Results-Based Protection in Practice

Colombia: Community Validation as a Pathway to Achieving Protection Outcomes

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This case example looks at how using a results-based approach to protection, emphasizing the use of community validation, can lead to stronger protection outcomes

Results-Based Protection (RBP) promotes a people-centered approach to reducing protection risks, grounded in the principle that affected populations are essential partners in identifying and understanding risks and appropriate responses. When communities are engaged throughout the program cycle—from risk analysis and prioritization to strategy design, implementation, and evaluation—they help surface high-impact opportunities, adapt strategies to shifting dynamics and local contexts, and provide insight into the outcomes of humanitarian programming.

While community participation has become a ubiquitous buzzword in the humanitarian sector, few practical resources guide practitioners on how to engage communities as part of an outcome-oriented approach to reducing protection risks. This case example addresses that gap by illustrating an RBP-informed community participation model in program design and exploring how other humanitarian actors can replicate these tools.

Specifically, we engage here with the concept of community validation, which is about ensuring that affected communities agree with a proposed humanitarian strategy for risk

WHAT IS COMMUNITY VALIDATION FOR PROTECTION?

Community Validation is a process through which affected communities review, refine, and approve theories of change developed by humanitarian actors based on previous need/risk analysis. Although linked to the findings of an initial context analysis, it stands as a unique engagement, functioning as a feedback loop within the RBP framework, ensuring that potential interventions remain relevant, feasible, and aligned with evolving local understandings of protection risks.

reduction. It is a consultation process where community members can discuss, refine, contextualize, or dramatically change pathways for change and/or suggested activities.

The following discussion provides an overview of the community validation experience of an InterAction-supported consortium of organizations operating in Colombia, touching on the structure of the validation exercise and the impacts this process had on the consortium's strategy. In lieu of a structured guide for other organizations to implement a community validation process, the discussion here encourages a flexible approach to validation through reflection on two key process decisions: where validation should take place and who it should reach. As such, the case study offers questions to consider for other organizations adapting community validation to their organizational timelines, capacity, and operational contexts.

Validation Overview in Colombia

Broadly, this Action-Based Research (ABR) project is a multidisciplinary effort using results-based protection (RBP) to develop and implement integrated, context-specific strategies that help prevent and reduce protection risks linked to conflict-induced food insecurity. The ABR project in Colombia has been ongoing since 2023, working in consortium with a group of international and local NGOs (referred to hereafter as the "country team") to respond to community-prioritized protection risks at the nexus of conflict and food insecurity in two municipalities of Colombia, Quibdó[1] and Tibú[2]. Both municipalities are heavily affected by interlocking effects of decades of conflict and state underdevelopment.

Building on participatory research conducted in 2023, InterAction and the country team developed theories of change in May 2024 to guide programming in Tibú and

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1In Quibdó, participant organizations include the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), World Food Program (WFP), Geneva Call, COCOMACIA (High Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River), FISCH (Inter-Ethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó), ATICH (Traditional Indigenous Association of Chocó), ASOVPICH (Association of Victims from the Indigenous Peoples of the Department of Chocó), and AVWOUNQ (Wounaan Victims Association of Quibdó).
2 In Tibú, participant organizations include the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), NRC, Geneva Call, CARE and the Tibú Diocese.

Quibdó. In October 2024, InterAction and the country team launched the community validation process.

The validation exercises in Tibú and Quibdó were structured differently based on security conditions and logistical constraints. In Tibú, the process involved three days of meetings at the Tibú Diocese with a wide range of social leaders. The first day was dedicated to workshops with local offices of the country team, focused on translating the existing theories of change into formats that were conceptually legible and responsive to local sensitivities around directly discussing the conflict. The second day was with 15 community leaders from two different indigenous resguardos, both of the Barí ethnic group. The final day included approximately 30 leaders from a diverse swath of rural civil society, including agricultural cooperatives, women's organizations, church leaders, and representatives of the Juntas de Acción Comunal (grassroots community boards recognized by the state).

