# CASE EXAMPLE

## People-Centered Approach: Recognizing Communities as the Experts

*The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of IRC or the Swedish Development Agency (Sida)

# INTRODUCTION[1]

**Case Example:** A small community in a disputed area faced consistent threats from landmines and frequent shootings by armed actors. As a result, the government stopped operating public services, including the local bus network, and many young people fled. The most vulnerable individuals, including the elderly and those without the means to escape, were left behind. If they needed to see a doctor or seek other services beyond their immediate neighborhood, they were forced to walk five to 10 kilometers, exposing themselves to potential landmines and crossfire.

A humanitarian INGO sought to address these protection risks by providing small grants to buy buses and negotiating with the armed actors present to try to reduce shootings. When the INGO presented their plan to the local community, they responded that they would prefer for the state to restore the bus service. As a result, the INGO stepped back and the community stepped forward. Community representatives advocated to the Ministry of Transportation to resume bus services, and following a reevaluation of the security situation, the ministry obliged. The community representatives further advocated to the armed actors to ensure the safe passage of buses, which the armed group agreed to. By asserting their own solutions, the community achieved desirable and sustainable protection outcomes.

As demonstrated in this example, impactful results-based protection often relies on putting people at the center of humanitarian action, not only by consulting them to understand their needs, but by trusting them to define and implement their own protection risk reduction strategies. The People-Centered Approach (PCA) is a protection programming model aimed at guiding humanitarian organizations to deliberately create space for engaging communities in a way that puts their concerns, capacities, rights, and dignity at the heart of programming.

The PCA is a participatory, area-based approach that aims to generate integrated protection responses working directly with people for greater relevance, effectiveness, and accountability of programming in humanitarian settings. While humanitarian programming tends to rely on needs assessments as the basis for activity design, the PCA adopts a threats-based analysis that focuses on people's concerns and priorities, guiding them in the development of their own protection strategies to reduce threats and achieve meaningful protection outcomes. The PCA works collaboratively with

**RBP POINT:** RBP Point: A threat-based analysis, rather than a need-based analysis, helps to keep protection risk reduction at the center of the project design.

Since 2015, Marta Pawlak has worked for various international humanitarian organizations and has been continuously inspired to design programming directly with communities. She subsequently began facilitating workshops on the PCA for other field practitioners across diverse contexts—training over 750 people to date—which enabled her to refine the approach. Building on these experiences, Marta consolidated the principles and processes into the PCA roadmap. She currently works for ICRC and is continuing to support the expansion of the PCA model in her private capacity.

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[1] *The author confirms that the views and opinions expressed in this publication are entirely their own. They do not in any way constitute the official view or position of the ICRC. The author confirms that every effort has been made to comply with their ongoing duty of discretion regarding activities undertaken during employment with the ICRC.*

community members to identify multi-disciplinary approaches that harness the complementary expertise and profiles of diverse actors. The PCA offers a way to operationalize the Centrality of Protection and ensures that accountability to affected populations is at the core of all interventions. The PCA is realized through a set of processes and principles that recognizes the agency of communities throughout all stages of engagement.

## THE PCA ROADMAP

**RBP POINT:** The key components of a protection analysis.

The PCA Roadmap proposes an eight-step process involving two phases: planning and implementation.

**RBP POINT:** Begin from the perspective of affected communities.

Community stakeholders are involved in every step of this Roadmap.

The process starts with organizations developing a basic understanding of the context, including conflict dynamics, relevant stakeholders, and culture. Organizations and communities then analyze specific threats, vulnerabilities, capacities, and underlying causes that affect local people, often through a participatory workshop. In the consolidation step, organizations triangulate this analysis with secondary sources and assess which approaches they may or may not be able to support due to internal mandates and constraints.



