Designing for Protection Outcomes

RBP READY THEORIES OF CHANGE

What is a Theory of Change?

Theories of change (ToC) are short descriptions of how an organization hopes to bring about the change it wants to see. Theories of change can be developed in many ways. Organizational theories of change include at least three elements: an articulation of how change happens in a particular context; a description of the organization's role in helping to bring that change about; and a list of assumptions that are being made about the power of the organization's work to succeed.

An example of a "typical" theory of change in the humanitarian sector would be something like the following:

> ***IF*** *we deliver food assistance to famine-affected communities in country X,* ***THEN*** *we will reduce hunger in those communities until the harvest returns,* ***BECAUSE*** *we know that our standard food assistance package meets the minimum calorie requirements for men, women and children.*

It is never too late for a theory of change; they are beneficial at any stage of the program cycle. The benefit of doing a theory of change is that it helps to sharpen the understanding of why an organization is doing what it does. It also helps evaluators test the assumptions that are being made about how change will happen and identify learning about how to improve delivery in the future.

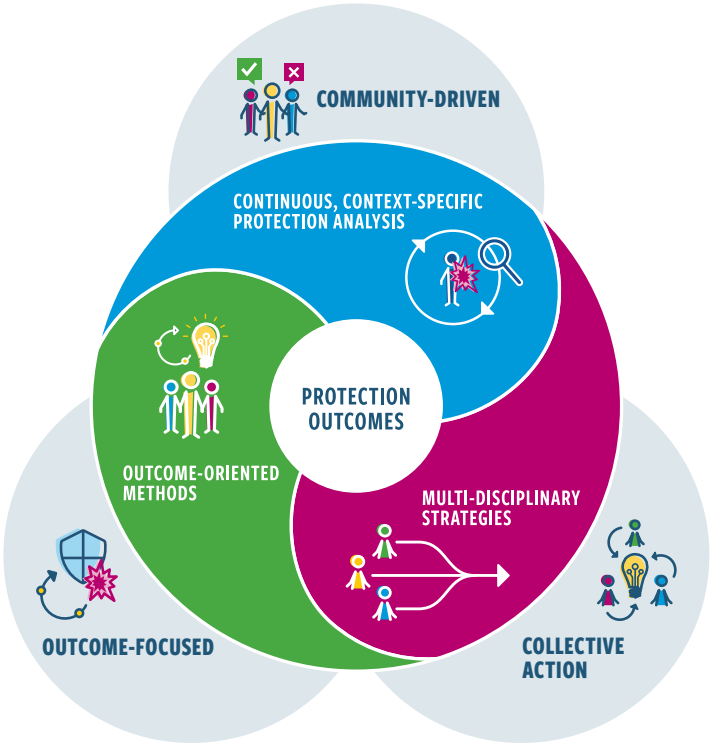
What makes an RBP Ready Theory of Change (ToC) Different?

An RBP-Ready ToC is not about organizational or project-level activities and efficiencies. The focus is on outcome-level changes for protection. In other words, it's about understanding how real change of risk reduction manifests in the community.

In alignment with the key elements of RBP, an RBP Ready ToC is **Community-Driven**, **Outcome-Focused**, and emphasizes **collective action**. Most importantly, the protection risk equation is the essential tool used to help articulate the pathways needed to achieve a protection outcome.

WHAT IS RESULTS-BASED PROTECTION (RBP)?

RBP is a problem-solving approach to addressing the complex and ever-changing environment surrounding protection issues in humanitarian action. It emphasizes starting from the perspective of the affected community while encouraging learning and adapting, investing in relationships, and strategic collaboration to achieve protection outcomes. In RBP, protection outcomes are defined as "reduction in risk." In other words, a reduction in violence, coercion, and deliberate deprivation that people face in crises.



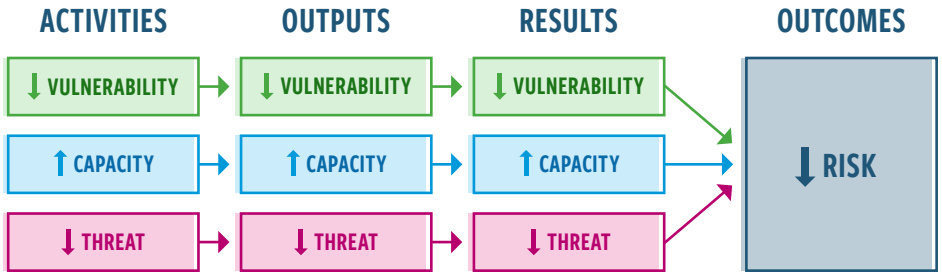
Developing an RBP-Ready Theory of Change

STEP 1

Use the **RISK EQUATION** to analyze the risk components.

