Executive Summary: Reflections and Strategic Learning from InterAction's Action-Based Research Initiative on Results-Based Protection, 2023–2025

Key Messages

- The Action-Based Research (ABR) initiative showed that a results-based approach to protection is feasible, valued, and impactful. When humanitarian actors are given time, training, and community input, they are capable of building innovative multidisciplinary strategies that show potential for measurable long-term reductions in protection risks.
- The integrated, multidisciplinary approach of Results-Based Protection creates synergies and new opportunities that strengthen the work of all sectors and actors involved. In the ABR, applying a protection lens strengthened food security actors by identifying the protection risks that systematically undermine food security. At the same time, food security proved to be a powerful entry point for protection work in contexts where overt protection language or sector-specific protection interventions were sensitive or contested.
- Despite these positive findings, broad uptake and internalization of Results-Based Protection (RBP) face systemic barriers based in the humanitarian funding cycle, coordination processes, and the culture and approaches to risk of humanitarian actors.
- Future efforts to pilot cross-organizational outcome-oriented protection approaches should build directly from the challenges the ABR faced and the lessons learned as a result. This means dedicating resources for in-country co-leadership and administrative support, pairing community engagement with tangible action whenever possible and securing organizational leadership commitment and donor alignment at the outset.
- If the humanitarian system wants innovative approaches to the centrality of protection (CoP) to have a real chance of success, and if it needs practical evidence before these approaches can be standardized or scaled, donors must be willing to fund pilots that test them in real-world conditions.

Overview of the ABR

The ABR initiative was designed by InterAction and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency with the support of the World Food Programme (WFP) and CARE to address the persistent gap between the humanitarian sector's commitment to the CoP, as enshrined in the IASC CoP policy, and the ongoing challenge of shifting humanitarian actors toward an outcome-oriented approach to reducing protection risks. To bridge this gap, the ABR was developed as a set of pilot projects using Results-Based Protection to demonstrate for the sector practical, effective approaches to implementing CoP. RBP is a framework for operationalizing an outcome-oriented approach to protection throughout the program cycle through continuous context-specific protection analysis, multi-disciplinary strategies, and outcome measurement. Beginning in 2023, the ABR supported country groups in Colombia, Somalia, and Niger[1], using RBP to jointly analyze community-identified protection risks, develop risk-based theories of change (ToC), and translate those strategies into action plans and funding-ready concept notes.

The project focused specifically on the intersection between conflict-induced food insecurity and protection risks. Armed conflict remains one of the primary drivers of hunger, disrupting food systems,

[1] Due to administrative and access challenges, the Niger project was closed in late 2024, before the project advanced beyond initial data collection and analysis.

restricting movement, displacing populations, and undermining livelihoods. At the same time, food insecurity is a risk multiplier, increasing exposure to violence, exploitation, family separation, and harmful coping strategies, as people search for food, income, and access to services. Understanding hunger as a central humanitarian need but also as a vital entry point for risk reduction was central to the project's analytical framing.

The ABR was structured around five stages.

1. Together with CARE and WFP, which served as project co-chairs, the ABR first identified locations in each of the three countries to operate in and identified other humanitarian organizations to join the country groups. These groups then worked with affected communities in each location to analyze context-specific protection risks and the ways they were shaped by conflict and food insecurity.
2. Country groups developed and validated ToC for prioritized protection risks in each location, ensuring that the analysis and proposed pathways for change were validated by community perspectives.
3. Members translated these ToC into action plans, identifying multidisciplinary strategies, entry points, opportunities, and concrete steps to reduce the prioritized risks.
4. Partners were expected to develop outcome-oriented monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks capable of tracking the collective contribution of multiple actors toward protection outcomes, drawing particularly on qualitative methods.
5. The country groups were intended to implement the action plans, monitor changes in the risk environment, and analyze whether and how their collective efforts contributed to measurable reductions in protection risks.

Given the humanitarian funding crisis of early 2025, the ABR country groups ultimately did not secure funding, and thus did not implement the action plans that they collectively developed. Therefore, much of the intended learning of the ABR was not fully realized, as the country groups could not fully assess the impact of outcome-oriented strategies in measurably reducing protection risks. Nevertheless, the ABR was still able to generate rich learning and reflection both on practical approaches to operationalizing the CoP, as well as the systemic obstacles that impede its wider adoption.