RBP POINT: Risk is not experienced the same across a community. RBP emphasizes the need to engage a wide range of actors to help map how different groups experience protection risks. This enables humanitarians to make better decisions and develop more informed strategies that are inclusive and targeted.

In Quibdó, due to heightened insecurity at the time, the validation workshop took place in Bogotá under a more condensed timeframe, with 10 Afro-Colombian and six indigenous community representatives. Afro-Colombian leaders were from COCOMACIA (Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River) and FISCH (Inter-Ethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó). Indigenous participants represented three organizations of displaced people in the outskirts of the city of Quibdó: ATICH (Traditional Indigenous Association of Chocó), ASOVPICH (Association of Victims from the Indigenous Peoples of the Department of Chocó), and AVWOUNQ (Wounaan Victims Association of Quibdó).

Given the limited number of participants able to travel from Quibdó, the consortium allocated microgrants—approximately $25,000 USD in total—to four community-based organizations represented at the Bogotá workshop. These groups were tasked with replicating the validation exercise with the broader communities they represent. Over the course of six weeks, they organized community assemblies and made visits to more than 25 communities to review and discuss the consortium's strategic approach. These community-led consultations were accompanied by light-touch interventions designed to support community self-protection efforts as a confidence-building measure for the consortium's work. These included the distribution of visibility gear for the indigenous guardias (unarmed community self-protection and territorial policing groups), as well as workshops led by community leaders on self-protection strategies and conflict resolution.

RBP POINT: RBP emphasizes the importance of understanding communities' existing capacities to support protection outcomes. In this case example, taking advantage of existing community resources and knowledge is a high-impact way to use external resources efficiently and enhance existing efforts to address protection risks.

In Tibú, the ABR consortium's theory of change centers on reducing armed groups' systematic denial of community-based economies. It posits that by fostering dialogue with armed actors, supporting circular economies, and building community self-management capacities, communities will be better able to sustain their own food systems and build their autonomy from conflict economies.

In Quibdó, the consortium's theory of change focuses on reducing movement restrictions for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. It posits that engaging armed actors in dialogue around international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights, strengthening community economies, and promoting intercommunity self-protection mechanisms can enhance freedom of movement, ultimately improving food security by enabling access to land, markets, and economic opportunities.

Understanding the Impact of a Validation Process

A community validation process involves verifying and refining a theory of change that was developed through participatory analysis. The process can appear somewhat duplicative, as communities have already been consulted for program design, but validation serves as a "double-check" to confirm if program design reflects initial community inputs. Given the time and resources required, why invest in this additional round of participatory feedback?

An initial participatory data collection, while valuable, often faces challenges. Data collectors may use rigid tools such as surveys, limiting the possibilities for community input. Alternatively, they may engage communities in overly broad discussions with unclear scoping or direction, leading communities to propose interventions that are unrealistic, inefficient, or beyond the bounds of the project. Communities may not speak in terms that translate intuitively to humanitarian frameworks, and community suggestions are frequently vague and/or contradictory. A focus on protection risks may exacerbate these challenges by encouraging frank conversations directly about threat actors in which data collectors must interpret subtle cultural signals, silences, and "between the lines" information when community participants cannot speak freely or do not trust humanitarian organizations.

