

Somalia Action-Based Research Field Update: Trends Emerging from Jowhar, Abudwaq and Las'anood

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Background on Results-Based Protection and Action-Based Research

Results-Based Protection (RBP) emphasizes the importance of adopting a community-centric approach, fostering continuous learning and adaptation, and investing in relationships and strategic collaboration to achieve protection outcomes and reduce risks. Essentially, RBP is an outcome-based framework that underpins how humanitarians, regardless of sector, can proactively reduce the violence, coercion, and deliberate deprivation that people face in crises.

InterAction's Action-Based Research (ABR) initiative is an effort to support the institutionalization of RBP at the field level by engaging humanitarian actors and others across disciplines to integrate outcome-oriented approaches into their operations. The ABR pilot assists organizations in analyzing protection risks from the perspectives of affected communities in order to develop context-specific theories of change and promotes the uptake of outcome-oriented ways of working to address protection risks.

The ABR pilot specifically considers conflict-induced hunger. It is broadly understood that state and non-state parties to conflict can cause hunger and starvation through acts such as forcing displacement and restricting people's movements, blocking food aid and restricting access of humanitarian actors to populations, or selectively destroying food-producing infrastructure. Additionally, food insecurity contributes to risks such as family separation, gender-based violence, and physical attacks as people search for food, water, and access to services. Nonetheless, the concrete links between conflict, food insecurity, and protection risks as experienced by populations at risk are not always well understood or reflected in project design and implementation.

Action-Based Research in Somalia

In Somalia, InterAction is coordinating with WFP and NRC on the implementation of the ABR initiative. The project began in earnest in December 2023, with the formation of the Somalia Country Group. Membership of the Country Group is diverse, comprised of national and international NGOs selected for their expertise in relevant topics and regions of Somalia. This includes minority-led organizations, as well as actors focused on both food security and protection.

The ABR modality for developing results-based protection programming is underpinned by quality, participatory field research focused on understanding protection risks, rather than a focus on humanitarian needs that often informs humanitarian action. In December of last year, members of the Country Group dedicated members of field staff to be trained by InterAction on qualitative research methods that seek to draw out the nuances of food security, conflict, and protection as communities understand them. Dozens of FGDs and KIIs were conducted in January in three target locations: Jowhar, Abudwaq, and Las'anood. The ABR approach to developing humanitarian programming is rooted in undertaking a context-specific protection analysis, as any effort to reduce a protection risk must be grounded in the lived experience of that risk.

Across Somalia, 22 percent of the population is experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or 4). The key drivers of food insecurity are largely understood to be climate shocks including years of below-average and poorly distributed rainfall, coupled with intense flooding in some locations, and multi-season drought in pastoral areas. However, the lived experience of populations reveals an intricate relationship between these climate shocks and conflict dynamics, which varies across locations and by type of conflict.

Selected Findings from Data Collection Phase

The cyclical nature of food insecurity and conflict, particularly evident in inter-clan conflicts, perpetuates resource disputes, diminishes community resilience, and exacerbates protection risks. Abudwaq offers a prime example of this relationship, one that was found to be repeated in the other research locations. There, according to communities, years of droughts have led to competition over limited resources of pastureland and water points, inflaming old clan tensions and inflaming new ones, prompting the militarization of communities. Participants across Abudwaq reported selling livestock for weaponry and described how male heads of households removed themselves from communities and cease livestock husbandry to join clan militia encampments. This in turn has increased vulnerabilities, particularly among women and children, and disrupted livelihoods, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of risk. A respondent from Bengelle recounted that, after years of drought decimating his livestock, he was forced to sell a handful of his few remaining goats to buy guns to protect his family from militia raids. Increased rainfall in 2021 brought him a sense of optimism, only to have it dashed by a locust invasion that decimated his remaining herds. He and his family had no choice but to displace to Abudwaq town.

While some participants attributed their displacement to climate shocks, conflict-induced displacement was far more common, often accompanied by property destruction and asset theft. One woman in Bulo-Sheikh shared how “armed men set fire to our house and farms, leaving nothing but ashes. They also stole all my goats and cattle, robbing us of our livelihood.” She went on to describe that her family has never succeeded in having sufficient access to food, water, or shelter while displaced. “Living in fear and uncertainty has become our way of life; the chaos and violence around us is inescapable.” Across all three locations, respondents from both host communities and among IDPs shared that conflict-related displacement has resulted in food insecurity in displaced camps and strains on host community markets. Moreover, as conflict restricts the ability to import food and goods, the quantity and diversity of food further deteriorates. At the same time, the sell-off of assets, especially livestock, for the arming of clan militias has resulted in price inflation.

The impacts of Somalia’s numerous political conflicts had somewhat different, less cyclical, implications for food security. Armed actors, including Al-Shabaab and the Somaliland Armed Forces, are associated with impediments to freedom of movement and forced relocation, both of which depress local economies and result in food insecurity. Al-Shabaab was reported to regularly exacerbate climate risks by breaking riverbanks, thereby causing floods, and blocking roads with the aim of forcing travelers through their territory, allowing them to impose taxes on vehicles for financial gain. In Las’anood, years of targeted killing, especially of prominent businesspeople and community leaders, and the expulsion of minority clans decimated the local economy.

Formulating Theories of Change

The Country Group considered these and other findings in the formulation of five theories of change addressing protection risks linked to food insecurity. Protection risks were prioritized according to their prevalence and severity in targeted communities, as well as links to food insecurity and feasibility of impact by multi-sectoral humanitarian programming. This process involved interrogating assumptions about these relationships and engaging in community validation exercises. The validation exercise offers an opportunity for humanitarians and communities to co-design intervention strategies to achieve protection outcomes. The data from this exercise, in which community members were invited to comment on the assumptions and logic flows of the Country Group members, is being analyzed. Moving forward, the ABR initiative will develop multi-sector, multi-agency implementation strategies to support the theories of change with an expanded field of stakeholders, with anticipated progress in May of this year. These implementation strategies will emphasize adapting existing programming to be more responsive to community experience of conflict-induced food insecurity and designing new programs to reduce protection risks.

Looking Forward into Action-Based Research in Somalia

The implementation strategies will be accompanied by the creation of tailored evaluation frameworks with MEAL specialists from Country Group members that will emphasize the use of outcome-oriented measurement approaches. The frameworks will include milestones for assessing progress of programs in contributing to the reduction of risks according to the perceptions of affected communities.