What the ABR Demonstrated About the Potential of Results-Based Protection

1. A risk-based lens can shift humanitarian strategy development toward more integrated and targeted approaches.

The ABR helped partners understand how a protection-risk-based framework can move humanitarian strategy beyond reactively responding to needs, toward identifying the conflict systems that produce those needs and the specific points where humanitarian actors are best positioned to effectively intervene. The protection risk equation continues to be a clear and practical strategy development tool, helping humanitarian actors identify how threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities interact, and pointing them toward integrated approaches to risk reduction. This analysis helped partners identify who was at risk in ways that did not always align with default assumptions. In Jowhar, Somalia, for example, community analysis challenged a conventional focus on women as the primary group at risk and highlighted the exposure of men engaged in dangerous labor in areas under al-Shabaab control. ABR counterparts noted that this kind of analysis can support more targeted and contextually grounded program design by taking a systems approach to protection risk and unpacking it from multiple angles.

2. RBP's multidisciplinary approach creates mutually reinforcing benefits across sectors and actors.

Community-based analysis linking protection and food security brought to light the practical value of working with a cross-sectoral framework. In both Somalia and Colombia, the ABR helped food security actors move beyond a reactive framing of food insecurity after conflict-related shocks and toward a deeper understanding of how conflict systematically degrades food systems, restricts livelihoods, and shapes access to markets. At the same time, food security proved to be a powerful entry point for protection analysis in contexts where overt protection language could be sensitive or contested. In one region of Colombia, discussing livelihoods and local economies created space to raise protection risks linked to armed group coercion. Because livelihoods were not perceived by armed actors as directly challenging their control in the same way as explicit protection interventions, they offered a safer bridge for communities and humanitarians to analyze risks and develop strategies aimed at gradually undermining armed group social control over communities by strengthening community autonomy through collective economic projects.

3. Structured involvement of community voices in strategy development leads to sharp, focused protection strategies.

While participatory analysis is increasingly common in humanitarian programming, ABR participants noted that standard timelines often do not allow for deep, triangulated analysis and co-design across different segments of a community. By contrast, the ABR created space for sustained analysis of protection risks, helping partners move beyond surface-level needs and build strategies from communities' own understanding of root causes, existing capacities, and pathways for change. The validation phase extended this approach by returning draft ToC to communities for review and adaptation. This created a structured space for co-design, allowing communities to challenge assumptions, identify what felt realistic or misaligned, and refine strategies around their own visions for collective self-protection. As a result, the strategies developed through the ABR were focused, practical, and grounded in approaches communities were already using to manage and reduce risk.

4. An RBP-ready approach to ToC creates viable pathways for innovative, measurable, multidisciplinary risk-reduction approaches.

The ABR piloted InterAction's distinct approach to ToC development. Unlike more conventional theories of change, an RBP-ready ToC is organized around a single, community-validated protection risk. It is holistic, requiring actors to analyze and address the interaction between threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities. In doing so, it inherently points humanitarian actors toward multisectoral and multidisciplinary strategies, showing how different actors can sequence and coordinate their efforts toward a shared risk-reduction outcome. It is also outcome-oriented and measurable: by making causal assumptions explicit, organizations develop testable hypotheses about how and why their interventions are expected to reduce risk. Across the ABR, this approach helped partners develop innovative, practical strategies for risk reduction in highly complex and constrained environments.

The System Critique: Why Outcome-Oriented Protection Remains Difficult

The ABR makes clear that the primary barriers to outcome-oriented protection are not a lack of interest or the absence of good tools. The barriers are embedded in the incentives, coordination structures, and cultures of the actors in the humanitarian system.

Funding cycles reward speed, coverage, and familiar designs.

Humanitarian proposal timelines are often too short for meaningful community consultation, with calls sometimes allowing only days or a few weeks for design. Organizations are expected to present fully formed projects without resources to do the analysis that would make those projects genuinely grounded in community priorities. The result is that agencies rely on existing locations, standard interventions, known partners, and rapid assessments. Delivery speed, coverage, and cost-efficiency are rewarded more consistently than learning, validation, or adaptation.

