



Getting Practical with Prevention: What does it take to reduce risk?

Key insights from the First Annual Results-Based
Protection Practitioners' Roundtable

OCTOBER 2020



Introduction

Between June and August of 2020, InterAction held a virtual practitioners' roundtable, a series of five online sessions titled *Getting Practical with Prevention: What does it take to reduce risk?* The sessions brought together more than 40 practitioners from 21 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and National NGOs, mostly operating in Nigeria, Iraq, and Honduras—all locations where InterAction has extended support for Results-Based Protection over the past year.¹ Participants included field-based staff as well as protection specialists from headquarters and regional offices.²

The overarching theme of the roundtable was **prevention**: what are practical ways that we can change the risk factors leading to violence, coercion, and deliberate deprivation and therefore interrupt ongoing patterns of harm? Participants identified a number of challenges they confront in preventative programming, including programmatic siloes leading to gaps in collaborative strategies; the perception of increased risk to the organization; a belief that preventative programming is under-resourced; and the challenge in measuring a counter-factual and, therefore, to demonstrate results. We know that these challenges are not new and there are efforts underway to address these barriers. However, much more work needs to be done before we can expect advancements in more preventative approaches to protection. Building on the three Key Elements of [Results-Based Protection](#), the roundtable covered several themes, including community strategies for risk reduction, strengthening protection analysis, the linkage between access and protection, and how to improve at measuring risk. Each thematic discussion aimed to engage participants on the practical realities in their contexts, about what works, and what is needed to overcome the challenges they face.

Cross-cutting themes centered around the way we do our work. Building from InterAction's findings outlined in [Embracing the Outcome Mindset: We All Have a Role to Play](#), the roundtable's underpinning assertion was that we must change our mindset to approach protection as an outcome rather than as an activity or a service to be delivered.³ As practitioners and experts engaged in discussions, tested tools, and challenged assumptions, some of the building blocks of this mindset emerged:

1. Affected people are the **primary agents** of their own protection.
2. Effective risk reduction depends on **creativity and flexibility**.
3. Simple **methods and tools** can help us to navigate the complexity of protection.

The culture and systems of individual NGOs and the humanitarian system as a whole—as well as donor policy and practice—are critical to this mindset, these ways of working, and the cultivation of environments that encourage practical problem-solving to reduce risk. An outcome-oriented mindset may have implications for how staff is hired, how resources are allocated, how programs are managed, and how we evaluate effectiveness and impact.

¹ This roundtable, along with InterAction's field support for Results-Based Protection, is supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

² The roundtable was comprised of a series of five online sessions preceded by a [public webinar](#), after the in-person event was cancelled due to COVID-19.

³ The report is also available in [Spanish](#).

Working from the perspective of the affected population

A significant reorientation in mindset should include understanding that affected people are the primary agents of their own protection and, therefore, must be at the center of efforts by external actors to support them. While this is not a new idea, roundtable discussions repeatedly highlighted this as an area where we continue to fall short.

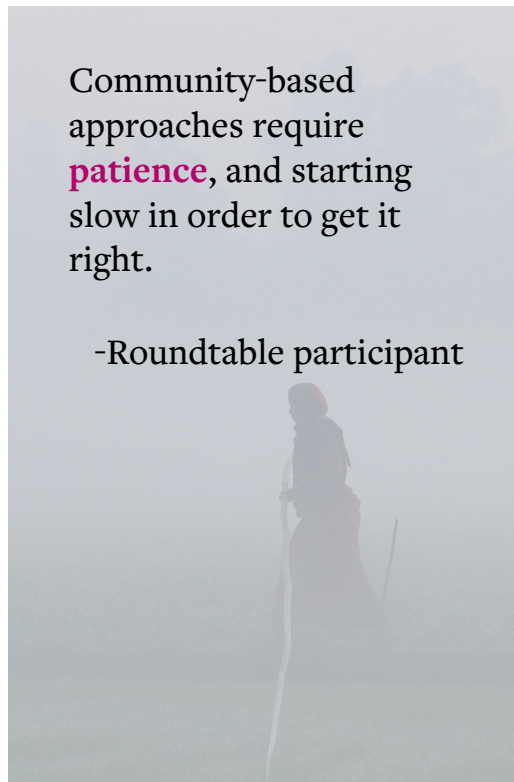
A discussion on community strategies highlighted the wide range of tactics that communities use to reduce risk, with high levels of community organization as a critical predictor for success. Examples include early warning systems, such as ringing bells to warn of impending fighting (Nigeria), and detecting whether armed groups were in the area by leaving food outside that the groups would steal at night, thus enabling community members to make choices about whether to move to safer locations (Sierra Leone). Other examples included how community members engage with armed groups, such as community leaders negotiating agreements for the reduction of violence at a local level in Yemen, or headmasters in schools in Colombia and Honduras engaging with armed groups to agree that schools were a place where no violence or recruitment would happen.

