

Results-Based Protection in Practice

Rethinking Humanitarian Partnerships: Locally Led Protection Strategies in Colombia



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This case example explores how the use of outcome-oriented approaches can enhance local partnerships in support of protection outcomes



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Introduction:

Achieving equitable partnerships in child protection requires more than simply shifting resources—it demands rethinking how knowledge, analysis, and decision-making are shared. This example shares insights from [InterAction's Action-Based Research \(ABR\)](#) project in Colombia, where [Results-Based Protection \(RBP\)](#) approaches enable international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) to partner with local civil society actors to drive protection strategies rooted in the lived realities of communities affected by conflict. The example highlights how using outcome-oriented approaches for protection can increase community ownership of humanitarian response by underscoring the importance of deep listening and contextual adaptation.

In Quibdó, armed groups impose movement restrictions that impact entire communities, with profound consequences for children and youth. Community leaders reframed humanitarian understandings of “confinement,” highlighting the systematic control of movement as an extension of armed groups’ governance. They identified strengthening community reglamentos (collective social and territorial rules) and expanding cross-community platforms for communication and strategy development as critical interventions to limit armed groups’ influence. These governance structures, they argued, would enhance community autonomy, reduce external control, and ultimately improve protection outcomes. Both strategies placed youth at the center, recognizing them as key actors in sustaining community governance and collective organizing. Furthermore, leaders emphasized that confinement was not just a physical restriction but a driver of cultural erosion, weakening traditional knowledge systems and collective identity. This, in turn, heightened risks of child recruitment into armed groups, making cultural preservation a central pillar of local child protection efforts.

Action-Based Research: The Centrality of Protection in Action

InterAction supports efforts to operationalize the Centrality of Protection principle, including through a problem-solving approach called Results-Based Protection (RBP). RBP is designed to help both protection and non-protection actors work together using systems-thinking to address complex risks. At its core, RBP is about moving beyond needs-based service delivery to co-designing strategies to reduce risks with affected communities, ensuring that actions not only meet immediate needs but also strengthen local systems and contribute to protection outcomes in the long term.

In 2023, InterAction commenced the Action-Based Research (ABR) initiative, which involved field-testing RBP methods in Colombia, working with a coalition of international and local actors. As part of this effort, we conducted a robust protection context analysis using the [protection risk equation](#) to explore issues related to conflict-induced food insecurity. During this process, communities identified several key protection risks, one of which was confinement. Through the modalities of RBP, local actors reframed how confinement was understood, making clear its profound impact on children and youth and developed strategies to reduce its harms.

Understanding Confinement and Child Protection in Context

When humanitarian actors think about confinement, we consider a well-defined set of parameters articulated by OCHA: physical blockades, villages under siege, or communities being cut off from aid. Community leaders in Quibdó, however, offered



RBP ENABLER: Systems That Enable Iterative and Adaptive Problem-Solving RBP requires systems that allow for continuous learning and adaptation rather than pre-designed responses. In Quibdó, humanitarian actors initially approached confinement through a conventional lens, which did not account for the lived realities of affected communities. However, by validating and adjusting the Theory of Change through an iterative process, local actors reframed the risk in a way that revealed new entry points for child protection interventions.



