also leverage communication to manage expectations around administrative procedures, providing transparent updates on project scope, timelines, and compliance with registration or permit requirements, which can reduce bureaucratic friction (ACAPS, 2025).

Additionally, strategic communication allows humanitarian actors to coordinate internally and externally, ensuring that messaging to state authorities is consistent, culturally sensitive, and timed to avoid misinterpretation. By anticipating potential objections and highlighting shared interests, agencies can preempt restrictive measures and negotiate access agreements more effectively (Ferraro, 2022). Regular, proactive dialogue, supported by evidence of impact and operational accountability, strengthens credibility and positions humanitarian actors as reliable partners rather than external disruptors.

In sum, strategic communication transforms state-imposed complexities from reactive obstacles into navigable interactions, enabling organizations to maintain access without compromising neutrality or operational integrity. By shaping perceptions, managing relationships, and presenting clear, context-sensitive messaging, agencies can reduce bureaucratic delays, mitigate political barriers, and ensure continuity of aid delivery.

Non-State Armed Groups: Leveraging Strategic Communication to Overcome Fragmentation, Mistrust, and Territorial Control

Engaging with non-state armed groups presents distinct challenges due to fragmented authority, shifting alliances, and widespread mistrust. Rather than simply describing these barriers, strategic communication offers a pathway to negotiate safe and consistent access across multiple actors and territories.

Strategic communication allows humanitarian actors to systematically build trust and credibility with different factions. By clearly framing humanitarian action as neutral, impartial, and guided by ethical principles, agencies can reduce suspicion and preempt misinterpretation of aid as political interference (ICRC, 2025; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Tailored messaging to each faction, informed by cultural and local knowledge, ensures that communications resonate with leadership and community members alike, fostering a sense of shared purpose and operational predictability.

In fragmented territories, strategic communication can also coordinate multi-level engagement, where updates, agreements, and clarifications are consistently disseminated across all relevant actors. This minimizes misunderstandings between factions, reduces risks of ambush or interference, and supports continuity in service delivery. Tools such as scenario-based briefings, liaison protocols, and repeated dialogues create a stable communication rhythm, making humanitarian actions more predictable even in dynamic conflict environments (ICRC, 2025).

Moreover, territorial control can be navigated more effectively through preemptive information sharing and negotiated access frameworks. By demonstrating respect for local authority structures and maintaining transparency about operational objectives, agencies reduce the likelihood of arbitrary restrictions or territorial conflicts over aid distribution. Through strategic communication, humanitarian actors convert the fluidity and fragmentation of NSAG-controlled areas into manageable, predictable negotiation landscapes.

Ultimately, strategic communication is central to transforming mistrust and fragmentation into structured dialogue, enabling humanitarian actors to deliver assistance safely and consistently, even in high-risk and fluid conflict settings.

Operational Barriers: Applying Strategic Communication to Insecurity, Logistical Constraints, and Misinformation

Operational realities, insecurity, damaged infrastructure, and misinformation often obstruct humanitarian access. The solution lies not merely in logistics or security measures but in strategic communication as a tool to anticipate, coordinate, and mitigate operational challenges.

Through strategic communication, agencies can share real-time situational updates with all stakeholders, including local authorities, community leaders, and partner organizations. Accurate, timely, and targeted messaging reduces confusion, prevents duplication of efforts, and mitigates the effects of

misinformation, while also ensuring that security protocols are understood and followed (ACAPS, 2025; ICRC, 2025). For instance, mapping and broadcasting safe routes, convoy schedules, and operational priorities in advance allows all parties to coordinate effectively, reducing delays and enhancing predictability even amid insecurity (Reuters, 2025).

Strategic communication also enables agencies to engage communities proactively, building trust and improving compliance with operational measures. By explaining constraints, expected delivery times, and procedures for aid collection, humanitarian actors can reduce community frustration, prevent rumors, and maintain the perception of impartiality. Internally, clear communication frameworks ensure field teams, logistics officers, and headquarters staff operate with aligned information, reducing errors, misallocation, or duplication.

Furthermore, communication anticipates and mitigates logistical constraints by aligning expectations with operational realities. By proactively informing authorities and partners about potential bottlenecks, resource limitations, or infrastructure challenges, agencies can negotiate contingencies and ensure aid reaches intended beneficiaries in a timely manner (Operational Challenges Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice, 2025).