Participants agreed that understanding the community's perspective—as much as is safely possible to do so—is crucial for measuring risk, particularly for identifying proxy indicators informed by community perceptions of risk. Recognizing and confronting the power dynamics between humanitarian actors and affected communities is essential to ensure that analysis starts from the community's perspective rather than allowing our biases and pre-determined notions of vulnerability to drive risk analysis, prioritization, and strategies to reduce risk. Participants also discussed ways to support communities in their own efforts to measure and reduce risk, including an example of monthly community meetings where changes in risk are identified and discussed. These community reflection sessions help to inform current and future strategies in support of the community.

JHABA, a local civil society organization in Honduras, which works with young people linked to active and/or retired *maras* and gangs, emphasized the importance of understanding the gang members' perspective before starting interventions, including understanding the gang recruitment process and the role the gang plays in individual people's lives. Similarly, the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) in Nigeria has taken an approach that centers the community's experience as the starting point for analysis, reinforces community-level organization through protection committees, and then supports them to engage directly with armed actors on the specific protection concerns they have and to seek changes in harmful practices and behaviors by armed actors.

Community-based approaches require **patience**, and starting slow in order to get it right.

-Roundtable participant



Interestingly, participants acknowledged that while they continued to emphasize the importance of community leadership and partnership, this often feels like mere lip service rather than a true investment in community capacities to act as agents in risk reduction. Humility, a willingness to listen, and attentiveness to power dynamics were highlighted as critical. Without these, humanitarian workers can fail to recognize community strategies and capacities that already exist. It was noted that this extends to how national and local organizations are treated, particularly, that their unique knowledge and expertise are not always respected.

One participant argued that needs-based approaches create additional barriers and proposed an alternative approach by starting analysis from community assets or capacities instead. Time pressures that accompany humanitarian programming were noted as one barrier. One participant emphasized the importance of patience and starting slowly to genuinely invest in community engagement—something short term grants do not allow. In addition, some donors require detailed descriptions of activities at the beginning of a grant, which may discourage incorporating community-driven priorities and perspectives during program implementation. Another participant reflected that the goal of understanding communities must be incorporated into their organizational culture more broadly.

Another discussion during the roundtable focused on access and protection and the links between the two. Ensuring that analysis and action are grounded in community perspectives is also critical in this regard. While humanitarian actors often approach access on a transactional basis, and with a heavy focus on our own access to affected populations, when approached from the lens of affected people and their entitlements in situations of armed conflict, access can be holistically understood as being concerned with people's protection. For example, persistent denial of access to resources and services necessary for survival (land, markets, social networks, health services, as well as humanitarian services) may constitute efforts to deprive or punish people deliberately and, therefore, need to be understood and approached with a view to changing harmful policies, practices, and behaviors, not simply by negotiating permission for assistance deliveries.



One weakness in our community-based approaches is that we **do more consulting than enhancing participation.**

These are not interchangeable and protection actors need to push for this.