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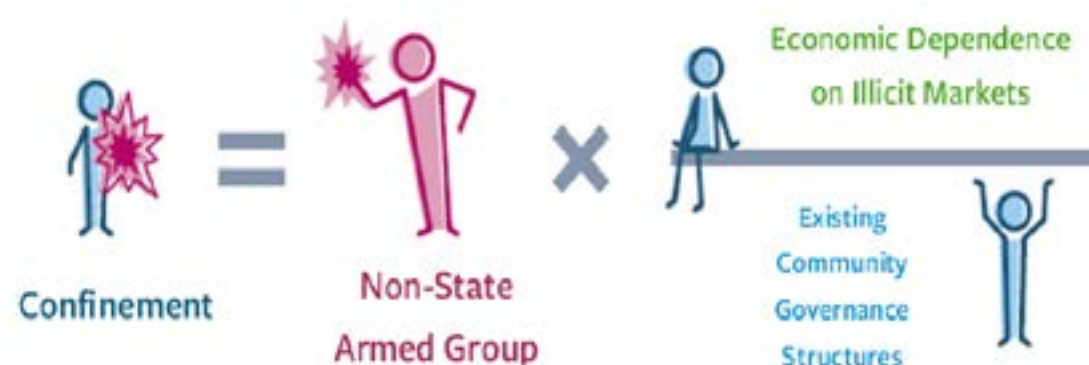
RBP POINT: RBP key element context-specific protection analysis emphasizes breaking down protection risks into their components—threat, vulnerability, and capacity—allowing humanitarians to formulate clear, context-specific pathways to reduce those risks. In Quibdó, the standard humanitarian definition of confinement would not have recognized the risk at all, as there were no overt physical barriers. However, by deconstructing confinement into its components, communities revealed how armed groups’ invisible borders increased vulnerabilities (economic hardship, weakened governance, and cultural erosion), sustained threats (violence and extortion), and eroded protective capacities (community cohesion and youth leadership).

a different, more nuanced understanding. They described how armed groups impose “invisible borders,” restricting movement through less overt but equally effective means—threats of violence, enforced curfews, extortion at checkpoints, and surveillance by informants embedded in communities. They noted that, although communities might not have a level of violence that aid agencies recognize as confinement, that is only because armed groups have sufficiently consolidated power that normal mechanisms of community self-protection are not able to stand against them.

Because these restrictions don’t always meet humanitarian definitions of confinement, responses are rarely triggered, despite the far-reaching and devastating effects on children and families. Community leaders explained that movement isn’t just about accessing basic needs like food and healthcare; it’s also about sustaining livelihoods, education, and cultural identity. They described their freedom of movement as a reflection of their *autonomía*—the ability to govern themselves, maintain traditional economic practices, and connect rural and urban spaces without fear. Community leaders emphatically connected this understanding of confinement to child protection, explaining how the loss of cultural identity and traditions, in addition to the economic insecurity caused by confinement, undercut the social ties that safeguarded children from recruitment into armed groups and deepened a mental health crisis among children. In the community re-framing of the risk of confinement, threat actors specifically targeted communities with few licit economic resources and governance structures undercut by years of conflict; it was in these communities that adolescents and youth were most likely to be targeted for forced recruitment. The implication for this risk is a continuous cycle of increasing vulnerabilities and decreasing capacities that only enable non-state armed groups (NSAG) and erode the outlook for children and youth. Using the protection risk equation, community leaders demonstrated how confinement was¹ not just a restriction on movement, but a strategy of control by NSAGs that exploited economic and governance vulnerabilities. This analysis reshaped the response, shifting the focus from humanitarian access to strengthening local governance and cultural preservation as protective factors.



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Through the RBP process, community leaders took this more profound understanding of confinement and reframed the response. Instead of focusing solely on securing humanitarian access, as INGO partners had initially, they emphasized the need to strengthen their own governance structures to counter armed group control.



RBP POINT: Rather than focusing solely on immediate service delivery, key element three of the RBP approach calls for a shift toward outcome-oriented methods. Community leaders prioritized strengthening governance structures and cultural preservation—not as standalone activities, but as strategic interventions to achieve the long-term protection outcome of reducing child recruitment and ensuring community resilience.

Key Interventions for Empowering Communities

The RBP approach invited communities to validate the protection analysis prepared by humanitarian partners and then refine the proposed change theory with actions that would substantially impact protection outcomes. Community leaders defined two change pathways that had previously been absent from the theory of change:

1. Strengthening community reglamentos—the collective social and territorial rules that govern how communities operate. Leaders saw this as essential to reinforcing community autonomy and setting clear internal structures that limit the space for armed groups to exert control.
2. Expanding cross-community platforms for communication and strategy development. They believed that better coordination among communities would reduce vulnerabilities to armed group manipulation and allow for collective responses that reinforce protection.

