

Results-Based Protection in Practice

Threat Reduction for Protection Outcomes in Constrained Humanitarian Environments



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This case example explores the threat component of risk within the protection risk equation



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In humanitarian settings affected by armed conflict, efforts to reduce protection risks often focus narrowly on alleviating vulnerability without sufficiently addressing the behavior of those who deliberately inflict harm. The aversion is driven by a combination of factors: institutional risk aversion; legal and operational constraints on engaging designated armed groups; a misinterpretation of humanitarian neutrality as passivity in the face of violence; and a sectoral history that places greater comfort in service delivery than in direct confrontation with sources of harm. The consequence of this aversion is a chronic failure to meaningfully reduce protection risk. In some instances, humanitarians have arguably contributed to the “well-fed” dead problem, wherein meeting basic needs fails to prevent actual violence.

This dynamic is visible in many contexts. In Colombia, despite an active peace process and a long history of civil society dialogue with armed actors, humanitarians have struggled to effectively engage in threat reduction due to legal prohibitions and political sensitivities. In Somalia, a long history of informal engagement with Al Shabaab has been chilled by anti-



terror legislation and organizational fears, even as communities face intensifying risks from the group.

Drawing on [InterAction's Action-Based Research \(ABR\)](#) project in both contexts, this case example explores how humanitarian actors, working closely with communities, can pursue threat reduction strategies even in constrained operational environments. These experiences demonstrate that, while legal and political constraints are real, threat reduction is both community knowledge and pursued through strategic, multi-actor collaboration. They also reveal critical lessons for how to navigate the ethics, risks, and trade-offs inherent in this work and point toward a need for renewed global dialogue on threat-focused protection strategies.

Reduced Humanitarian Space in Colombia and Somalia

In Colombia, despite a high-profile history of civilian peace dialogues with armed groups, engagement with armed groups by non-governmental actors without the express permission of the Colombian state is [prohibited by law](#). The government has recognized the right of the Catholic Church to pursue “[pastoral dialogues](#)” to reduce protection risks for communities and broker the release of hostages. Sources in Colombia suggested to InterAction that there were expectations for legal permissions for humanitarian engagement with armed groups under President Petro's Paz Total. However, such permissions have not been delivered.

In Somalia, both [humanitarian NGOs](#) and [clan leaders](#) have historically had regular, if fractured and challenging, dialogue with Al-Shabaab (A.S.). However, the U.S. designation of A.S. as a foreign terrorist organization has created a challenging aid delivery environment in A.S.-held areas. Additionally, the Somali government has become increasingly hostile to NGO- or civil society-led dialogue efforts. Citing authority under a 2023 anti-terrorism law, Somali officials have [openly threatened criminal prosecution](#) against any local or international NGO “collaborating or engaging” with A.S. or other armed groups.



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Contextualized Threat Reduction Strategies

Broadly, the ABR project is the collective effort of international and national organizations¹ to pilot [results-based protection \(RBP\)](#) approaches to implement the Centrality of Protection. The ABR project has operated in Colombia and Somalia since 2023 to develop and implement strategies to reduce community-prioritized protection risks at the nexus of conflict and food insecurity in select municipalities.

Jowhar, Somalia

In Jowhar, intense cycles of drought and flooding, entrenched conflict between the state and A.S., and clan conflicts over the fertile lands near the Shebelle River have generated repeated rounds of displacement, forcing minority clan IDPs to adopt extremely precarious livelihood strategies such as firewood collection and other forms of day labor. There, they are subject to beatings, extortions, sexual violence, kidnapping, and killings by A.S., which uses violence to maintain territorial control and extract economic contributions.

The objective of the ABR project is to reduce the risk of A.S.-perpetrated violence and extortion against conflict-displaced men engaged in high-risk manual labor. Through a participatory co-design process, community members and humanitarian actors developed a comprehensive strategy that touches all three elements of the risk equation. First, the project seeks to reduce vulnerabilities by creating recourse to alternative, safer livelihood options for people engaging in high-risk livelihoods. Second, the project seeks to strengthen existing capacities by enhancing civilian mitigation, early warning, and self-protection strategies. Finally, the project aims to reduce threats by generating commitments from AS to reduce punishments for perceived incursions in their operational space by rural laborers.