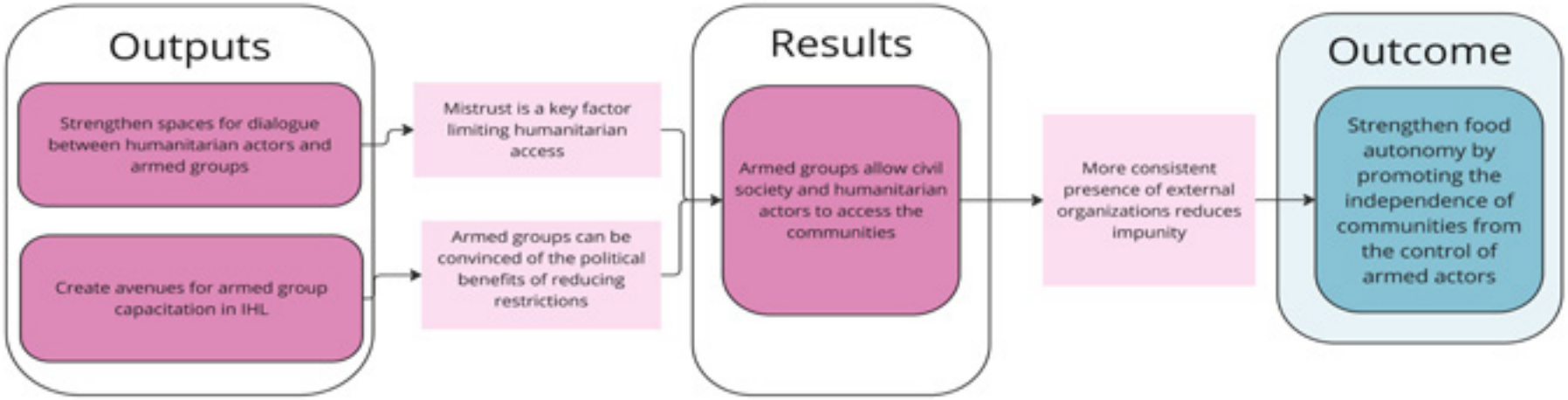
RBP POINT: Conflict-sensitive protection analysis requires reading between the lines. Silence, contradictions, and ambiguity often carry more meaning than direct statements in conflict-affected contexts.

Community validation addresses these issues by facilitating additional, more focused spaces for interaction between humanitarian organizations and communities. Program designers can ask specific questions about grey areas, contradictions, or changes in conflict dynamics from the initial data collection. Discussions are bounded and targeted by the theory of change itself, allowing for deeper engagement with the

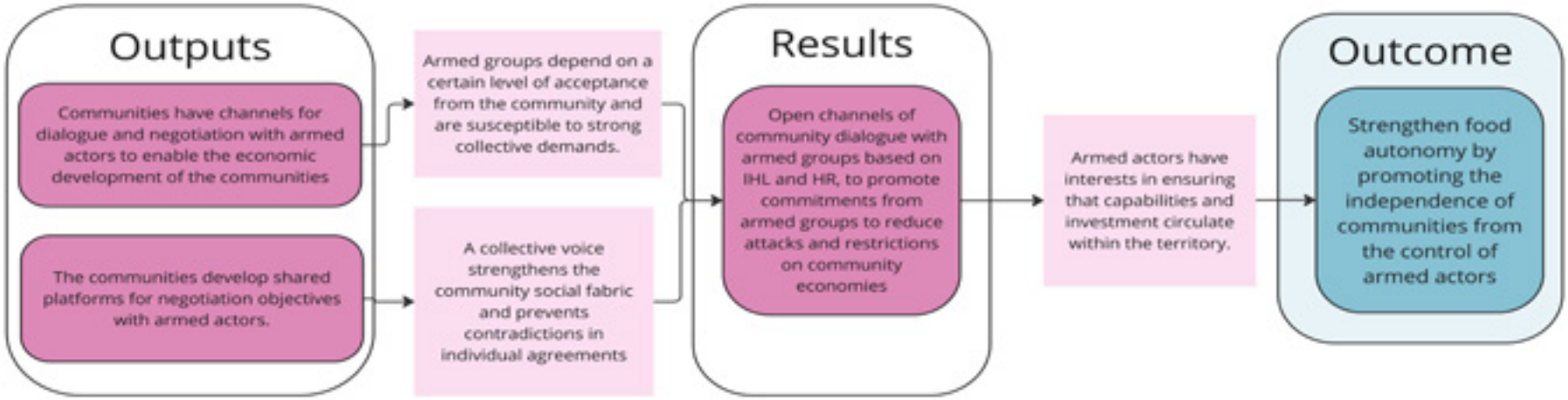
project's core objectives and fostering a collaborative co-design space that ensures the intervention remains feasible, community-driven, and responsive to emerging dynamics on the ground.