People-Centered Approach Roadmap
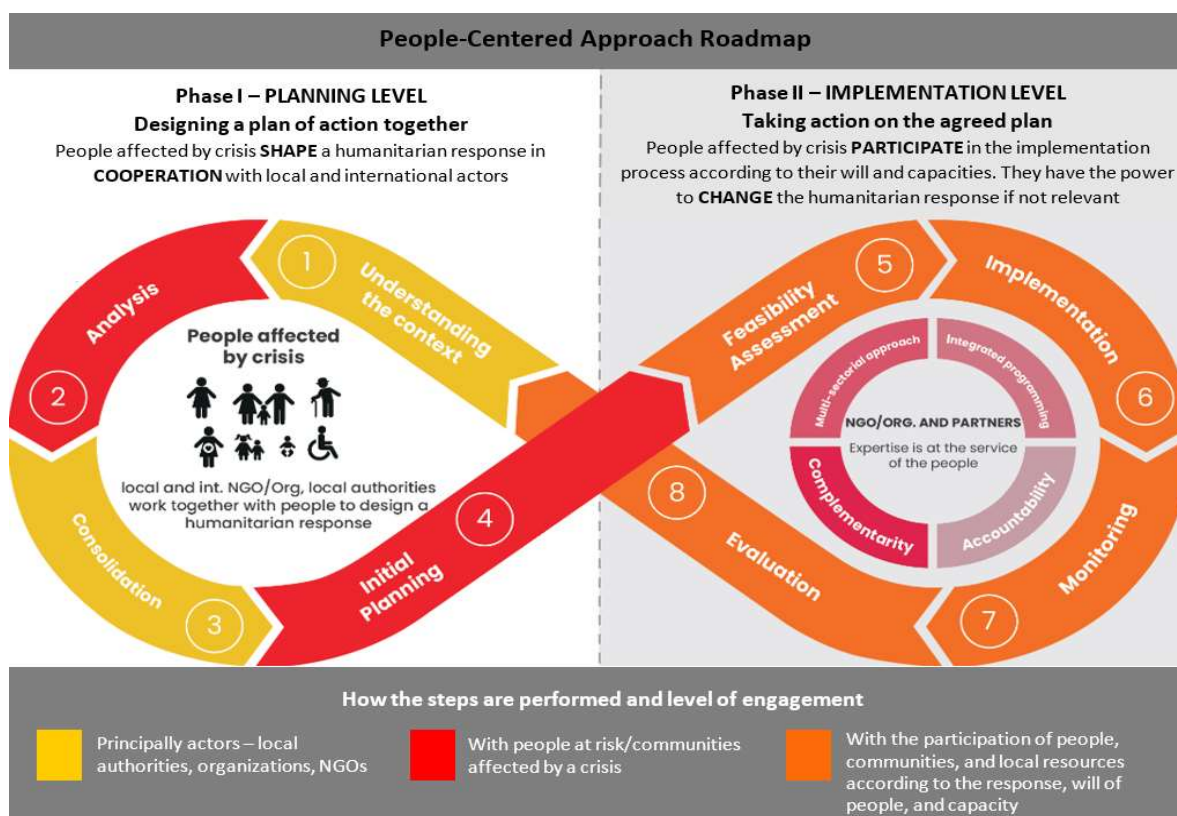
Organizations and communities then collaborate on developing initial planning during a workshop, ensuring that all actions abide by do no harm principles and delegating roles and responsibilities. Organizations and communities conduct feasibility assessments to ensure that all proposed steps are actionable within the current context. Finally, all actors implement identified multi-disciplinary activities according to their resources and abilities. Organizations conduct regular consultations with community members to monitor progress and adapt activities as needed. Organizations should also evaluate the success of their approaches and share findings with communities to enable continuous improvement of protection responses.

The above steps that support PCA are fully achieved when organizations work at the institutional level to ensure that internal policies and practices enable people-centered approaches. Organizations should take stock of their strategic planning documents, technical tools, cultural norms, and institutional will to identify good practices that should be reinforced and areas that require further adaptation. This may

> **RBP ENABLER:** In addition to their tools and methods, organizations must consider enablers—including resources, systems, and culture—which are equally as important to achieving protection outcomes.

require dedicated training and mentorship to fully integrate PCA principles and processes. Management support is an essential ingredient for resisting the inclination for rapid response; instead, teams should be encouraged to take the time and space needed to engage with affected communities and collaborate with other actors in a multi-disciplinary way. They may also consider engaging senior leadership and donors to ensure that existing project management and funding expectations and procedures enable the flexibility and extended timelines required for the PCA. The PCA is most successful when various organizations working in a target area come together and agree to jointly implement the PCA and contribute the necessary resources.

