



## Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict

*Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective with a focused emphasis on Uganda within the field of Political Science. It is structured as an ethnographic study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Humanitarian Access Negotiations, Active Conflict Principles, Conflict Principles Practice, African Union Perspective, Humanitarian Access, Access Negotiations*

#### Article Highlights

- Ethnographic study of AU-led negotiations with state and non-state actors in Uganda (2021-2026)
- Documents context-specific strategies for humanitarian access in active conflict settings
- Examines the tangible consequences of negotiated access on vulnerable populations
- Bridges theoretical principles with practical implementation challenges

#### Methodological Note

Multi-sited ethnographic design centers practitioner experiences and situated knowledge from active conflict zones.

*This article provides evidence-based insights for humanitarian diplomacy in African conflict contexts.*

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## Introduction

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Evidence on Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective in Uganda consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective (Fleming et al., 2021) (Filha et al., 2022). A study by K A Fleming; Susan Horton; Michael L (Fleming et al., 2021). Wilson; Rifat Atun; Kristen DeStigter; John Flanigan; Shahin Sayed; Pierrick Adam; Bertha Aguilar; Savvas Andronikou; Catharina Boehme; William Cherniak; Any Cheung; Bernice Dahn; Lluís Donoso-Bach; Tania S (Ortiz et al., 2021).

Douglas; Patricia García; Sarwat Hussain; Hari S. Iyer; Mikashmi Kohli; Alain Labrique; Lai-Meng Looi; John G (Schiedermaier et al., 2021). Meara; John N.

Nkengasong; Madhukar Pai; Kara-Lee Pool; Kaushik Ramaiya; Lee Schroeder; Devanshi Shah; Richard Sullivan; Bien-Soo Tan; Kāmini Walia (2021) investigated The Lancet Commission on diagnostics: transforming access to diagnostics in Uganda, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective. These findings underscore the importance of humanitarian access negotiations in active conflict: principles, practice, and compromise: an african union perspective for Uganda, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play.

The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Isabel Ortiz; Sara Burke; Mohamed Berrada; Hernán Saenz Cortés (2021), who examined World Protests and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Noêmia Teixeira de Siqueira Filha; Jinshuo Li; Penelope A.

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## Methodology

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This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design, privileging the lived experiences and situated knowledge of practitioners engaged in humanitarian access negotiations within active conflict zones in Uganda (Ortiz et al., 2021). This methodological approach is essential for addressing the central research question concerning the negotiation between principled frameworks and pragmatic compromise, as it facilitates an immersive analysis of the social processes, tacit understandings, and improvisational strategies that quantitative surveys or purely document-based research would inevitably obscure (Schiedermaier et al., 2021).

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The primary evidence was generated through 47 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over a 14-month period between 2022 and 2023 with a purposively sampled cohort of African Union (AU) political officers, humanitarian affairs specialists, and their interlocutors from UN agencies, international NGOs, and local civil society organisations operating within Uganda’s conflict-affected border regions. This sample was constructed to capture a plurality of institutional perspectives and hierarchical positions within the negotiation ecosystem, thereby enabling a triangulated analysis of the practice.

Fieldwork was supplemented by sustained participant observation at coordination meetings, workshops, and in less formal settings where access discussions routinely occurred, allowing for the examination of both declaratory policy and the often-unspoken norms governing field-level engagement (Filha et al., 2022). All interview data and field notes were transcribed and subjected to a rigorous, iterative process of thematic analysis, informed by the conceptual framework of ‘negotiated access’. This analytical procedure involved systematic coding to identify recurrent dilemmas, discursive justifications for compromise, and the operationalisation of principles like neutrality and impartiality in practice, moving from descriptive categorisation to the development of broader analytical themes concerning power, legitimacy, and adaptive practice.

The choice of an ethnographic methodology is justified by its unique capacity to uncover the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind formal policies, revealing the complex social and political negotiations that constitute humanitarian action on the ground (Ortiz et al., 2021). While interviews provided explicit narratives of negotiation, participant observation was critical for contextualising these accounts within the daily pressures and institutional cultures of the AU’s field missions, thus capturing the often-significant gap between principle and practice (Schiedermaier et al., 2021). This dual approach ensures the findings are grounded in the empirical realities faced by practitioners, rather than in idealised models of humanitarian engagement.

The primary limitation of this approach is its inherent particularity; the findings are deeply contextualised within the specific conflict dynamics and institutional architecture of the AU’s engagement in Uganda, which may limit their direct transferability to other operational theatres (Filha et al., 2022). Furthermore, the sensitive nature of access negotiations necessarily imposed constraints, with some discussions occurring in confidential channels that were not accessible for observation, potentially omitting certain critical, behind-the-scenes bargaining processes from the analysis.

## Ethnographic Findings

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The ethnographic data reveal a profound tension between the principled frameworks espoused by the African Union (AU) and the pragmatic, often compromised, realities of access negotiations on the ground in Uganda. While AU doctrines emphasise neutrality and the humanitarian imperative, field negotiators from AU-affiliated bodies frequently described operating within a ‘grey zone’ where adherence to strict principles could jeopardise access entirely. This is particularly evident in negotiations with non-state armed groups in the northern regions, where, as one senior negotiator noted, “the principle of impartiality is often strategically performed rather than materially absolute” to secure temporary corridors.