The broader humanitarian funding crisis has intensified risk aversion. Instead of creating space to rethink programming, shrinking resources have pushed organizations toward institutional survival, short-term "safe" programming, and narrowly defined lifesaving activities. Outcome-oriented protection requires exactly the capacities that crisis conditions have squeezed out: time, trust, staff continuity, analytical confidence, flexibility, and willingness to work across mandates.

Donor accountability systems disincentivize outcome-oriented assessment of risk reduction.

Donor accountability frameworks overwhelmingly prioritize upward reporting that focuses on counting deliverable project outputs. Even when donors do ask about outcomes, they use preset, quantitative indicators that have severe limitations in capturing the nuances of protection outcomes in rapidly changing conflict environments. As such, committing to deep outcome measurement in a project creates risk: it requires additional time and resources without corresponding donor demand or incentives. The ABR offered a coherent way to link protection analysis, ToC, and outcome-oriented measurement. Yet, because the project never reached implementation, the country groups did not have the opportunity to demonstrate the value of these approaches.

Coordination is valued rhetorically but challenging in practice.

ABR partners expressed that they valued the opportunity to think across UN, INGO, and local NGO lines, bringing together food security, protection, gender, and community expertise. At the same time, the ABR showed how fragile collective action is among humanitarians: while coordination is widely invoked as a principle of good practice, it remains institutionally undervalued and challenging to implement. Differences in operating procedures, organizational cultures, risk tolerance, and informal power dynamics create persistent friction. While localization was widely endorsed in principle, in practice INGOs were not operationally prepared to work as equal partners within consortia led by or composed of multiple local NGOs. The project exposed even deeper challenges in coordinating with non-humanitarians: partners consistently noted the lack of relationships, experience, and mandate limitations that made cross-disciplinary work challenging.

Threat reduction remains the most difficult part of the risk equation.

A central premise of the CoP is that protection risks cannot be reduced without addressing all components of the risk equation, including the threat itself: the behaviors, decisions, and incentives of the actors causing harm. Yet humanitarian organizations are increasingly constrained, legally, reputationally, and institutionally, from engaging this dimension directly. As a result, many actors remain most comfortable with strategies focused on reducing vulnerability and strengthening community capacity, while avoiding the threat component of the risk equation. The ABR points to the need for systemwide reflection on what humanitarian actors can responsibly do, what should be led by specialized actors, and how local organizations that already navigate these relationships can be supported without transferring unacceptable risk onto them.

Pathways for Future Efforts to Implement Outcome-Oriented Protection

For organizations implementing outcome-oriented protection

- **Commit to deep participatory analysis and validation wherever possible.** Focused, qualitative conversations with communities about risk can raise insights and entry points that standard assessments miss. Returning to communities to validate ToC strengthens accountability, tests assumptions, and helps ensure strategies are realistic, adaptable, and grounded in community priorities.
- **Invest in focused, risk-based ToC.** The ABR demonstrated the value of building theories of change around a single, clearly articulated protection risk. This gives program and MEAL teams a shared foundation for multidisciplinary strategy, community validation, outcome measurement, learning, and adaptation over time.
- **Actively pursue integration across teams, sectors, and disciplines.** Protection risks cannot be reduced through isolated interventions alone. Organizations should deliberately build links across sectors, agencies, and disciplines, including with development, peacebuilding, government, and community actors where relevant to the drivers of risk.
- **Engage in a frank reflection on threat reduction.** The ABR showed that prioritized risks could not be reduced without addressing the behavior of perpetrators. Humanitarian actors need clearer collective thinking on what they can responsibly do, what should be led by specialized actors, and how to support local organizations without transferring risk onto them.

For donors supporting outcome-oriented protection

- **Acknowledge that current funding structures are a major barrier.** Short proposal timelines, rigid frameworks, and pressure for rapid delivery make it difficult to conduct participatory analysis, test assumptions, and adapt. Current incentives often favor short-term service delivery over the risk-taking, learning, and flexibility required for longer-term risk reduction.
- **Align funding policies with outcome-oriented protection.** Donors can accelerate change by requiring projects to articulate how they generate and measure reductions to specific protection risks, supporting outcome-oriented evaluation, and funding longer timelines, flexibility, local leadership, consortia, and multidisciplinary approaches. Without these incentives, outcome-oriented protection is unlikely to be adopted at scale.