-Roundtable participant

Flexibility and creativity

Systematically enabling flexibility and creativity in our ways of working, rather than trying to layer creativity into fixed and rigid program design, emerged as critically important. This means enabling programs to adjust their approaches and activities in response to emerging information or changes in the context and allowing staff to incorporate new ideas, including those from the community members themselves, rather than relying solely on predetermined activities.

The discussions on community strategies brought out clear links to creativity—when we listen to what communities are already doing and support them as needed and relevant, this forces a move away from preconceived and formulaic notions of what protection work should be. A participant from Cure Violence shared an experience from Syria, where a community protection committee supported by Cure Violence and Nonviolent Peaceforce, in response to gunfire and violence occurring at the funerals of fighters, supported the creation of a musical band. Through negotiation with leaders of the various armed actors in the area, it was agreed that this band would play out of respect instead of shooting guns. Extensive relationship-building and relying on—and listening to—the unique knowledge of local people were the core components that led to this successful intervention.

Participants discussed how ongoing analysis allows us to adapt our responses as we go along. Informal methods, such as weekly context discussions or sitting with local leaders or community groups over tea or a meal, can provide new insight into the dynamics and changes within the environment and how protection issues manifest. While there is a heavy emphasis on extensive and rigorous data collection in the humanitarian system, cultivating an organizational culture that values continuous analysis and reflection may be more critical to effectiveness and adaptability in support of protection outcomes. Regular and frequent engagements with affected community members and other local stakeholders build trust, encourage local staff's critical role and initiative, and deepen contextual understanding in program teams and decision-makers. In turn, this supports more flexible and adaptable programming as all relevant stakeholders are part of the process and can readily agree when programs need to adapt.

Another method explored during the roundtable was the use of a **protection canvas**—a tool to help actors quickly look at the components of risk and then explore what triggers might be for the best, worst, and most likely scenarios that might emerge for a particular risk.⁴ This is a “quick and dirty” approach to think ahead about possible strategies that could be implemented if certain scenarios begin to materialize. Considering the opportunities and challenges beforehand, and continuously revisiting the risk factors driving these scenarios, supports adaptation to changing risk factors. Increasing the range of options available to an organization, without becoming stuck in rigidly planned contingency plans, fosters more flexible thinking and decision-making as the environment changes.

Discussions on the relationships between access and protection also focused on the need for creativity, particularly to understand the positions, interests, and needs of an individual gatekeeper or armed actor who controls access to a community, and to build trust and relationships with them. For example, negotiations may need to speak to specific cultural norms to make a case for humanitarian access or address specific access constraints. For example, one participant explained how the shared value of justice in Afghanistan was crucial to building a collective understanding for further dialogue on access. In Uganda, former child soldiers who had ongoing relationships with rebel groups could effectively and safely negotiate access to different communities completely cut off from humanitarians. These examples demonstrate that access constraints—similar to other protection risks—require [continuous and context-specific protection analysis](#) and a readiness to iteratively evolve strategies over time.

⁴ See Annex A for the protection canvas. See also, ACAPS' [analysis canvas](#), which served as a basis for the protection canvas. ACAPS welcomes all feedback about the protection canvas tool at info@acaps.org.

Hiring and cultivating the right skill sets

All these ways of working require uptake by staff—often frontline personnel—who are responsible for much of the day-to-day work of carrying out humanitarian programs. Participants discussed the importance of assessing soft skills, in addition to technical skills, in staff recruitment. Relationship building is crucial but is often under-emphasized and difficult to identify in the hiring processes. Some participants emphasized that locally hired staff, including those who come from communities we are working in, may be the best source of these soft skills as they will often have deep knowledge of the context, enjoy the trust of community members, and are best-positioned to build relationships in culturally and historically appropriate ways.

Recent reports show that organizations that invest in cultivating and embedding the right skill sets within their teams in an ongoing way achieve greater success.⁵ This includes being adaptable, people-centered, flexible, and creative problem-solvers—skills and traits that must be fostered over time. Listening and humility are necessary skills to ensure that we are accountable to the affected population, and one participant asked how we can incentivize staff to be better listeners. Not only is this challenging to measure, but it is also often overshadowed and overtaken by the pace of planned activities and outputs that implementers are required to track and report. Managers have particularly important roles in cultivating and sustaining this kind of organizational culture and programming orientation.



