



Summary update of ABR progress in Colombia

The RBP team visited Colombia and held a workshop on May 7th and 8th with 12 representatives from WFP, CARE, PLAN, SoyDoy, and NRC. The purpose was to build on the initial protection analysis conducted in 2023 to identify 1-2 priority protection risks in Quibdó and Tibú. The workshop then used those risks to develop 'RBP-ready' theories of change (see inset) based on the protection risk equation, which structures protection analysis of a specific risk based on a highly contextualized understanding of the existing threats (the source of the risk), vulnerabilities (factors that make individuals or groups susceptible to specific threats) and capacities (individual or collective strategies to mitigate threats). In the workshop, participants identified economic coercion by armed groups in rural Tibú, confinement and mobility restrictions by armed groups in rural Quibdó and forced recruitment and sexual exploitation of young women and girls by urban gangs in Quibdó as priority risks. Using these protection risks, we developed draft RBP-Ready theories of change that explored pathways for achieving protection outcomes. For example, in Tibú building from the risk equation, the theories of change identified pathways to reduce the threats (ex. spaces of direct negotiation with armed actors), mitigate vulnerabilities (ex. developing economic opportunities for communities involved in illegal economies), and strengthening community capacities (ex. fortifying existing *campesino* organizing and women's networks as self-protection systems).

Understanding RBP-ready Theories of Change

RBP-ready TOCs differ from standard sector/organization-specific ones:

- **Specific:** based on context-specific protection risk analysis using the risk canvas
- **Comprehensive:** covers each component of protection risk (Threat, Vulnerability, Capacity) using the risk equation
- **Outcome-Focused:** The goal is reduced risk. Pathways within the ToC lead to change that will reduce the threat, reduce vulnerability to the threat, and increase capacity to overcome the threat.
- **Multi-disciplinary:** Brings together actors from humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, human rights, and others.
- **Strategic:** Generates a roadmap for change identifying relevant contributions without focusing on organization-specific activities
- **Community-driven:** built through community engagement, validation, and feedback.
- **Evidence-Informed:** Emphasizes and tests causal assumptions vs activity or background assumptions.
- **Iterative and Adaptive:** Supports real-time learning about what is working and what is not.



Background to ABR work in Colombia

The RBP team's [Action-Based Research \(ABR\) project](#) in Colombia has been ongoing since early 2023, working to understand the protection risks at the nexus of conflict and food insecurity in the municipalities of Quibdó and Tibú.¹ Quibdó, in the Pacific coast department of Chocó is demographically unique for Colombia, as nearly 90% of Quibdó's 129,000 inhabitants are Afro-Colombian. Chocó ranks among the lowest departments in Colombia in terms of human development: WFP estimated in 2023 that about 45% of the region was food insecure.² Multiple armed groups are active in the region, controlling illegal mining, drug trafficking, extortion, and other illegal activity. Tibú, a municipality at the border with Venezuela, has increasingly served as a crossroads for migrants and refugees and a strategic operating ground for the various armed groups that have been jockeying for control of the Catatumbo region. The municipality consistently ranks as one of the densest cultivations of coca in the country;³ roughly 40% of the population is food insecure.⁴



Analysis and Reflections of the RBP-Ready Theory of Change workshop

The theory of change workshop focused on translating the findings from these focus groups into potential pathways to reducing the risks identified by the affected population, as a starting point towards building a community-validated strategy of implementing and measuring protection outcomes. The experiences of the team in the workshop point to some important learning points on the implementation of outcome-based approaches to protection, especially regarding shifting the perspectives of humanitarian actors and unpacking the complexities of community-driven approaches.

Shifting Humanitarian Approaches: Generating Specific, Comprehensive, Multi-disciplinary Theories of Change

Results-Based Protection encapsulates a new outcome-oriented approach to analyzing, designing, implementing, and measuring humanitarian action in support of protection outcomes; as such, we are working towards shifting humanitarian actors out of their established operating patterns towards more outcome-oriented approaches. An initial hurdle was that partners were resistant to engaging in a workshop on building a theory of change, as they felt the tool was

¹ The two municipalities were prioritized for their interlocking affectations of decades of conflict and persistent food insecurity. Using community-driven methods, a research team led by CARE, the World Food Program (WFP), and InterAction engaged diverse populations in both municipalities, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and Venezuelan migrants. Focus groups used narrative and qualitative approaches to explore communities' lived experiences of food insecurity and protection.