> "At the basis of this approach is the notion that self-determination is an essential element of human dignity. The PCA recognizes that affected communities are experts of their own situation, capable first responders, and agents of their own protection and change."
>
> - Marta Pawlak, Initiator of the People-Centered Approach

## FOSTERING MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Very often, as humanitarians, we believe that "we do it already," we already put communities at the center of our work. However, there is an important distinction between "consulting" and "engaging" with people. When we consult people, we often use questionnaires to ask them about their needs, offer them a menu of

pre-designed activities, do our own analysis to design a humanitarian response, and recruit beneficiaries based on their perceived alignment with the selected interventions. This supply-driven approach is often much more efficient in emergency contexts. However, it often misses critical opportunities to build on existing capacities and consider people's self-determination.

Genuinely engaging with people means handing over the reins and recognizing that affected communities have the power to co-design humanitarian responses and, where possible, co-implement them. It recognizes people's voice in identifying their main concerns, determining their own needs, and designing their own solutions. It acknowledges the diversity of people forming a community and that they have different needs and capacities. As a result, the PCA Roadmap systematically enables the active participation of communities throughout every stage of the process, from analysis to design and evaluation. Depending on the type of intervention—as well as community capacities, resources, and will—they may also be involved in implementation. This approach requires more time during the planning phase of the PCA Roadmap, but ultimately has the potential to produce more effective and durable protection outcomes.

> **RBP ENABLER:** Organizations must be aware of—and push for—sufficient time to truly engage with communities. Donors must acknowledge this and fund it.

> **Case Example:** During a workshop, a group of women shared their concerns about the risk of being sexually assaulted by local armed actors when they collect firewood. Some women reported that they stopped collecting firewood and started buying it at the local market instead. Others did not have the means to buy it in the market or saw it as a lucrative source of income to continue collecting firewood and selling it at the market. The women who continued collecting firewood explained how they are trying to reduce the risks that they face: "One day before going to the bush, we requested to meet the commander of the armed group that is attacking us. We ask them to protect us. We know they are the ones harming us, but we want to raise in them the feeling of responsibility and turn them to our protectors."
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> The women asked if the humanitarian organization could help them in their negotiation efforts by improving their skills or accompanying them. The humanitarian organization explained that this is not a service that they can offer; however, they could conduct an assessment and raise the issue in a confidential dialogue with the armed group. One of the women retorted, "Why would you speak about us without us? And most of your members, you are going to leave this place and we will remain here. We already have a dialogue with them. Why can't you come with us and help us to get our message stronger?"

Sometimes in the PCA process, communities may propose solutions that are beyond the scope of activities that organizations typically implement. Embedding meaningful participation calls for organizations to creatively explore new approaches and demands full transparency along the way. In the case example above, the organization heard the women's demands and eventually developed a program for humanitarian mediation to include affected communities in protection dialogue with diverse actors who influence their

safety. Alternatively, the community may suggest solutions that are not in line with international norms or can be harmful to a specific segment of the community (e.g., child labor as a coping mechanism for low household income); that do not comply with humanitarian principles (e.g., building trenches as to enable self-protection); for which sufficient quality cannot be ensured (e.g., providing dressing kits without medical staff); or for which humanitarian actors do not want to be held accountable (e.g., helping widows find husbands to reduce their vulnerability). In the PCA process, these types of limitations, constraints, and do no harm concerns are consistently discussed with community members to make informed decisions and uphold accountability to communities.

# STARTING WITH A BLANK SLATE

The PCA requires organizations to enter communities with humility and a blank slate, not with a menu of pre-determined activities. During the initial analysis workshop, the first question is often: "What worries you?" This broad scope creates space for community members to identify the issues that are important to them, and start the conversations from what they see as important. These open discussions encourage individuals to clearly voice their concerns, perspectives, and knowledge of the context. They can also be paired with participatory analysis tools, such as pair-wise ranking, problem trees, and the protection onion. Concretely, the PCA provides a platform where communities can share their analysis of threats and coping strategies and suggest potential solutions without resorting to questionnaires at the initial stage.

**RBP POINT:** A wide variety of participatory methods can be used to understand protection risks facing communities. The specific method is less important than the underlying principles that you are embedding and understanding that you are co-developing.