BELOW: EXCERPTS FROM THE ABR THEORY OF CHANGE FOR TIBU BEFORE AND AFTER THE OCTOBER 2024 VALIDATION

Pre-Validation Tibú strategy for threat reduction



Post-Validation Tibú strategy for threat reduction

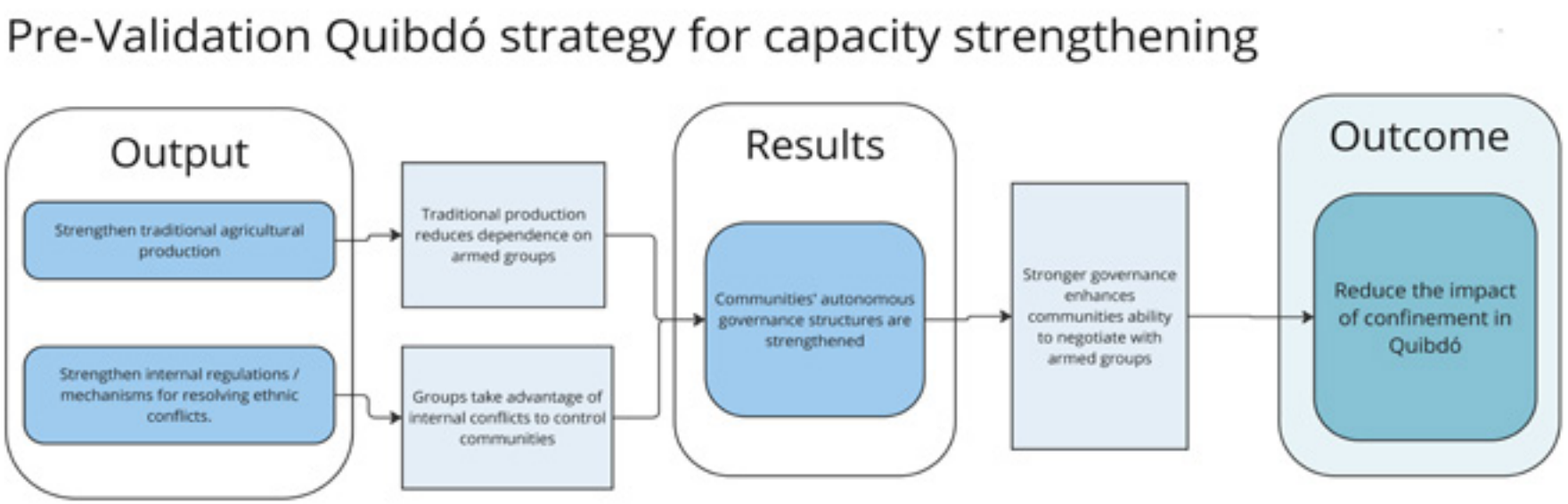


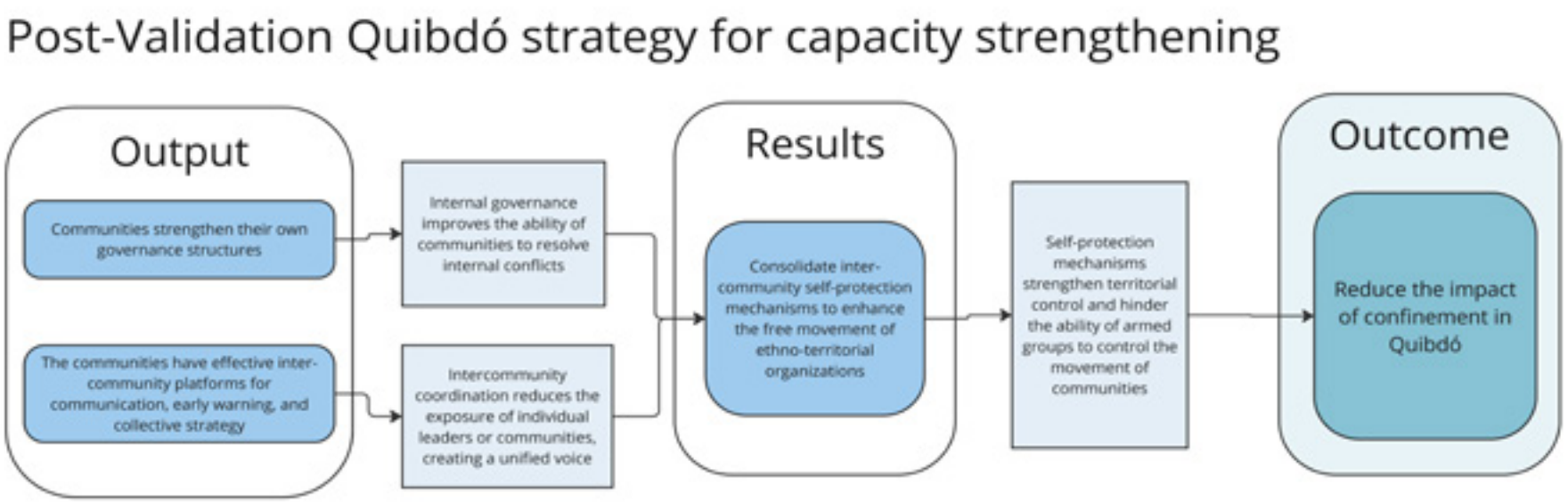
RBP POINT: Outcome-oriented approaches are rooted in what's actually possible within the operating environment, rather than idealized strategies.

The ABR validation exercise, which began in October 2024, reflects the importance of community validation. In both cases, communities significantly strengthened risk reduction strategies by reflecting on the "fit" of the proposals to their lived experiences. In Tibú, indigenous and campesino leaders rejected the threat reduction strategy proposed initially by the humanitarian organizations, which focused on strengthening humanitarian access based on a logic of protective accompaniment. Community leaders noted that civil society and humanitarian actors already have sufficient, if imperfect, access to communities. They argued that the more relevant threat to their food autonomy was that non-state armed groups (NSAG) would attack and destroy any community economic project outside of NSAG's control. As such, communities shifted focus from opening humanitarian access toward ensuring better capacitation and coordination among communities to engage in legal pathways to collectively advocate for access to licit markets.