STEP 2

Write your **THEORY OF CHANGE** to address risk components in the framework of **activities**, **outputs**, **results**, and **outcomes**.



STEP 3

Check and revise your Theory of Change so it addresses the **RBP-READY COMPONENTS**.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

Built through community engagement, validation, and feedback

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

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Brings together actors from humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, human rights, local civil society, and communities

SPECIFIC

Based on context-specific protection risk analysis using the risk canvas

CO-DESIGN

Protection analysis, design, and testing the ToC with communities

ITERATIVE AND ADAPTIVE

Supports real-time learning about what is working and what is not

EVIDENCE-INFORMED AND LEARNING-ORIENTED

Emphasizes and tests causal assumptions vs activity or background assumptions

COMPREHENSIVE

Covers each component of protection risk (Threat, Vulnerability, Capacity) using the risk equation

STRATEGIC AND HOLISTIC

Generates a roadmap for change identifying relevant contributions without focusing on organization-specific activities

Theory of Change Example

This example from a community in Niger, illustrates a simplified Theory of Change that depicts a specific pathway for each component of the risk equation: **THREAT**, **VULNERABILITY**, and **CAPACITY**. Each change pathway contributes to and leads to the same protection outcome.

ACTIVITIES

↓ VULNERABILITY

Development actors support agro/pastoral investment in Diffa

ASSUMPTION: *Lack of agricultural implements is the main barrier for employment*

↑ CAPACITY

Peacebuilders conduct *training with youth leaders*

ASSUMPTION: *Training equips them with skills and confidence to influence peers*

↓ THREAT

Humanitarians negotiate with Boko Haram identify opportunities to train on IHL with unit commanders

ASSUMPTION: *Trainers can demonstrate the ethical and strategic importance of IHL*

OUTPUTS

↓ VULNERABILITY

New farming jobs created for young people in Diffa

ASSUMPTION: *Agriculture offers a viable and relevant livelihood for young people in Diffa*

↑ CAPACITY

Youth leaders advocate against joining Boko Haram

ASSUMPTION: *Visible youth leadership encourages broader participation and norm-shifting*

↓ THREAT

Unit commanders engaged on IHL implementation

ASSUMPTION: *Commanders have strategic interest in adhering to IHL norms*

RESULTS

↓ VULNERABILITY

Improved livelihood opportunities for Diffa youth

ASSUMPTION: *Sustained employment enhances income stability, reducing the desperation that drives recruitment*

↑ CAPACITY

Increased community engagement in anti-recruitment advocacy

ASSUMPTION: *Social resistance reduces opportunities for armed groups to find recruits*

↓ THREAT

Reduced attempts of Boko Haram to recruit young people from Diffa

ASSUMPTION: *Commanders exercise control over internal recruitment practices*

OUTCOMES

↓ RISK

↓ Reduced RISK

Reduced recruitment of young people by Boko Haram in Diffa

Components of **RBP-READY THEORIES OF CHANGE**

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change should be community-driven, and built through community-engagement, validation and feedback. All theories of change take time to get right. But an RBP-Ready Theory of Change should start with community consultation to identify the context-specific protection risks and end with community consultation to amend and refine the theory of change for the interventions designed to reduce those risks.

EXAMPLE
Community dialogues revealed economic desperation, community fragmentation and predatory armed group behavior as key drivers of recruitment. These insights informed the design of livelihood, peer advocacy, and armed group engagement activities in the ToC.

SPECIFIC

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change must start with specific protection risks identified by community members themselves, and then work backwards to the actions an organization will take to reduce those risks. It's not ok to start with a global protection risk, such as "Gender-Based Violence" or "Attacks on civilians". Instead, it is essential to begin with a context-specific, localized understanding of the nature of the protection risk faced by specific community members at the time of intervention.