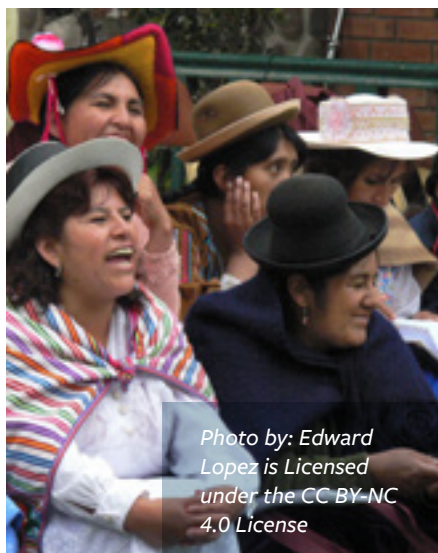
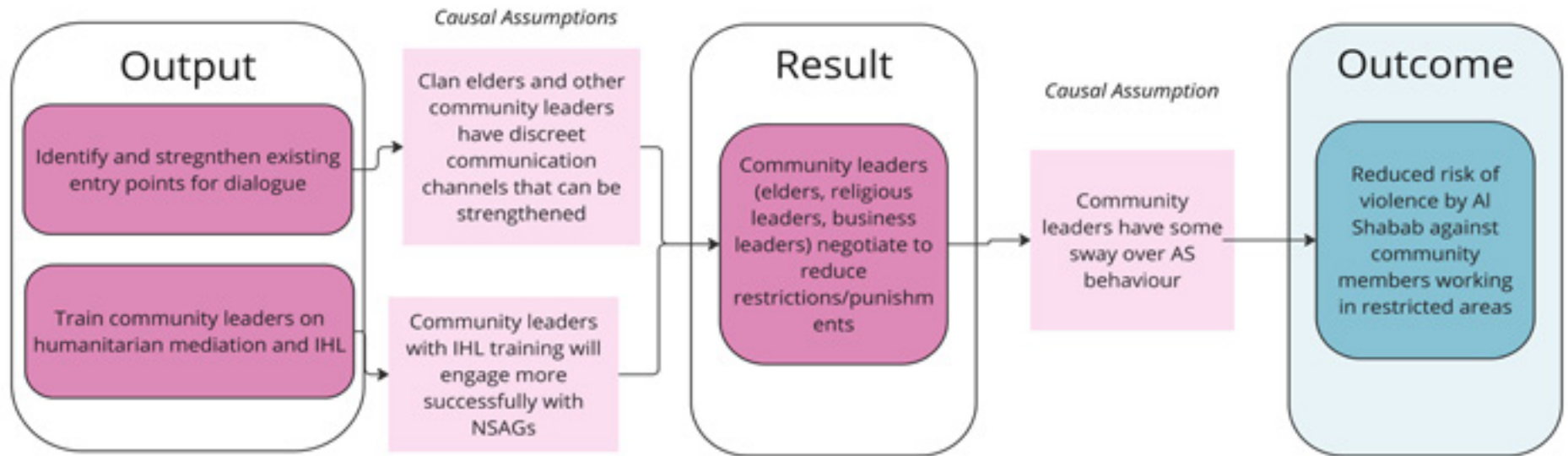


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¹ In Quibdó, participant organizations include the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), World Food Program (WFP), Geneva Call, COCOMACIA (High Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Atrato River), FISCH (Inter-Ethnic Solidarity Forum of Chocó), ATICH (Traditional Indigenous Association of Chocó), ASOVPICH (Association of Victims from the Indigenous Peoples of the Department of Chocó), AVWOUNQ (Wounaan Victims Association of Quibdó). In Jowhar, the participant organizations are Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Marginalized Communities Advocacy Network (MCAN).

Jowhar strategy for threat reduction



To reduce the threat, the project focuses on working with community leaders (elders, religious leaders, business leaders) and other actors (humanitarian, peacebuilding, civil society) to create spaces for dialogue on reducing restrictions and punishments on rural laborers. This two-pronged strategy seeks to support existing informal and indirect channels for communication with A.S. while strengthening the dialogue capacity of local civil society.