In essence, strategic communication transforms operational barriers from unpredictable disruptions into manageable processes, enabling humanitarian actors to maintain consistent access, protect staff, and deliver aid effectively under complex conditions.

Strategic Communication Solutions: Politicization, Neutrality vs Advocacy, and Security vs Transparency

Humanitarian action is highly susceptible to politicization, tensions between neutrality and advocacy, and conflicts between security and transparency. These challenges require strategic communication to navigate perceptions, maintain credibility, and safeguard access.

Strategic communication allows agencies to frame humanitarian work as universally need-based, neutral, and impartial, reducing perceptions of favoritism or political alignment (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This is critical in environments where multiple actors, governments, NSAGs, or communities may interpret aid flows strategically. Preemptive messaging, stakeholder engagement, and narrative management help reinforce neutrality while allowing advocacy for vulnerable populations without compromising access.

To address tensions between neutrality and advocacy, strategic communication offers tools to segment audiences, tailor messages, and schedule communications effectively. By anticipating how different actors will interpret statements, agencies can speak out on protection gaps or human rights issues without appearing partial, maintaining operational legitimacy while fulfilling moral obligations (Toole, 2013). Similarly, balancing security with transparency is enhanced by selective, audience-focused messaging, ensuring sensitive operational information is protected while stakeholders remain confident in accountability and ethical standards (Fast, 2014; OCHA, 2023).

Through deliberate planning, consistent messaging, and proactive perception management, strategic communication addresses these intertwined challenges holistically. It prevents misinterpretation, reduces operational friction, and maintains credibility across diverse stakeholders, ensuring aid reaches populations in need safely and effectively.

Across state actors, non-state armed groups, operational constraints, and complex ethical dilemmas, the lack of strategic communication emerges as the central factor intensifying humanitarian access challenges. By embedding strategic communication as a deliberate, context-aware, and multi-level process, humanitarian actors can anticipate concerns, frame interventions clearly, manage relationships, and navigate fragmented and high-risk environments. This approach transforms unpredictability, mistrust, and operational barriers into manageable, coordinated processes, enabling more reliable, timely, and impartial delivery of aid. Ultimately, strategic communication is not merely a support tool but a core operational strategy that underpins safe, effective, and sustainable humanitarian access in the most challenging conflict settings (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; ICRC, 2025).

Discussion

Humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas is complex, influenced by political, security, and operational realities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for delivering aid effectively, safely, and impartially. This discussion interprets the study's findings in light of the study objectives, highlighting how state and non-state actors, operational constraints, and communication strategies shape access in contested environments.

The study confirms that state actors play a central role in shaping humanitarian access through political control, bureaucratic procedures, and security measures. These findings align with ACAPS (2025) and Ferraro (2022), showing that governments often prioritize sovereignty and political interests over humanitarian imperatives. Bureaucratic delays, restricted

movement, and administrative barriers exacerbate operational challenges, consistent with prior research on conflict-zone aid delivery (ICRC, 2025). Humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Slim, 2015; ICRC, 1949) offer a normative lens for navigating these complexities. The findings suggest that strategic communication enables agencies to frame aid as complementary to state objectives, manage bureaucratic expectations, and foster legitimacy, transforming potential obstacles into manageable interactions.

Non-state armed groups also significantly influence access through fragmented authority, territorial control, and mistrust. The study shows that humanitarian actors face unpredictable environments where agreements with one faction may not hold elsewhere, consistent with ICRC (2025) observations on operational fragmentation. Applying negotiation theory (Fisher et al., 1991; Lewicki et al., 2015), findings indicate that trust-building, relationship management, and context-sensitive engagement are crucial. Strategic communication emerges as a key mechanism to convey neutrality, coordinate multi-level engagement, and navigate territorial constraints, reinforcing existing scholarship on communication's role in legitimizing humanitarian presence (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Operational barriers, including insecurity, logistical constraints, and misinformation, further complicate aid delivery. The study highlights that proactive communication sharing real-time updates, coordinating with authorities, and managing community expectations, reduces confusion, mitigates risk, and enhances operational efficiency (ACAPS, 2025; ICRC, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Additionally, tensions between neutrality, advocacy, security, and transparency underscore the importance of strategic messaging in maintaining credibility and safeguarding access (Fast, 2014; Toole, 2013; OCHA, 2023). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that strategic communication is not a peripheral activity but a constitutive process enabling humanitarian actors to navigate ethical, operational, and political complexities while delivering aid safely, consistently, and impartially.