² World Food Programme. 2023. "Food Security Assessment for the Colombian Population.

³ UNODC Research. 2023. "Colombia: Monitoreo de Los Territorios Con Presencia de Cultivos de Coca 2022." https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia_Monitoreo_2022

⁴ World Food Programme. 2023.



something they were already deeply familiar with. Yet in the workshop, it was evident that participants were not aligned with some of the unique components of the RBP-Ready theories of change. A core component of the RBP approach is the importance of a specific, contextualized approach to defining risks and possible responses: for example, different kinds of gender-based violence (Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), etc.) against different gender/age/identity categories likely relate to a completely different set of threat actors, vulnerabilities and capacities; similarly, this mix of factors is unlikely to be mirrored in different places.

However, participants were hesitant to specify in explicit detail a contextualized risk, preferring to discuss a risk factor such as GBV or economic coercion in generalized and broad terms in the municipality. In fact, participants expressed concern that a highly specified risk could result in a too narrow or inflexible strategy. Similarly, our team noted a tendency to develop responses based on existing programming that the partners are already highly familiar with, rather than developing adaptive, contextualized programmatic responses based on the community-informed protection analysis.

Furthermore, although the RBP approach emphasizes theories of change that comprehensively cover all components of risk (threats, vulnerabilities, capacities), and holistically consider the potential multidisciplinary engagement with development, peacebuilding, and human rights actors in addition to traditional humanitarian actors, the participants had real questions about which kinds of work are within the purview of the theory of change strategy-building. Participants expressed serious hesitation about considering approaches that directly involved the threat actors (armed groups and gangs) as none of the present organizations had real capabilities working with armed actors. Furthermore, when discussing risks that involved labor exploitation, or advocacy with the Colombian government to advance development and human rights issues, participants expressed that although they understood the relevance of these issues to the identified risks, such work was outside the bounds of humanitarian approaches. While we were able to have breakthroughs by collectively considering which other organizations might be interested in supplementing our work, our partners still had ongoing questions about the importance of balancing feasibility and comprehensiveness in a theory of change.

Challenges to Effective Community-Driven Methods

A second area for learning involves the complexities of community participation in humanitarian strategy building, especially around managing expectations with community partners. The next step of the ABR process following the theories of change is community validation. Community validation is the process of returning the RBP-ready theories of change for discussion with the communities, in order to solicit their input and adaptations. In anticipation of this step, workshop participants again pointed to the potential feasibility issues of a comprehensive ToC that identifies strategies beyond traditional humanitarian work. Participants warned that by presenting strategies beyond their organization's immediate control, they were likely to generate unrealistic expectations from the community. Our discussion pointed to the need for a balanced approach: the act of visiting a community and soliciting input inherently generates expectations for action



that can be (somewhat) managed by careful discussions with community leaders about the intended outcomes of a project. Nevertheless, participants agreed on the necessity of generating the strongest possible internal buy-in for the project before returning to the communities.

A related issue for collective learning around community participation relates to “participation fatigue”, which refers to the exhaustion or disillusionment experienced by community members due to repeated involvement in participatory processes without seeing tangible results. This issue is especially relevant to Colombia, where community leaders have frequently critiqued the tendency of researchers and practitioners to ‘over-diagnose’ and/or apply extractive research approaches in soliciting community input.⁵ This issue emerged when discussing the structure of the ABR project, in which we return to the communities to validate the theories of change before constructing action plans or securing funding for specific projects. The ABR approach prioritizes the importance of community input to shape broader strategy over the risk that community-validated projects may go unfunded, which in turn could jeopardize organizational reputations and relationships within the communities. Once again, participants agreed that the best way to balance the need for input and the risk of fatigue was to maximize their organization’s commitment to the project before returning to the community. Participants also discussed the possibility of smaller, ‘light-touch’ projects that could be rapidly implemented as confidence-building measures.

⁵ Centre for Spatial, Environmental and Cultural Politics. 2022. Practices of relationality: Conversations to imagine social research otherwise. University of Brighton. Retrieved June 10, 2024, from <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/csecp/2022/10/26/practices-of-relationality-conversations-to-imagine-social-research-otherwise/>