The consortium will conduct a power mapping, assessing local actors with previous communications with A.S., especially regarding humanitarian access, to identify existing and potential entry points for dialogue. Power mapping will allow the consortium to develop a collective understanding of A.S. red lines and willingness to have dialogue over issues of punishment and extortion. Simultaneously, community and clan leaders and other peacebuilders will receive mediation training, leading to the development of a negotiation strategy with contingency and safety plans. This strategy operates under the key assumption that A.S. can be convinced that its interests and territorial control will not be threatened by reducing punishments and extortions of rural laborers. In turn, this assumption is based on the ABR's initial risk analysis, indicating that the armed group is motivated to negotiate in order to develop

★ RBP POINT: Understanding community perspectives on who holds influence and how that influence is used can reveal unexpected openings for engagement. This kind of localized insight is often only visible through lived experience and sustained community collaboration gained through continuous participatory engagement of communities.

★ RBP POINT: No single actor holds all the tools to reduce risk. By building shared, multi-disciplinary strategies across humanitarian, peacebuilding, and civil society actors, each group contributes its strengths to address different facets of a complex problem.

a minimum level of acceptance and legitimacy with the communities in its operational space.

Quibdó, Colombia

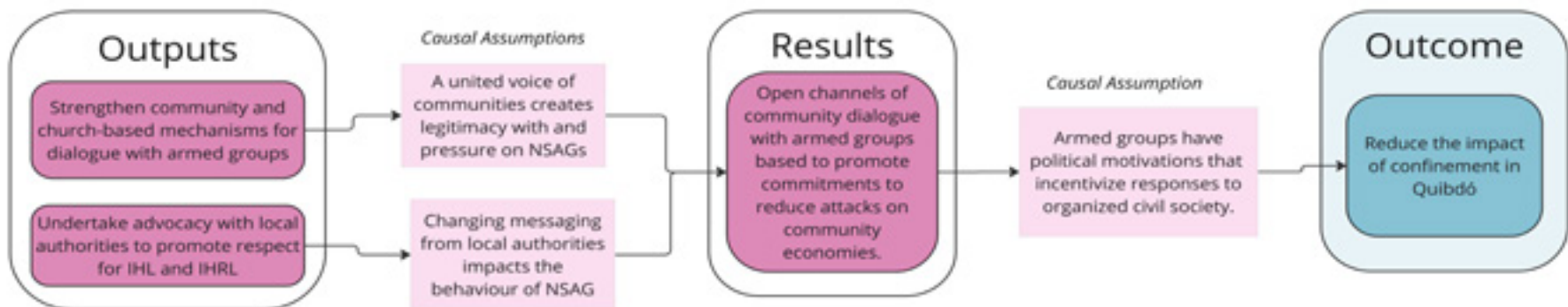
In Quibdó, communities identified the systematic denial of their freedom of movement as the primary protection risk they face, perpetrated by armed groups, including the EGC (Gaitanista Army of Colombia), ELN (National Liberation Army), and various smaller criminal gangs in the city.

Armed groups enforce “invisible borders” with violence, restrict community movement to certain areas of their territory and certain times of day, increase the difficulty of movement with checkpoints and vacunas (extortion), and place informants (puntos) in the communities to monitor and restrict community movements.

The objective of the proposed project is to reduce confinement and movement restrictions for Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities. First, the project seeks to reduce vulnerabilities by supporting the recovery of community economies, enabling families to minimize reliance on economies controlled by armed groups. Second, it aims to strengthen existing capacities by promoting intercommunity self-protection mechanisms and enhancing the ability of communities to monitor and respond to risks. Finally, the project seeks to reduce threats by reinforcing platforms for dialogue on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights, increasing the pressure on armed groups to respect community freedom of movement.

★ RBP POINT: Although communities identified a shared core protection risk across these different threat actors and similar strategies to reduce this risk, each threat actor requires a contextualized approach reflecting their modes of operation and relationship to the ongoing peace negotiation process, as touched on in the 2024 Learning Brief produced by this project.