Conclusion

Humanitarian access in conflict zones is inherently complex, shaped by the interplay of political authority, armed group control, insecurity, operational constraints, and ethical dilemmas. This study demonstrates that access is rarely a product of legal entitlement or logistical capacity alone; rather, it is a negotiated, relational, and communicative process. State and non-state actors alike influence access through sovereignty claims, bureaucratic barriers,

territorial control, and mistrust, while operational realities such as insecurity, misinformation, and infrastructural limitations further constrain aid delivery. The challenges of politicization, the tension between neutrality and advocacy, and the balance between security and transparency underscore that access is not merely a technical problem but also a moral and perceptual one, requiring constant navigation across multiple, often competing, interests.

Strategic communication emerges as a critical pathway to enhance humanitarian access by transforming these complexities into manageable processes. By framing interventions clearly, building trust with diverse stakeholders, tailoring messages to audiences, and proactively managing perceptions, humanitarian actors can mitigate risks, uphold neutrality, and maintain credibility. Communication not only facilitates negotiation with state and non-state actors but also strengthens community engagement, coordination, and operational predictability. In essence, humanitarian access is produced, sustained, and legitimized through deliberate, context-aware, and multi-level communication, making strategic communication an indispensable operational strategy. Embedding these practices allows humanitarian organizations to navigate conflict settings more safely, effectively, and ethically, ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need despite highly contested and volatile environments.

Recommendation

Institutionalize Strategic Communication as a Core Operational Practice:

Humanitarian organizations should embed strategic communication into all program stages, including proactive stakeholder engagement and culturally sensitive messaging. This ensures neutrality, builds trust, and anticipates political or bureaucratic obstacles. Structured communication protocols transform access challenges into manageable and predictable processes.

Acknowledgement: This study was undertaken solely by the author, who appreciates the personal growth and learning gained through the research process.

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- ACAPS. (2025). A snapshot of global challenges in humanitarian access. <https://www.acaps.org/en/thematics/all-topics/humanitarian-access>
- ACAPS. (2025). Humanitarian access overview. <https://www.acaps.org/en/thematics/all-topics/humanitarian-access>
- Adams, J. S. (1976). Organizational legitimacy and boundary spanning. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1–15.
- Akal, B., Holmes, R., & Yarhi-Milo, K. (2025). Empathy and trust in negotiation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 69(2), 211–234.
- AP News. (2025). Roadside bombs kill 26 people in several vehicles in Nigeria. <https://apnews.com/article/6d346816e48106e9898e57d605bec148>
- Barnett, M., & Weiss, T. G. (2011). *Humanitarianism contested: Where angels fear to tread*. Routledge.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It depends: A contingency theory of accommodation in public relations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 10(1), 31–63.
- Cancel, A., Cameron, G., Sallot, L., & Mitrook, M. (1997). Information exchange and strategic communication in organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 10(1), 42–70.
- Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation. (2019). *Field manual on frontline humanitarian negotiation*. CCHN.
- Chatham House. (2024). Enhancing the security of civilians in conflict: Humanitarian corridors.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/enhancing-security-civilians-conflict/04-humanitarian-corridors>

- Critical Threats. (2025). Al Shabaab and humanitarian assistance challenges in Somalia. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-shabaab-and-the-challenges-of-providing-humanitarian-assistance-in-somalia>
- de Waal, A. (2015). *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power*. Polity Press.
- Donini, A., Minear, L., & Walker, P. (2012). *The future of humanitarian action*. Feinstein International Center.
- Donini, A., Minear, L., Walker, P., & Wilder, A. (2012). *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and independence in humanitarian action*. Kumarian Press.
- Duffield, M. (2010). Risk-management and the fortified aid compound: Everyday life in post-interventionary society. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 4(4), 453–474.
- Egeland, J., Harmer, A., & Stoddard, A. (2011). *To stay and deliver: Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Fast, L. (2014). *Aid in danger: The perils and promise of humanitarianism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fast, L., & O'Neill, M. (2010). A closer look at acceptance. *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, 47, 5–7.
- Ferraro, R. (2022). Challenges to implementation of humanitarian access norms in the Sahel. *International Review of the Red Cross*. <https://international->