In Quibdó, community leaders offered crucial refinements to the country group's strategy to reduce local confinement, which at that point focused on enabling rural communities to access their plots. Leaders pointed to the specific dynamics of confinement in Quibdó, which is the departmental capital and economic hub but also encompasses extensive rural areas. Both indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities described the necessity of movement across the rural-urban divide, seeking economic opportunity and food security. This movement forces them to cross invisible frontiers, dividing armed group territories and subjecting them to extortion and accusations of acting as informants. For that reason, the strategy of the country group shifted to focusing on freedom of mobility across these divides by strengthening early warning systems and engaging armed actors as part of ongoing legal dialogues, specifically on the legitimacy of community economic projects and market access.

RBP POINT: Refining a theory of change based on improved understandings of how communities experience protection risks reflects the heart of an outcome-oriented approach, iterating and improving in response to new data.





Above: Excerpts from the ABR Theory of Change for Quibdó before and after the October 2024 Validation.

Community Validation in Practice: Navigating Challenges and Embracing Adaptability

While the validation process in Colombia illustrated the rich potential of co-design processes with communities in a return visit, it also highlighted the real challenges and trade-offs in designing and executing an effective approach to validation. Critical considerations included: determining the appropriate location for validation, balancing safety and contextual learning, and dealing with concerns of assessment fatigue and assessing how much participation is "enough."