Listening and humility are necessary skills to ensure that we are accountable to the affected population.

⁵ ALNAP. (2019). Shifting Mindsets: Creating a more flexible humanitarian response. Retrieved from <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/alnap-shifting-mindsets-section-4.pdf>.

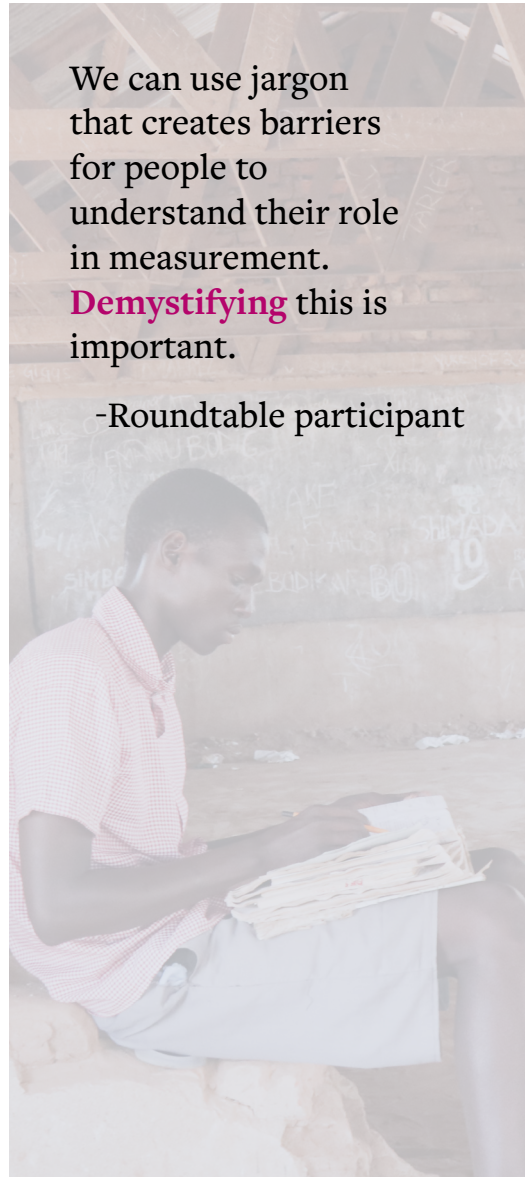
Can we simplify how we work?

Participants identified the need to simplify some of our ways of working and reduce bureaucratic bloat that has accumulated in the humanitarian system. This necessitates more practical tools and processes most pertinent to risk reduction and a willingness sometimes simply to rely on common sense. Simplification is seen as especially needed for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Several participants noted that some of our methods of measurement are overly technical and that M&E requirements in recent years have expanded dramatically, overburdening field teams. One participant noted that when their teams are so focused on fulfilling heavy requirements, they often cannot take a step back and ask if they see genuine change, a challenge that was echoed by others. During a case study exercise on measurement, participants discussed simple tools to measure risk reduction, focusing on understanding the community's perspective, including using the right language to communicate effectively.⁶

It was noted that humanitarian actors tend to overcomplicate the analysis process and approach it as something very scientific and technical. ACAPS's experience shows that all staff can do analysis, but need to be empowered and given simple tools to do so. Using a simple **protection canvas** tool, participants from each country worked together to analyze a particular risk and identify scenarios based on that analysis. Feedback from this exercise was that, although it was simple, it gave participants insight into the contexts they are working in, and that the protection canvas was a tool that would be useful at a field level. One participant added that the canvas was helpful in thinking about how to build in more anticipatory analysis, which is then actionable for agencies on the ground.

We can use jargon that creates barriers for people to understand their role in measurement. Demystifying this is important.

-Roundtable participant



⁶ See the recent RBP briefing paper, “Embracing the Protection Outcome Mindset: We All Have a Role to Play,” (available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)) for further discussion.