While the PCA uses a protection lens to approach communities' priorities and concerns, it also recognizes the correlation between safety and protection, on the one hand, and basic needs and services, on the other. Using a threat-based analysis as the entry point, rather than a need-based

**Case Example:** During a PCA workshop, a group of farmers identified a lack of food as their main concern. The humanitarian organization facilitating the workshop did not initially recognize this issue as a relevant protection concern. After probing further, they learned that the farmers could not access their agricultural fields because they were close to disputed areas and the farmers risked being caught in the crossfire. The farmers had opted to stop tending their fields but suffered from a loss of livelihoods and food shortages. In consultation with the farmers, the humanitarian organization decided to provide special value crops that require less water so that the farmers did not have to spend as much time in their fields. They also accompanied the farmers to negotiate with local armed actors to ensure their safe passage on specific days so that the farmers could resuming tending to their fields.

approach, helps create space for communities to speak more broadly about the risks they are experiencing. These are not always identified by communities or humanitarian organizations as protection risks; however, further discussion often demonstrates how protection concerns can be the causes and/or consequences of the identified concerns. Moreover, the understanding of "protection" might be different for a community than it is for humanitarian actors. For most humanitarian actors, "protection" refers to notions of risk reduction, responsibilities of duty bearers, and respect of rights. For affected people, "protection" is frequently understood as physical safety, as well as access to resources and information that enable their safety, or as connection to people who can influence their safety. What is most important is to develop a common understanding of the concerns causing harm to the affected community, of the available resources, and of potential solutions that can be addressed at different levels, by different actors, alongside the community.

> "During trainings, I ask people to stop thinking about checking boxes. Let's deconstruct what you have learned! Come with a blank slate. For many, it's intimidating to accept that you're going to go and sit with the community and allow them to tell you the risks they care about. The only real skillset needed is to be curious; let yourself be guided by the community."
>
> - Marta Pawlak, Initiator of the People-Centered Approach

In many cases, the PCA is likely to generate suggested solutions that are beyond the typical portfolio of protection activities the organization was implementing. Wherever possible, organizations should aim to honor the "blank slate" approach by following through on the identified protection strategies. While not all options may be possible within the scope of humanitarian principles, internal mandates, resources, and technical expertise, committing to supporting communities in ways that they believe will best achieve protection outcomes is essential to preserving their dignity and self-determination.

> RBP POINT: Humanitarians must become more comfortable reaching out to non-humanitarian actors, who can often provide contributions that humanitarians cannot. This supports a multi-disciplinary approach that is needed to achieve protection outcomes.

## EMBRACING COMPLEMENTARITY

The PCA adopts a principle of complementarity in which diverse actors join efforts based on their comparative advantage to implement the most effective and efficient humanitarian response. This complementarity may occur between actors with different sectoral expertise, across the humanitarian-

development-peacebuilding spectrum, and with actors across the local, regional, national, and international levels. A true spirit of complementarity strengthens partnerships, enables more coherent action for affected people, and avoids the duplication of activities and assessment fatigue in communities.

It is important for humanitarian organizations to recognize that before external support is deployed, local communities and existing structures often serve as the first responders. The PCA seeks to build on these capacities, rather than replacing or, at worst, undermining them. The PCA ensures that international organizations are engaging local actors in genuine partnership, rather than co-opting local actors to transfer risk or to serve as force multipliers for their own activities. While the PCA often places international actors as the facilitators of the PCA process, in some cases, humanitarian organizations simply offer different resources, such as giving local actors access to reputational capital and funding that they wouldn't otherwise be able to tap into. Based on their respective capacities and positions, local and international actors each implement parts of the solution they can best contribute to.

> **Case Example:** Community members identified child labor as a harmful coping strategy taken in response to poor household income. In collaboration with early recovery and protection actors, local social workers and a local women's association organized a joint session with parliamentarians to advocate for an increase in the number of people who could benefit from the state welfare system and to increase the amount of the allowance. The session had a positive impact, compelling the parliamentarians to review their criteria to access the welfare benefits. Meanwhile, the early recovery and protection actors supported illiterate female heads-of-household to apply for the allowance.

The PCA therefore encourages actors to go beyond information exchange and referral among agencies, to engage in joint assessment, analysis, and planning. This collaborative process can help identify collective outcomes as defined by communities, as well as relative areas of expertise and available resources for response, so that implementation can harness opportunities for synergy. As a result, the team or organization best positioned implements that part of the solution. Moreover, when humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors collaborate, responses are often able to not only address immediate protection concerns, but also set the foundation for addressing the drivers of conflict. Joint monitoring and evaluation can also enable collective learning and adaptation.