Crucially, both strategies are community-led and centered youth participation. Community leaders repeatedly emphasized that “youth are the face of peace”—young people were the linchpin of community capacities. If youth were involved in

governance and had meaningful roles in shaping community decisions, communities themselves would become more resilient to conflict and economic coercion. Some recommendations for youth engagement include representation of youth on community councils, youth-focused activities such as sporting or cultural events that help strengthen inter-community communication, and mandatory positions for youth in the junta in directiva cocomacia.


But there was another layer to this: leaders highlighted that confinement wasn't just about restricted movement—it was also about a loss of cultural identity. In many communities, the breakdown of traditional practices and weakened cultural education have exacerbated risks for children, making them more vulnerable to recruitment. By preserving cultural identity—through language, traditions, and storytelling, and even through the preparation of traditional foods—leaders saw a direct way to reinforce local child protection systems and build resilience against armed group influence.


The strategies identified—strengthening community reglamentos and expanding cross-community platforms—demonstrate that not all protection efforts are driven by humanitarian actors. Local governance structures, community elders, and youth leaders emerged as key actors in sustaining these strategies. While INGOs can be counted on to provide facilitation and technical support, the core interventions must be community-driven, reinforcing autonomy rather than dependence on external humanitarian assistance. Moreover, cultural preservation efforts, such as storytelling and traditional food preparation, would engage educators and cultural leaders, illustrating how risk reduction extends beyond humanitarian programming.

Conclusions

This case study in Quibdó offers three key takeaways for how we facilitate more equitable partnerships in achieving child protection outcomes across all humanitarian responses:

- Deep listening and contextual adaptation matter. If we had relied only on standard humanitarian definitions of confinement and analysis of the risk, we would have missed the full scope of the problem. By centering community voices, we arrived at a richer understanding of the risk and how to address it.
- Protection strategies must be locally driven. Instead of imposing pre-designed interventions, the RBP process allowed communities to define

 **RBP POINT:** RBP emphasizes the importance of undertaking a multi-disciplinary approach to solve protection issues. The strategies identified in this context clearly show the necessity to engage actors outside of humanitarian action to support reduced risks.

 **RBP ENABLER:** Effective protection responses require resources that are flexible and responsive to evolving needs. The Quibdó case illustrates that protection funding must not be siloed—local actors identified child protection as inextricably linked to governance, livelihoods, and cultural preservation. However, these types of interventions often fall outside traditional child protection funding streams. An RBP-aligned approach would ensure that resources are allocated based on community-defined priorities, enabling investments in youth leadership, cultural education, and local governance structures as protection strategies. Without this flexibility, the humanitarian system risks missing key opportunities to reduce child protection risks at their root causes.

solutions that made sense in their context—from strengthening governance structures to reinforcing cultural identity as a child protection strategy.

- Shifting power means valuing local knowledge production. Community leaders weren't just consulted—they led the analysis and shaped the response. This not only increased community ownership but also resulted in more sustainable and impactful strategies.

RBP provides a model for how humanitarian and local actors can co-design protection responses that don't just react to crises but create long-term, systemic change. If we truly want to shift power in child protection, we must commit to processes that allow communities to lead—not just in implementing activities but in defining the very outcomes we seek to achieve.

RBP Questions to Consider

- In this example, the protection risk equation helped clarify key components driving the risk. One strategy identified by the communities aims to enhance existing capacities as a mechanism to counter control by NSAGs. In this sense, the aim is to increase capacities while also reducing the threat. How might additional responses utilizing the risk equation complement and reinforce the goal of reduced risk?
- What challenges arise when integrating locally led approaches into broader humanitarian frameworks?
- How can humanitarian actors better support non-traditional protection strategies outside standard response mechanisms?



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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