Quibdó strategy for threat reduction



To reduce the threat of armed groups imposing movement restrictions on communities in Quibdó, the consortium has developed a strategy to strengthen existing legal channels for civilian engagement in peace discussions, promote respect for IHL among key state actors, and develop proactive protection capacities with community leaders. The strategy builds on the expressed willingness of armed groups in Quibdó to engage in dialogue with the state, which in turn generates political and strategic pressure for them to recognize and engage with the platforms of an organized and empowered civil society.

To ensure a contextualized approach adapted to local needs, the consortium will consult with key actors from communities, organizations, and the state to evaluate existing dialogue channels and community risks. The consortium will build on existing platforms including the Mesas Humanitarias, which is a platform that communities have developed to communicate their concerns and peace proposals to official state-armed group dialogue spaces. The consortium will reinforce these efforts through resources and trainings in IHL to strengthen the negotiation capacities of community and religious leaders.

Additionally, the consortium will lead advocacy efforts with key actors—including local authorities, civil society, and dialogue platforms—to promote compliance with IHL. Through targeted training and capacity-building, the consortium will strengthen proactive protection practices within communities and among local authorities. As part of this work, consortium members will accompany community leaders and residents in key activities, particularly in high-risk and hard-to-reach areas.

Lessons Learned

In most conflict contexts, communities have no choice but to engage in day-to-day informal interactions with armed actors, making them positioned to identify opportunities to influence their actions. Community leaders from Jowhar and Quibdó overtly or subtly signaled regular contact with armed groups at checkpoints or within their communities, in required participation in armed group ideology meetings, through familial relationships with armed group members, or as part of proactive self-protection strategies such as collective dialogue, traditional conflict resolution, and early warning systems. These interactions have granted communities deep knowledge of the personalities, interests, internal cultures, and political alignments of local

 **RBP POINT:** As conflict environments constantly evolve, so must our understandings of them. Regular reflection with communities helps surface evolving shifts in threat actors that present opportunities or require adaptations from humanitarians, illustrating how continuous participatory analysis drives iterative, outcome-oriented responses.



RBP POINT: In volatile environments, access is inherently relational. Trust-building can take time and may stall or retract depending on the context. Iterative approaches to programming create the flexibility to pause, evaluate opportunities and challenges, and adapt.

commanders and their units. This information is necessarily the starting point of any sensitive threat reduction strategy.

Accessing this information requires sustained community participation in spaces that foster trust and safety. In Quibdó, the consortium is built on existing relationships with key ethnic leaders who provided critical insights into current armed group modes of operation and the strengths and limitations of existing self-protection mechanisms. In Jowhar, where the consortium faced more dangerous operational conditions, it was more challenging to establish open communication. In one instance, clan leaders ended a collective analysis session prematurely, expressing unwillingness to engage on the subject of Al-Shabaab due to serious security concerns.

One crucial insight communities can offer is identifying which local actors (if any) have the legitimacy and freedom of movement needed to engage armed groups safely. In Quibdó, this role is played by the Catholic Church, which holds both moral authority and legal permission to engage in dialogue with armed actors. This insight guided the consortium to put significant focus on supporting priests—through training in humanitarian principles and practical support such as transportation and logistical facilitation—to enhance their capacity to approach dialogue safely.

In Jowhar, clan elders possess the cultural authority to potentially engage in dialogue with Al Shabaab. However, participatory research also revealed significant internal divisions and limitations among clan leaders. As such, the consortium strategy focuses on deliberate advocacy and capacity-building efforts with clan leaders to strengthen coordination among clan leadership and collectively focus on violence against highly marginalized rural workers.

A second crucial insight communities can offer is their knowledge of armed group dynamics, including their motivations and interests, red lines, and strategic and normatively resonant approaches toward potential dialogue with armed groups on protection risk reduction. Armed groups in Quibdó are involved in formal peace processes and have an incentive to project legitimacy, which potentially includes greater openness to respecting IHL. These groups often publicly claim to fight for the community's interests, offering a narrative foothold for community-led advocacy. However, certain topics—such as accessing drug trafficking routes—remain non-negotiable due to their centrality to armed group revenue.



RBP POINT: Often the most effective drivers of risk reduction are not traditional humanitarian actors. Through multidisciplinary approaches, humanitarians can strengthen the ability of those with moral authority and social access to act safely, shifting conversations in ways outsiders cannot.