Tradeoffs of In-Territory and Off-Site Community Validation

First, community validation designers can decide where to hold consultations. Whereas the ABR country team held the first validation exercise in Tibú, security conditions in Quibdó forced the team to hold the workshop with Quibdó community leaders in the capital of Bogotá. This presented an opportunity to compare the experience of conducting theory of change validations in the conflict zone versus a secure, distant city.

RBP ENABLER: Flexible systems that were capable of adapting validation procedures to conditions on the ground were able to uncover new approaches and compelling data.

There was a stark contrast in the findings that emerged from the two locations. The Quibdó participants who came to Bogotá were far more willing to talk candidly about the conflict and NSAG and push for the necessity of dialogue with armed groups. Quibdó participants went as far as to reject approaches that overly focused on livelihoods without engaging directly with the armed groups as the source of threat to their livelihoods. In contrast, even though the Tibú meetings were held in the Church—widely regarded as the safest place to discuss the conflict in the municipality freely—community members preferred livelihoods-focused discussions and showed real reticence to discuss conflict and the actions of armed groups openly.

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This challenge also manifested in Tibú around the language and framing that the validation team perceived as safe and/or comfortable to use with the community. Because of the depth of armed group control and the sensitivity around speaking about the conflict among the civilian population, country group partners asked us not to use several key terms and concepts, such as protection, armed group, threat, anything referring to recruitment, or coca substitution. While the country group found workarounds by focusing on the concept of food autonomy, these oblique framings often led conversation toward topics perceived as safer, such as systematic state underdevelopment of their municipality and the structural violence that this caused.

ABR members found that holding the validation exercise in a secure location outside the conflict zone was a far easier way to generate open, concrete discussion on the toughest and most dangerous issues facing communities. Quibdó leaders were comfortable digging into the mechanics of community relations with armed actors and the ways that IHL training could serve as a vehicle for increasing community mobility and reducing food insecurity. In contrast, it was a real challenge to get Tibú leaders even to acknowledge the presence of armed groups. It is possible that data collectors missed subtle cues. Working directly with communities in conflict zones demands much more sophistication and contextualized knowledge in order to read and interpret veiled messages, metaphors, side comments, and strategic silences that people use to communicate in unsafe environments.


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However, holding community validation exercises outside the territory also presents limitations. Because humanitarian actors cannot support the transportation of whole communities, participation is often restricted to leadership figures, necessitating reliance on familiar gatekeepers and making it harder to ensure broad demographic representation. Due to the logistical challenges of bringing participants from Quibdó to Bogotá, we focused primarily on a few well-known local organizations already operating in the area. In contrast, in Tibú, we invited a more diverse range of civil society actors based locally in the municipal capital. Tibú leaders reflected on underlying fragmentation and competition within civil society and ways to overcome these dynamics. Similar dynamics are likely in play in Quibdó, but were papered over by the small, relatively aligned subset of actors who could attend.

The absence of chance encounters, side conversations, and opportunities for ethnographic observation can hinder a deeper understanding of community dynamics. Some of the richest insights we gathered in Tibú came from informal evening conversations with members of the Diocese, who provided crucial context for simmering tensions between campesino and indigenous communities. Community validation exercises conducted outside of the territory lose the potential for the positive externalities that regular visits to the communities can offer, including strengthening relationships of trust, fostering community belief and buy-in for the project, and generating protective effects through the presence of international actors.

Discussions with community leaders surfaced approaches to bridge the gap between in-territory and off-site validation, drawing on existing community-based accountability structures in Chocó, particularly the concept of the replica. Under this

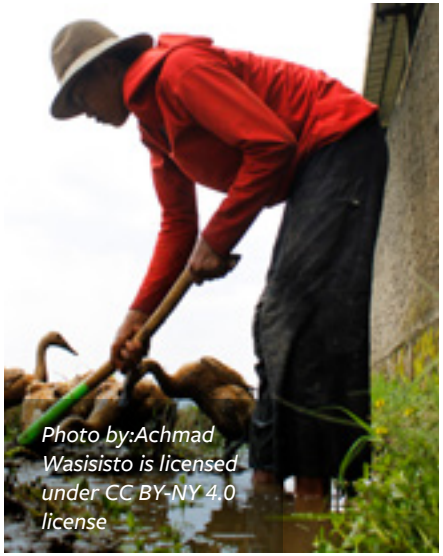
practice, when a leader attends a meeting outside the territory, they are expected to reproduce or share the content of the meeting with the broader community. Because security conditions at the time prevented project leaders from traveling to Quibdó, the project integrated the replica approach. Community leaders were provided with funds and technical support to bring the theory of change discussions back to their communities, gather additional feedback, and relay these insights to the project team for further refinement.

This approach not only deepened community ownership but also fostered a more iterative and inclusive validation process. Leaders drew on knowledge of their communities to frame the theories of change in locally resonant language, building around the metaphor of a river paired with a community mapping exercise. This replica allowed the project to gather richer, more grounded feedback, including perspectives from farmers on specific market access challenges and youth on their entry points into community governance. Notably, however, these exercises faced similar limitations as on-site community validation exercises in Tibú, in that community leaders could only obliquely touch on the armed conflict, and community conversations tended to focus on safer, economic-focused topics.

RBP POINT: RBP emphasizes using outcome oriented methods that start from the community's perspective. The validation process not only helped to better understand the risk, it empowered communities to take ownership of the strategies.

Defining the Scope of Community Participation in Validation

A second key set of questions concerns the scope of a community validation process, reflecting decisions of who to invite, how many communities and/or demographic groups to involve, and how long to discuss before moving into program implementation. This section engages in the tradeoffs of deep participatory engagement. It explores how the ABR project is navigating the challenges of knowing when to stop and managing assessment fatigue among communities. In an ideal scenario, project design would build from a continuous, dynamic exchange between communities and humanitarian actors who are deeply enmeshed in the local context, grounded in ongoing dialogue and an evolving analysis of local realities. Such an organic process would allow for constant, relatively light-touch co-design and iteration.



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However, this approach is not always easily integrated into current modes of operation for humanitarian actors, particularly when organizations are working with new communities or population demographics. For most organizations as currently constructed, validation requires organizing formal meetings and community visits, which can be fairly time- and resource-intensive. As such, decisions about validation

scope must reflect thoughtful considerations of evolutions in both project design and local context.

In Tibú, decisions about the validation scope reflected the growing risk of armed conflict in the region. Reflecting this risk analysis, even though much of the original data collection focused on Venezuelan migrants as the primary at-risk population, the country group focused on engaging rural communities of Colombian nationals for the community validation exercise. In that exercise, the country group was able to bring a highly diverse group of civil society actors into dialogue on a focused approach to reducing armed group coercion and systematic negation of alternative livelihoods in their communities. This rich discussion gave us confidence that the data collected was sufficient to move directly into the planning and implementation stage.

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However, just a few months after the ABR validation consultations, armed groups unleashed one of the most violent outbreaks of conflict in recent Colombian history in Tibú, leading to mass displacement and confinement. The ABR country group is now working with key local partners to assess the possibilities for adapting the community-validated theory of change to reflect these new conditions, or whether additional rounds of validation are necessary.

In Quibdó, the country group focused the validation exercise on ethnic authorities from rural communities, even though these actors had not been significantly engaged in the original data collection. This decision was influenced both by the addition of new consortium partners with a stronger rural focus and by the lack of clarity and depth in our initial analysis of how rural–urban linkages contributed to food insecurity in Tibú.

RBP POINT: An analytical approach to community risk analysis understands who is—and isn't—in the room, and how those absences may affect the data one receives.

Nevertheless, following the community validation exercise, both community leaders and consortium partners felt that further community engagement was necessary given that meetings were held in Bogotá. This raised concerns about missing perspectives, particularly those of young people, given that community leaders specifically highlighted youth involvement in collective organizing processes as essential to any protection risk reduction strategy. These concerns ultimately drove the decision to hold the replica exercises in order to bring the theory of change discussions closer to the populations that the consortium aims to impact.