Looking outward for systemic change

While many of the participants' discussions focused on their own organizations and programs' internal dynamics, they also identified broader and systemic ways of working that need to be addressed. Discussions gave rise to three critical areas:

1. The role of **donors**.
2. The **humanitarian system** more broadly.
3. How we make **decisions**.

Measurement was one particular area where participants felt that donors could contribute to positive change. Many participants identified donor M&E requirements as contributing to a workload that distracts from a meaningful measurement of risk reduction. Other comments indicated that global indicator requirements compromise local organizations' creativity and knowledge and that more discussion with donors was needed about what changes can realistically be measured within short project time frames. The conversation on measurement also reflected a broad theme of needing greater flexibility from donors. While participants did acknowledge a wide range of donor policy, many participants noted an expectation from donors to rigidly adhere to the original project design, even when changes in context demonstrated a need for adaptation. Donors who do not focus primarily on activity- and output-focused reporting are seen as more supportive of protection outcomes and preventative programming. Donors can support more creative and flexible ways of working, including those discussed above, by encouraging an approach whereby the desired outcomes, and the results and activities to achieve these outcomes, are determined together with communities, including when and how approaches need to adapt. Donor policy and funding practices can also enable investment in multi-year strategies, thereby encouraging investments in community strategies, continuous analysis, relationship-building, and an investment in tackling more complex problems.

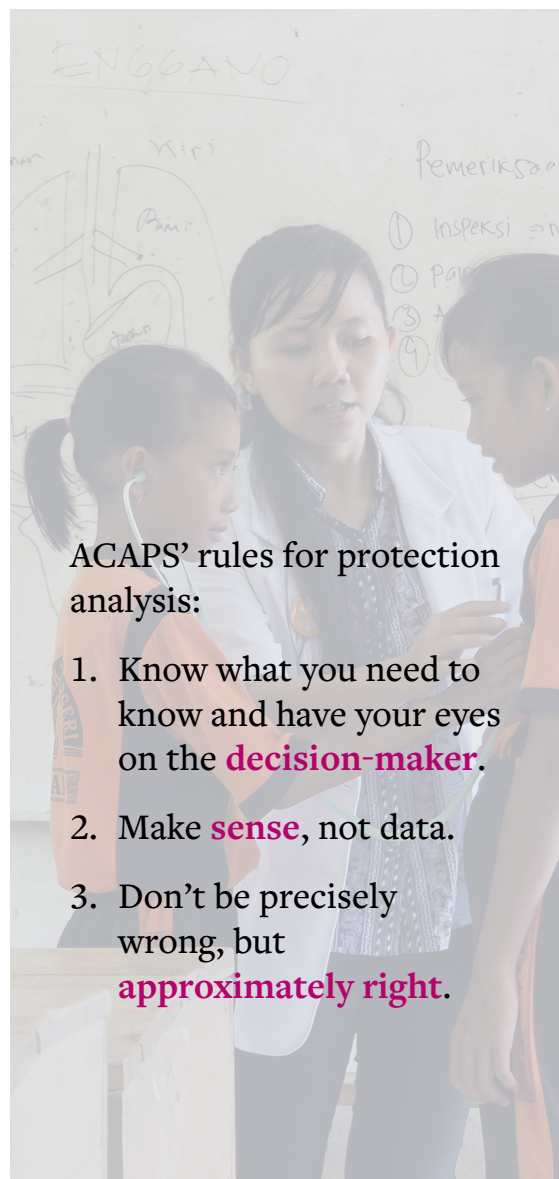
Also critical is the role that donor governments can and should play in their diplomatic functions. For example, during the exercise on measurement, participants identified the need for active contributions from the diplomatic community in high-level advocacy and negotiation as part of a strategy to reduce the likelihood of non-state armed actor violence against civilians. Participants also discussed ways to measure the outcomes of such efforts based on changes in behavior and levels of awareness on the ground of commitments made at higher levels.