RBP POINT: By engaging communities in ongoing dialogue, humanitarians can build the space and contextual knowledge for communities to identify entry points for engaging and influencing behavior change of threat actors

COMMUNICATING THREAT REDUCTION TO DONORS

Humanitarian actors can engage donors in support of politically sensitive threat reduction strategies without explicitly detailing them in proposals or logframes. Informal, pre-proposal conversations offer a valuable space to build shared analysis of conflict dynamics and explore effective response pathways. By using terms like “outcome-oriented risk reduction,” or a holistic approach to the risk equation, organizations can signal their intent to threat reduction while remaining discreet.

Maintaining informal or backchannel communications throughout the grant cycle helps ensure continued alignment. Outcome-oriented approaches to measurement, such as proxies or results journals, can focus on changes in communities’ experience of risk, enabling outcome-level reporting without exposing sensitive operational details. This balances accountability with the discretion needed to navigate complex environments.

In contrast, Al-Shabaab in Jowhar has less clear political motivation or incentive to engage in formal negotiation. Nevertheless, like most armed actors, it maintains an interest in local legitimacy to preserve recruitment pipelines, access to information, and general tolerance within communities. This creates space, albeit limited, for dialogue strategies centering on the legitimacy of communities freely engaging in subsistence economies, which do not undermine stated armed group interests.

Furthermore, where formal dialogue platforms already exist, humanitarian actors can build upon these foundations through advocacy and community capacity strengthening. If and when these actions fall outside the mandate of traditional humanitarian actors, they offer opportunities to build multidisciplinary partnerships with peacebuilding actors operating under complementary mandates, fostering integrated approaches to reducing protection risks. Legal and technical capacity building, such as community training in IHL, not only prepares leaders to engage in formal humanitarian spaces like the Mesas Humanitarias but also equips them for informal interactions with armed actors that cannot be publicly supported. In Quibdó, community feedback helped the consortium understand how this knowledge serves both formal and informal engagement strategies, reinforcing community self-protection.

Finally, operational security and language sensitivity are crucial in threat reduction work. In conflict environments, some degree of informal engagement with armed actors by both humanitarians and communities is often inevitable. While these engagements serve as the foundation for building a highly effective threat-reduction strategy, they can be easily compromised if stated too explicitly. Organizations must establish secure internal spaces for cross-team reflection and strategy development on high-risk engagement. Simultaneously, external communications, such as concept notes and donor-facing documents, could consider using calibrated language and framing activities in terms of general capacity strengthening and risk mitigation rather than direct engagement.

Conclusion

The strategies outlined in this paper reflect an adaptive, context-specific approach to altering threat actor behavior to reduce protection risks in highly constrained humanitarian environments where direct dialogue with armed groups is legally limited. They are grounded in the recognition that communities possess critical knowledge, relationships, and leverage points that can inform efforts to reduce



RBP POINT: The key to effective multi-disciplinary work is to identify complementary knowledge and resources. For example, humanitarians may be well positioned to strengthen peacebuilding activities by bringing in IHL training capacities.



RBP POINT: Using outcome-oriented approaches that support adaptability and emphasize context-specific problem-solving is critical to achieving protection outcomes.

threats. However, this is an inherently imperfect strategy, shaped by serious operational, ethical, and political limitations.

One of the most pressing concerns is the risk transfer to communities. In settings where humanitarian actors cannot safely or legally engage directly with armed actors, the responsibility often de facto shifts toward building the capacity of communities to do so. While this can be empowering, it also places civilians on the front lines of some of the riskiest and most sensitive negotiations.

In many contexts, communities are already navigating these realities daily, and thus strengthening their ability to engage more safely and strategically can offer substantial benefits. However, civilian-led approaches must always be accompanied by a careful analysis of whether the benefits outweigh the risks. Humanitarian actors must be exceedingly clear about what kinds of protection and legal cover they can or cannot offer communities.

Furthermore, not all armed groups are open to or influenced by civilian dialogue. Some deliberately target civilians and see organized civil society as a means of control, using extreme violence to suppress perceived resistance. Others may lack the internal coherence to uphold negotiated commitments. These realities underscore the importance of deep analysis to identify credible avenues for threat reduction. Armed actors, like any other social actor, are made up of multiple factions, viewpoints, and interests which are subject to influence through some combination of strategic incentives, coercion, and ethical or ideological appeals.