[review.icrc.org/articles/challenges-to-implementation-humanitarian-access-norms-in-the-sahel-918](https://www.icrc.org/articles/challenges-to-implementation-humanitarian-access-norms-in-the-sahel-918)

- Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (1991). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in* (2nd ed.). Penguin.
- Grunig, J. E. (2006). Furnishing the edifice. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 18*(2), 151–176.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Hammond, L. (2008). Power, aid and responsibility. *Disasters, 32*(4), 482–501.
- Harmer, A., & Stoddard, A. (2018). *Understanding humanitarian negotiation: Five analytical approaches*. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.
- Hofmann, C. A., & Gordon, S. (2019). Negotiating humanitarian access. *International Review of the Red Cross, 101*(910), 359–386.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020). Nigeria: Army restrictions stifling aid efforts. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/04/nigeria-army-restrictions-stifling-aid-efforts>
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (1949). *Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*. ICRC.
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2016). *Commentary on the First Geneva Convention: Convention (I) for the amelioration of the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field*. Cambridge University Press.
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025). Humanitarian challenges in contested territories. <https://www.icrc.org>
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025). 204 million people live in areas controlled or contested by armed groups.

<https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1119/icrc-204-million-people-live-areas-controlled-or-contested-by-armed-groups-302326>

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025). Humanitarian challenges in contested territories. <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/icrc-report-navigating-violence-daily-life-contested-territories>

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2025). ICRC engagement with armed groups in 2025. <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2025/10/30/icrc-engagement-with-armed-groups-in-2025/>

International Rescue Committee. (2023). Gaza: The IRC responds to UN Security Council resolution. <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/gaza-irc-responds-un-security-council-resolution>

Jackson, A. (2018). *Life under the Taliban shadow government*. Overseas Development Institute.

Lewicki, R. J., Saunders, D. M., & Barry, B. (2015). *Negotiation* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Magone, C., Neuman, M., & Weissman, F. (2011). *Humanitarian negotiations revealed: The MSF experience*. Hurst.

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage.

Metcalfe, V., Giffen, A., & Elhawary, S. (2012). *Humanitarian action in conflict: Challenges and lessons*. Overseas Development Institute.

Monge, P. R., & Eisenberg, E. M. (1987). Emergent communication networks. In F. Jablin et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication* (pp. 304–342). Sage.

- MSF. (2026). South Sudan government blocks opposition-held areas from humanitarian access. <https://www.msf.org.za/news-and-resources/press-release/south-sudan-government-blocking-opposition-held-areas-humanitarian>
- OCHA. (2017). *OCHA on message: Humanitarian access*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- OCHA. (2022). Gaza: Humanitarian needs and access. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- OCHA. (2023). Nigeria: Humanitarian response overview. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- OCHA. (2024). Humanitarian access snapshot – Gaza Strip. <https://container.ochaopt.org/node/12096>
- OCHA. (2025). Humanitarian access impediments in South Sudan. <https://www.africa-press.net/south-sudan/all-news/un-ocha-records-33-access-impediments-including-attacks-on-humanitarians>
- Operational Challenges – Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice. (2025). Operational challenges in humanitarian practice. <https://arhp.msf.es/categories/humanitarian-practice/operational-challenges>
- Palmer, I. (2019). *Communication in humanitarian operations: Building trust and legitimacy*. Routledge.
- Reuters. (2025). Hunger grows in Nigeria as aid cuts reduce food supplies. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/hunger-grows-nigeria-aid-cuts-reduce-food-supplies-2025-09-04>
- Slim, H. (2015). *Humanitarian ethics: A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Toole, D. (2013). Humanitarian negotiation: Observations from recent experience. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2017). *OCHA on message: Humanitarian access*. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/ocha-message-humanitarian-access-enar>
- United Nations Security Council. (2023). Resolution 2720 (2023) (S/RES/2720). United Nations. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2720\(2023\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2720(2023))
- Van Wassenhove, L. N. (2006). Humanitarian aid logistics: Supply chain management in high gear. *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, 57(5), 475–489. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jors.2602125>
- Webster, J., & Watson, R. T. (2002). Analyzing the past to prepare for the future: Writing a literature review. *MIS Quarterly*, 26(2).
- Wells, K. (2013). The melodrama of being a child: NGO representations of poverty. *Visual Communication*, 12(3), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357213483059>

Author

Fredrick Wilson is a doctoral fellow at the School of Media and Communication, Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA