Results-Based Protection in Practice

Considering the Use of Language in Protection Risk Analysis

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Considering the Use of Language in Protection Risk Analysis

Humanitarians often recognize the importance of language in planning and implementing responses but tend to confine their considerations to issues of protection mainstreaming—access, participation, accountability, and safe and dignified service provision—rather than understanding how their use of language can further protection outcomes. CLEAR Global has done extensive research into the protection mainstreaming-related challenges humanitarians face in missing the critical importance of language usage, to the detriment of the efficacy of and safety and inclusion in their programs.

However, the work of InterAction and partners in Somalia and Colombia further demonstrates how a broader conceptualization of language usage could enhance more effective strategies toward the implementation of the Centrality of Protection across all sectors. Language usage plays a profound role in defining and understanding protection risks, helping to reveal perspectives unique to each community.

This case example was written with input from CLEAR Global

Language Sensitivity and Safe and Inclusive Programming: An Imperfect Status Quo

Accessibility: A Foundation for Language Considerations in Safe and Inclusive Programming

It is a widely acknowledged and decried fact that humanitarians' over-reliance on global languages of power or perceived local lingua franca can hinder program accessibility and efficacy. CLEAR Global, an NGO helping people get vital information, and be heard, whatever language they speak, conducted [research in Cox's Bazar](#) which found instances of mistranslation with significant implications for service seeking, such as "violence against women" being rendered as "violent women." In a similar [study in northeast Nigeria](#), "safe space" was understood as "a space protected by guards." Such errors can obscure service functions and deter engagement, particularly for marginalized language speakers or those with hearing or visual impairments.

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Guidance such as the [Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) Commitment 1](#) emphasizes the importance of communicating in languages and formats that are accessible, understandable, respectful, and contextually appropriate. While these practices are vital, they often remain confined to planning stages—limited to creating Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials or recruiting community mobilizers—and focus on reducing barriers to access.

Participation and Accountability

Language also plays a crucial role in enabling participation and accountability. Often, these considerations bookend a project, gathering data on the needs of affected persons prior to project design and then considering the impact and effect of implementation through complaints and feedback mechanisms. Effective community engage-

GLOBAL LANGUAGES OF POWER

Global languages of power refer to widely spoken international languages that dominate in diplomatic and humanitarian contexts - primarily English, French, Spanish, and to a lesser extent, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese. These languages gained prominence through historical colonization, political influence, and economic dominance, and often have been used to enable dominant language groups to maintain hegemony at the expense of Indigenous and minoritised language communities.

ment for participation and accountability depends on affected persons understanding survey questions and knowing how to provide feedback or report issues.

However, CLEAR Global's study in northeast Nigeria revealed that many respondents understood as little as 35% of survey terms due to reliance on multiple translation stages. In Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), language barriers prevented individuals from reporting Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) through hotlines operating only in dominant languages. For example, a woman in Gwoza, Nigeria, recalled dropping a hotline call because the operator spoke only English.

Here, again, the humanitarian sector has well-defined, if too often ignored, guidance in the form of the Global Protection Cluster's Protection Mainstreaming Toolkit. The toolkit calls for facilitators of protection risk assessments to be fluent in the local language and to communicate in a way that the objectives of the assessment or data collection are clearly understood and unrealistic expectations are not created. The toolkit's guidance squarely places consideration of language as enabling full participation in data collection.

Safety and Dignity

Language usage, particularly overreliance global languages of power, can reinforce or challenge power dynamics. This is an issue, for example, when humanitarians are mostly recruited among speakers of global languages of power, while crisis-affected people speak marginalized languages. The result can be reduced access to lifesaving information and services, aggravating existing vulnerabilities. A CLEAR Global study in eastern DRC found that aid workers and health care providers often spoke French or Lingala, languages associated with government forces perceived as oppressive or hostile by communities that spoke Congolese Swahili or Nande. Thus, even using the lingua

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franca in a large part of DRC, but not the eastern part of the country —Lingala—undermined trust in aid agencies and fostered suspicion. Not understanding service providers is also a source of shame for minority language speakers in Somalia, where CLEAR Global found speakers of the Maay Somali dialect said they would feel embarrassed discussing their needs and concerns with predominantly Maahati-ri-speaking humanitarians and would rather remain silent for fear of discrimination.

Protection case management best practices offer some guidance that can be used outside of that specific response area, such as emphasizing jargon-free and nonjudgmental communication. Reflective listening techniques, drawn from case management, should be fully integrated into data collection to ensure that language choices enhance, rather than hinder, disclosure. However, such approaches often focus narrowly on creating trust in service provision rather than leveraging language to advance broader protection goals.

Beyond Safe and Inclusive Programming: Language and the Centrality of Protection

To effectively achieve the Centrality of Protection (CoP), humanitarians should take a nuanced view of the language they use, going beyond safe and inclusive programming principles. Results-Based Protection (RBP) presents a framework for humanitarians to operationalize the Centrality of Protection to undertake risk-based—as opposed to strictly need-based—assistance to achieve a protection outcome. RBP supports integrating the consideration of language into continuous, context-specific protection analyses. This approach prioritizes community-led risk identification, ensuring that linguistic nuances inform a deeper understanding of threats, vulnerabilities, and coping capacities. Language is more than a tool for communication—it shapes how communities define and understand risks. InterAction is working with several operational humanitarian partners in Somalia and Colombia to respond to conflict-induced food insecu-

> ⭐ **RBP POINT: Embracing key element one of the RBP Framework: Continuous, context-specific protection analysis informed by affected communities.**

[rity using RBP approaches](#). In both locations, InterAction and partners undertook qualitative, iterative protection context analyses to inform risk-based programming. The project teams conducted participatory analysis to understand community perceptions of protection risks that either led directly to or resulted from food insecurity and conflict.

Lessons from the Field

1. **Preparation and Adaptation: What We Say and What They Hear**

For most needs assessments, preparations include recruiting staff from affected communities and training them on materials. The RBP approach aligns with these fundamentals but emphasizes the criticality of iterative, qualitative methodologies and demands facilitators have a nuanced understanding of terminologies. Efforts to contextualize and simplify terms like "protection" and "displaced person" demonstrated where preparation worked, where gaps remained, and where further adaptability and creativity were needed.

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⭐ **RBP POINT:** Applying an outcome-oriented approach that supports iteration and adaption allowed for relatively quick changes in the program design..

In Colombia's Norte de Santander, InterAction's Tibú-based partners warned that references to non-state armed groups (NSAG), or even "protection," were potentially unsafe for participants. This posed a clear challenge, as the research aimed to analyze NSAG's impacts on food security. Preparation included field-testing euphemisms with various stakeholders. Initial terms like "key actors," which resonated with staff in Bogota, were misinterpreted in Tibú as referring to local government or community actors. The language had to be adjusted iteratively, settling on neutral terms like "groups" to ensure participant comfort while preserving analytical clarity. Such iterations highlighted the need for context-specific language choices, depending on facilitator familiarity, location, and group composition. Notably, a local diocese representative engaged more openly on sensitive topics than other local humanitarian staff, underscoring the importance of matching messages with the right messenger.

In Somalia, the term "protection" lacked a direct equivalent in Maahatiri Somali. Field teams framed protection risks as "anything that causes people to move," a consequence of which was that community members focused on displacement-related concerns. While this framing was effective in highlighting climate-induced displacement, it unintentionally sidelined risks like targeted killings or deliberate discrimination of minority clans—issues often experienced post-displacement or without mass movement.

These examples demonstrate that effective preparation, iteration, and adaptation in situ are crucial to promoting safety and fostering open communication.

RBP POINT: RBP emphasizes using outcome-oriented methods that foster iteration, adaptability, and flexibility.

2. Data Analysis: Processing What Communities Say Through Humanitarian Minds

Just as communities' lived experiences impact how they understand the verbiage used in data collection—that "protection" might not include an array of risks that do not result in displacement—so too do humanitarians often fail to accurately process the nuances captured in qualitative data. Communities often communicate risks through euphemisms or culturally specific terms that do not align with rigid analytical frameworks and taxonomies.

As InterAction's partners in Somalia sought to gather data on conflict-induced food insecurity, they found communities in Jowhar were reluctant to even name Al-Shabaab (A.S.) directly, instead using an array of euphemisms that each carried its own significance for how the threat actor was perceived: Arsenal, as in the Premier League football team, mostly used by young people; Ahalinyaradda, meaning "the youth"; Odayaashii, meaning "the elderly" and carrying an association with power and authority; and Gaagaabka, meaning "short men" and carrying the sense that A.S. can infiltrate any location or group. Some men refused to speak of A.S. entirely, with one focus group respondent ending not his own focus group discussion (FGD) prematurely

but calling on two others being held with different enumeration teams to stop, as well. This reluctance revealed how fear of A.S. stifled open discussion—a critical finding, though initially unreported by field teams. Only through thorough debriefing was this insight captured.

Similarly, community members in Somalia employed varied translations for sexual violence, colored by different components of risk, most notably the nature of the threat actor. For respondents in Jowhar, "taken by force" referred exclusively to stranger-perpetrated assault, excluding domestic or transactional sexual violence that occurred in the workplace. The term was also never applied to men and boys who had experienced sexual violence. Men also tended to use the term "sexual harassment" or "sexual exploitation" to describe marital disputes, including over money. The fluid use of these terms, especially their different understandings between respondent genders, risked skewing data. Field teams had to disentangle these nuances to avoid erasing critical distinctions.

In another example from Somalia, this time in Abudwaq, respondents differentiated between targeted assassinations, interclan militia attacks, and assaults on civilian infrastructure, all of which were related to clan conflict. While standard UNHCR taxonomies might group these under "attacks on civilians," communities' linguistic distinctions highlighted unique vulnerabilities, distinct relationships to community capacities, and implications for food insecurity. Initially translating all incidents into "killings," enumerators needed training to preserve these distinctions in their notes.

3. Training and Sensitization for Field Teams

Engaging communities in defining protection risks requires humanitarian actors to understand and adopt local terminology. This is not

Sexual violence terminology proved particularly nuanced and dependent on facilitator comfort. Jowhar communities used "taken by force" exclusively for stranger-perpetrated assault, excluding domestic or workplace violence. Respondents brought up those risks themsevles. In Abudwaq, teams were unsure how to approach GBV and intially used "rape" as a catch-all for all GBV, while, as in Jowhar, communities themselves created a separate category for conflict-related sexual violence. In Las Anood, teams avoided specificity entirely, referring only to generalized "violence", or "violence directed against a person because of their sex," which often resulted in communities discussing violence that was targeted at men and boys.

without challenges. Even local staff may sanitize sensitive disclosures, using generic humanitarian language that erases the granularity of community narratives.

While it was previously noted that respondents in Somalia often used "taken by force" as a euphemism for rape (khusi) under specific circumstances, some enumerators preemptively used the more oblique term to create a safer space for discussion. While this might have been effective for initial engagement, the phrasing risked obscuring nuances and implicitly directed respondents to consider only a subset of instances of sexual violence. In one location, Las'anood, field teams admitted to using even more elliptical verbiage, asking only about "violence," to avoid their own discomfort with the subject matter.

Participatory methodologies, though promising, often resulted in emotionally charged disclosures. In Abudwaq, storytelling elicited vivid accounts of displacement, such as a woman recalling artillery fire and fleeing her home. While these narratives enriched the data, they overwhelmed some staff, necessitating extensive debriefing and data cleaning. When engaging in data collection on protection risks, it is essential to recognize that participants might relive or share traumatic experiences, even if questions are designed to minimize re-traumatization. Non-protection staff might also lack experience in receiving and responding to stories of trauma; this is a skill in and of itself, and psychological first aid (PFA) training, especially if not regularly refreshed, might be insufficient to build this skill. It is critical to ensure that both community members and field teams have access to appropriate referrals to mental health and psychosocial support services. In the cases described, debriefing and emotional support mechanisms were not systematically integrated, leading to challenges in processing difficult narratives. Future efforts should incorporate structured post-interview debriefings, peer support mechanisms, and clear referral pathways for both enumerators and respondents experiencing distress. This ensures that qualitative data collection not only maintains integrity but also safeguards the well-being of all involved.

RBP ENABLER: Not every staff will have the skills to use outcome-oriented methods. There is a need to ensure continuous capacity strengthening, introducing skills that foster better use of language and the significance behind it, with staff to enhance efforts to achieve protection outcomes.

Preparing non-protection staff for such challenges is essential to ensure data integrity and emotional well-being.

RBP Recommendations

Language is integral to protection analysis, enabling a deeper, community-aligned understanding of risk. To operationalize this:

1. Tailor data collection and analysis tools so they can interrogate language dynamics: Make sure that the tools are concise and contextually localized and are translated in the right local languages, with familiar imagery and terminology. Where possible, co-create the tools with native language speakers from the target communities and pilot the tools.

2. Integrate Language into Risk Analysis: Move beyond accessibility to consider how linguistic nuances reveal unique threats and vulnerabilities.

3. Strengthen Staff Capacity: Provide comprehensive training to staff and enumerators collecting data and undertaking analysis on cultural and linguistic sensitivity to avoid data distortion.

4. Adopt Iterative Approaches: Test and adapt language used in protection programming throughout project cycles to ensure alignment with community realities and understanding by the community

5. Centre Community-Led Processes: Center community voices in defining and prioritizing protection risks.

By embedding language considerations into RBP and CoP frameworks, humanitarians can more effectively reduce protection risks across all sectors.