Within this combination of available strategies, humanitarian actors may not always be the best-positioned actors for threat reduction. However, it is still the job of humanitarian actors to use the risk equation to identify entry points for influence, whether through diplomats, peacebuilders, state armed forces, individuals within the armed group, or others. Analyses should contribute to collective, multidisciplinary understandings of what tactics are available and how these fit into a broader network of actions that work toward risk reduction. Furthermore, humanitarian actors' ability to [measure protection outcomes](#) depends on understanding the contributions of relevant actors, whether they directly engage with threat actors or not.

Finally, the ABR project has highlighted the deep chilling impact of the criminalization of armed group engagement on humanitarian activity. While A.S. is a profoundly difficult armed actor to deal with, humanitarian engagement was [not uncommon](#)

RBP POINT: RBP approaches to risk analysis make use of the risk equation to identify opportunities for synergies between risk components. In this case, existing community dialogue capacities serve as the bedrock of a dynamic threat reduction strategy.

RBP POINT: Measuring protection outcomes means using methods humanitarian actors are less familiar with, but essential for understanding how risks are changing. This means using methods such as contribution analysis or most significant change methodologies that can help point to factors and influencers that contribute to risk reduction.

RBP POINT: Communities' understanding and perspectives on protection risks, including the threat actor, should always be the starting point.

RBP POINT: Understanding humanitarian contributions to risk reduction requires mapping all relevant actors (including potentially state armed forces, community organizations, and others) and their actions to support outcome-oriented analysis aimed at achieving protection strategies

through most of the conflict. However, since the ABR has operated in Somalia, InterAction's partners have expressed profound hesitancy to engage in anything resembling dialogue with threat actors, even the discreet and informal approaches reflected above. In both Colombia and Somalia, several partner organizations pulled out, citing the organizational risks involved in threat reduction. Partners who remained have had to seriously consider potential implications even for teams operating in other sectors and locations.

Ultimately, these experiences highlight an urgent need for stronger and sustained advocacy at both national and international levels to expand the space for humanitarian actors to engage directly with armed groups. Without consistent advocacy to preserve the ability of humanitarians to engage with all armed parties to the conflict on the basis of neutrality and impartiality, humanitarian work is being gradually and effectively restricted to state-approved engagement only.

This also means that humanitarian actors must continue meaningful dialogue on organizational risk tolerances and collective appetites to engage in the inherently political process of protection risk reduction. However, as humanitarian space continues to shrink, opportunities to openly explore, discuss, and train on threat-focused strategies are also diminishing. A renewed global dialogue is needed to develop ethical, context-specific best practices.²

² Essential starting points for discussions on principled humanitarian engagement with non-state armed groups include [Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups: A Manual for Practitioners](#) (OCHA/IASC), ICRC's [Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups: Why, How, for What Purpose](#), and Chatham House's [Towards a Principled Approach to Engagement with Non-state Armed Groups for Humanitarian Purposes](#). For a focused analysis of how counterterrorism measures in particular impede such engagement, see InterAction's 2021 report [How Counter-Terror Measures Impede Humanitarian Action](#).

RBP Questions to Consider

1. How can humanitarian actors better recognize and operationalize their role in reducing threats as part of a collective effort to achieve protection outcomes?
2. How can humanitarians ethically navigate the line between empowering communities to engage with threat actors and shifting additional risk or responsibility onto them? How do these decisions reflect (or challenge) the “do no harm” principle?
3. When threat reduction pathways require leadership or support from non-humanitarian actors, what steps can humanitarians take to build multidisciplinary coalitions, identify shared goals, and work collaboratively toward protection risk reduction?
4. How should humanitarians navigate tradeoffs between pragmatism and urgency for the most challenging threat actors? What responsibilities and sources of support do humanitarian leaders have to place strategic focus on the most pressing protection risks, even when political obstacles make them difficult to address?
5. What role should humanitarian actors play in shaping the political and legal space needed to engage armed actors in ways that enable threat reduction and advance protection outcomes? How can leadership leverage the Centrality of Protection to advocate for expanded humanitarian space with states and other duty-bearers?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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