EXAMPLE
The ToC focuses specifically on unemployed youth in Diffa targeted by Boko Haram. It reflects detailed analysis of recruitment patterns, livelihood gaps, and social norms that reflect the reality of communities in this cross-border context.

CO-DESIGN

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change must involve communities in co-designing its outcomes and strategies. Co-design means communities and humanitarians jointly prioritize a protection risk, define effective pathways for reducing that risk, and collectively consider which actors are best placed to implement those pathways. This collaborative process ensures humanitarian strategies reflect community knowledge, priorities, and lived experience, making resulting pathways for change more relevant, feasible, and likely to reduce protection risks.

EXAMPLE
The ToC was refined through workshops with youth groups, civil society, and local authorities who contributed local knowledge and vetted assumptions. Their input ensured interventions reflected local realities and avoided reinforcing community divisions or stigma.

Components of **RBP-READY THEORIES OF CHANGE**

OUTCOME-FOCUSED

RBP-Ready Theory of Change must be outcome-focused. Results-based protection understand protection risk reduction as the central intended outcome of protection activities. As such, an appropriate theory of change must map the pathways that will lead to reduced threat, reduced vulnerabilities to that threat, and increased community capacity to overcome the threat.

EXAMPLE
Each pathway in the ToC aims to measurably reduce the risk of youth recruitment by targeting vulnerability (lack of livelihoods), increasing community capacity (peer advocacy), and reducing the threat (armed group targeting of youth).

ITERATIVE AND ADAPTIVE

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change should be iterative and adaptive. It should be developed in a manner that supports ongoing revision and change on the basis of the evidence generated through the monitoring of protection risks as they evolve over time. That's why its vital to spell-out the assumptions that are being made about why, for example, food assistance is expected to reduce child recruitment by armed actors in a community affected by food insecurity. Once these are spelled out, monitoring teams can provide real-time information about whether or not they hold true, and senior leadership can act on the basis of nuanced community-based feedback about what's working, and what needs to change.

EXAMPLE
Regular feedback loops enabled adjustments as challenges emerged: when trained youth struggled to find land access, program teams revised the livelihood pathway through government advocacy and training to support new titling on unused state lands.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED AND LEARNING-ORIENTED

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change should be evidence-informed and learning-oriented. It should be based on context-specific evidence of the protection risks experienced by community members. And, moreover, it should support the generation of new evidence about what works and what doesn't by explicitly outlining causal assumptions about what will make the activities effective, rather than just listing background conditions that need to be in place to get the activities done.

EXAMPLE
Monitoring of vulnerability factors identified by protection analysis revealed that stigma against returned youth hindered reintegration. This prompted new activities built on peer advocacy frameworks, keeping strategies responsive and rooted in lived experience.

Components of **RBP-READY THEORIES OF CHANGE**

COLLECTIVE ACTION

The RBP-Ready Theory of Change emphasizes collective action to reduce the identified risk. This means bringing together partnerships, relationships and activities from across multiple organizations, including humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors. It's not enough to specify what one agency or organization might do to reduce the risk. RBP approaches require a mapping of actions from a wide range of protection actors, to fully express how the complex nature of protection risks can best be addressed in real-time.

EXAMPLE
The ToC links efforts by agricultural extension agents, youth networks, and humanitarian diplomats, among others. These development, civil society and humanitarian actors collaboratively address recruitment risk through complementary and mutually reinforcing actions.

COMPREHENSIVE

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change must be comprehensive in its approach to reducing the risk identified. Every risk can be broken down into three components: the **THREAT** (the actors, attitudes or behaviors that may cause harm); the **VULNERABILITY** (the types of people and activity that are most at risk of harm from that particular threat); and the community **CAPACITIES** to mitigate that risk (the behaviors and practices that communities or individuals already take to reduce the protection risk, before any external intervention has occurred).

EXAMPLE
The ToC explicitly maps interventions addressing all components of the risk equation: reducing vulnerability via livelihoods, building capacity through youth leadership, and influencing threat behavior through IHL engagement with Boko Haram commanders.

STRATEGIC AND HOLISTIC

An RBP-Ready Theory of Change should be strategic and holistic. It should generate a clear roadmap for change that identifies the relevant contributions to be made without focusing on the organization-specific actions that have to take place to make those contributions happen.

EXAMPLE
The ToC maps a multi-agency strategy to reduce recruitment risk through coordinated, context-specific actions across sectors and actors.