While much of the discussion was focused on ways of working at the field level, participants also raised the need to look at different levels of intervention by a single organization or by the humanitarian system more broadly. For example, one agency shared how their negotiation in Nigeria to change military forces' conduct occurs at multiple levels, from the community level to in policy at a national level. During the discussion on protection and access, participants shared their experiences of negotiations that span different response levels, with some sharing that negotiations at a local level are much more efficient than those at a more senior level. Another theme that emerged in the discussion on community strategies is the need to link local level negotiations to the humanitarian system's strategic processes, including the Humanitarian Program Cycle (HPC) and Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Protection strategies.

One participant noted that formal processes within the humanitarian system can insufficiently reflect what is happening at a community level and asked, "When do we need to get out of the way [of what communities are doing]?" Another participant linked this again to those power dynamics within the

humanitarian system and suggested that a kind of “hero complex” has influenced how we think about results, where those coming in already know what the results should be. We also need to consider those system-wide processes, including the HPC and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), and how they can be approached in more outcome-oriented ways.

Lastly, decision-making was emphasized as a critical component, especially in protection analysis. The session on protection analysis opened with the contention that all decision-making is inherently political, and while that makes humanitarians uncomfortable, we cannot fully step away from it. Protection analysis needs to consider decision-making processes and incentives of those making the decisions—sometimes those at strategic levels of response and within an organization. A discussion with participants from NGO headquarters echoed this. They reflected that they often make decisions based on the sector’s political and financial realities. The way they respond to protection analysis can be based on those internal pressures. Understanding where each actor sits in relation to the issues discussed and the decisions made can help actors more purposefully analyze information.



ACAPS’ rules for protection analysis:

1. Know what you need to know and have your eyes on the **decision-maker**.
2. Make **sense**, not data.
3. Don’t be precisely wrong, but **approximately right**.

Moving Forward

Throughout the Roundtable, participants reflected on their own ways of working and what needs to change—while acknowledging where we’ve already begun to improve. Many of the barriers standing in the way of more consistent and systematic change relate to the resources, culture, and systems that underpin and influence humanitarian programs. While program design’s technical aspects are important, greater attention is needed on ways of working and how these are resourced, organizational and inter-agency culture, and incentives built into our systems.

Organizational culture came up numerous times when participants reflected on how their organization’s culture influences how they engage with communities, undertake protection analysis, and negotiate access. In many ways, the outstanding question is: **how do we make those changes?** While leadership plays a particular role in creating and sustaining organizational culture, all of us can shape the culture within our spheres of influence, whether it’s a team, or field site, or project.⁷ More work needs to be done to identify the right points of leverage—internal and external—to prompt changes and diversify ways of working, not only within our organizations but within our partnerships, coalitions, and formal coordination mechanisms.

Photo Credits

Cover: Jonathan Torgovnik
Page 3: Abu Wahed Nurul Momen Talukdar
Page 4: Ivan Roma Manukrante
Page 6: Carrie Taneyhill
Page 7: Joan Letting
Page 9: Muhammad Ikhsan

Photos are licensed under the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

⁷ See RBP brief on Resources, Culture, and Systems to explore this further.

PROTECTION ANALYSIS CANVAS

Background	Context What is known about the population at risk, the types of events, the historical backgrounds for the protection issue. (3-5 bullets)		
Analysis	Threat Which types of threats are the population at risk experiencing?	Vulnerability What makes the population at risk vulnerable?	Capacity What are the capacities the population at risk have at their disposal relevant to the protection situation?
Scenario	Scenario Describe with 3-5 bullets the most likely way in which the situation could evolve		Triggers What are the events that might make this happen?
	Worst case		
	Best case		
	Most likely		
Mitigation	Reduce Threat What can we do to reduce the threat (3-5 bullets)	Reduce Vulnerability What can we do to reduce the vulnerability (3-5 bullets)	Increase Capacity How do we increase the capacity of the population at risk (3-5 bullets)



InterAction.org | [@InterActionOrg](https://twitter.com/InterActionOrg)