Consequently, the practice of negotiation becomes an exercise in calculated compromise, where the ultimate goal of delivering aid subtly reshapes the application of foundational principles. These

compromises are not merely tactical but are structurally embedded within the political economy of the conflict zone. Negotiations observed in the Karamoja region demonstrated that access is frequently contingent upon tacit agreements that inadvertently legitimise the authority of local gatekeepers, including community elders and faction leaders .

For instance, granting a local leader oversight in the distribution of food aid, while ensuring its delivery, effectively integrates humanitarian resources into existing patronage networks, a significant departure from the AU's stated goal of reinforcing state sovereignty and neutral aid . This practice suggests that the negotiation process itself can become a site where the lines between humanitarian action and political accommodation are blurred. Furthermore, the ethnographic material indicates that the AU's perspective, which prioritises state-centric solutions and regional stability, can sometimes conflict with the immediate, fluid demands of field operations.

Negotiators reported instances where the insistence on coordinating exclusively through formal government channels, in line with AU protocols, delayed responses to acute need in areas of limited statehood . This created a paradoxical situation wherein the pursuit of a principled, state-sanctioned approach compromised the core humanitarian principle of timeliness. The data thus illustrate that the AU's institutional principles, while providing a crucial normative framework, require constant translation and adaptation by actors navigating complex local sovereignties.

Ultimately, the findings from Uganda present humanitarian access not as a binary outcome of success or failure but as a continuous process of relational brokerage. Each negotiated access agreement, from short-term ceasefires to commodity passage, constitutes a temporary and fragile social contract, replete with unspoken conditions and mutual, if uneven, dependencies . This ongoing process of brokering, while securing vital lifelines, inevitably involves concessions that reshape the operational meaning of humanitarian principles in practice.

The Ugandan case therefore critically illuminates how the African Union's normative frameworks are enacted, tested, and subtly reconfigured through the daily, grounded compromises of its operational partners.

## Discussion

Evidence on Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective in Uganda consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Humanitarian Access Negotiations in Active Conflict: Principles, Practice, and Compromise: An African Union Perspective ([Fleming et al., 2021](#)). A study by K A Fleming; Susan Horton; Michael L. Wilson; Rifat Atun; Kristen DeStigter; John Flanigan; Shahin Sayed; Pierrick Adam; Bertha Aguilar; Savvas Andronikou; Catharina Boehme; William Cherniak; Any Cheung; Bernice Dahn; Lluís Donoso-Bach; Tania S.

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## Conclusion

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This ethnographic study concludes that humanitarian access negotiations in active conflict, from an African Union perspective, constitute a dynamic and morally contingent practice of principled compromise. The findings illustrate that while the AU's normative framework is firmly anchored in international humanitarian law and the principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality, its operational praxis in contexts like Uganda is necessarily adaptive and pragmatic. Field evidence indicates that successful negotiations are less about rigid adherence to doctrine and more about the strategic, context-sensitive brokerage of access, wherein compromise is not a failure of principle but a tactical necessity for achieving humanitarian outcomes.

This continuous negotiation between ideal-type principles and the realities of the battlefield forms the core of the AU's distinctive approach. The primary contribution of this research lies in its empirical and theoretical elaboration of 'principled compromise' as a central, legitimate modality of humanitarian action within a regional intergovernmental framework. It moves beyond the often binary debates between purist and pragmatist positions in the literature, demonstrating how the AU navigates this tension through a practised, iterative ethics.

The study thereby enriches political science understandings of how normative frameworks are enacted and reinterpreted by regional actors in complex emergencies, offering a more nuanced vocabulary for analysing the grey areas of humanitarian diplomacy. For Uganda, a key practical implication is the demonstrable utility of the AU's convening power and perceived neutrality in facilitating dialogues between the government and non-state actors where direct UN or bilateral engagement may be politically untenable. The Ugandan case suggests that leveraging the AU's regional legitimacy can create provisional, yet critical, humanitarian corridors even amidst deep-seated mutual distrust.

Consequently, Ugandan policymakers and humanitarian actors would be advised to more formally institutionalise channels for AU-facilitated negotiation protocols within national disaster response frameworks, thereby embedding this regional asset into contingency planning. A critical next step for research and policy is to investigate the long-term consequences of repeated tactical compromises on the perceived integrity and operational security of humanitarian actors in the region. Future work should therefore adopt a longitudinal approach to trace how successive access agreements, each contextually rational, may cumulatively reshape the humanitarian space and the AU's own normative authority.

Ultimately, this study underscores that in the theatre of African conflicts, humanitarian access is seldom granted but is painstakingly negotiated—a process where principled compromise, as practised by the AU, remains an indispensable, if imperfect, art.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, field-based analysis of the African Union's (AU) operational role in facilitating humanitarian access within Uganda's conflict-affected regions from 2021 to 2026. It advances scholarly understanding by critically examining the negotiation processes between AU actors, state authorities, and non-state armed groups, revealing the complex interplay between principled frameworks and pragmatic compromise.

The research offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners by documenting context-specific strategies and the tangible consequences of negotiated access, thereby informing more effective and ethically grounded humanitarian diplomacy in active conflict settings.

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