While the RBP methodology emphasizes deep community engagement where safely possible, there is a danger to re-engaging communities multiple times in the planning

process—the risk of participation fatigue. Communities can grow weary of repeated consultations that yield little tangible action, leading to perceptions of extractive research and eroding trust in the project. Formal participatory spaces demand significant time and effort from community members, often requiring them to take time off work with minimal or no compensation. Some indigenous participants traveled multiple days to attend ABR's validation sessions. These concerns were given voice in Tibú, where a community leader criticized international actors as pura habla (all talk), expressing frustration that consultations rarely translate into concrete outcomes.

While signs of participation fatigue played a role in moving the ABR project more rapidly toward project implementation, project leaders also sought to respond to fatigue by balancing consultations with start-up projects with smaller budgets and lighter program design requirements that nonetheless tied directly into program goals. These initiatives demonstrated a commitment to co-design and tangible impact, fostering buy-in from community leaders. In Tibú, the Tibú Diocese, a key local consortium partner, developed a plan to collaborate with conflict-displaced farmers to establish community gardens as part of efforts to develop internal circular trade and food autonomy, thereby strengthening community independence from economies controlled by armed actors. In Quibdó, ethnic leaders are updating community conflict resolution systems and providing visibility tools for unarmed guardias as part of a strategy to strengthen community collective self-protection.

RBP ENABLER: Program leaders found ways to adapt and adjust program design to signals of fatigue from the community, enhancing a culture of trust and open communication

Conclusion

Community validation is a critical step in designing humanitarian strategies that effectively reduce protection risks. Achieving protection outcomes requires interventions that are not only relevant and feasible but also precisely targeted and adapted to local realities. Community validation enables this by revisiting and refining the theory of change through participatory engagement, creating a focused space for communities to shape the strategies meant to address the threats they face. In doing so, it strengthens the causal logic between risk analysis and response, ensuring that interventions are grounded in context-specific pathways for risk reduction.

The experience of the ABR team reflects that the design and execution of a community validation exercise demands careful, sensitive analysis of shifting dynamics, social landscapes, and program goals. Key decisions such as location and scope require thoughtful consideration. Designers must ask: What perspectives were missing from initial data collection? Who must be present to ensure decisions reflect

BENEFITS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNDERTAKING COMMUNITY VALIDATION

Community validation enables deeper, targeted engagement by inviting communities to confirm or contest the logic, scope, and focus of proposed strategies based on their lived experience of risk. This often requires careful consideration of who participates, where consultations are held, and how feedback mechanisms (such as replication or iterative co-design) are structured to account for constraints like insecurity, gatekeeping, or participation fatigue.

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community realities and are perceived as legitimate? How can potential schisms or conflicts within the communities be addressed or mitigated? What has changed since the initial consultations and who is best positioned to address these changes?

In this complex landscape, creativity and blended approaches that take existing community practices into account—such as the replica approach of ethnic organizations in Quibdó—offer promising avenues for balancing the challenges of on-site/off-site validation work. By balancing structured participatory spaces with flexible approaches, humanitarian actors can build trust, foster legitimacy, and ensure that their interventions are both grounded in local realities and responsive to the communities they aim to serve.

RBP Questions to Consider

- How can validation processes adapt to and reflect rapidly shifting conflict environments? What does meaningful participatory conflict analysis look like when conflict conditions make access to direct dialogue with communities difficult?
- When internal community divisions shape competing strategies for reducing risk, how can humanitarian actors facilitate inclusive, context-sensitive responses without reinforcing harmful power dynamics or bias?
- How do we balance safety and frankness in participatory engagement when operating in environments where open discussion of conflict actors can generate blowback for communities?
- What are the best ways to combat participation fatigue and address extractive approaches to community participation, especially in contexts where repeated evaluations have not led to concrete changes?
- If trust and insight often emerge in informal interactions, how can humanitarians make space for these moments in a system that prioritizes formal processes?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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