

# Lessons Learned from 29 Area-Based Assessments in 18 countries

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## INTRODUCTION

IMPACT, through its initiative REACH in particular, has worked across numerous crisis settings over the past several years to implement Area-Based Assessments (ABAs) — localized, mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) assessments designed to inform response planning at the area level. In late 2023, we reviewed experiences from 29 ABAs across 18 countries to reflect on what has worked, what hasn't, and why. The review is based on internal documentation and perspectives only and does not benefit from external partner feedback.

We're sharing these lessons now to inform current discussions on humanitarian reform — particularly the growing push toward area-based coordination models. As the system considers how to localize planning and decision-making, our experience offers practical insights into what's already possible — and where structural barriers still need to be addressed.

## Key Takeaway 1: Participatory, inclusive area-level research is not just feasible — it's being done

✓ **Ground-level co-creation:** It is possible to co-create with local partners and response actors:

- In over 60% of ABAs (18 out of 29), implementing partners were involved in shaping research design — advising on geographic scope, indicator selection, or data collection tools.
- In 11 of the 29 ABAs reviewed, findings were shared directly and/or validated with communities through town halls or local presentations.
- 60% of ABAs globally in the past two years were designed to support area-based response programming — primarily informing partners, inclusive of municipal authorities, operating at the local level.

✓ **Methodologically flexible:** ABAs were used across diverse themes including disaster risk (e.g. Brazil), durable solutions for displacement (e.g. Iraq), and local service delivery (e.g. Mali), showing adaptability to sectoral and geographic needs.

✓ **Enabled by local offices:** ABAs were most effective in contexts where IMPACT had permanent presence and senior national staff to maintain relationships — such as Afghanistan and Syria. These teams were able to conduct sustained outreach and follow-up, supporting a cycle of research, dialogue, and localized planning.

### Example of ABA - Syria



In Jurneyyeh, located in Ar-Raqqa governorate, IMPACT (in collaboration with ACTED) has been implementing an ABA project since 2021 to support community recovery by restoring sustainable livelihoods and local value chains, improving access to services and strengthening local governance and civil society. The ABA approach played an important role in operationalising this nexus by integrating relief, recovery and resilience activities in a conflict-sensitive manner while also accounting for differences between areas. It involved the active participation of a wide range of local stakeholders at all stages of the intervention.

## Key Takeaway 2: What remains hard is getting actual response decisions made from local evidence

✗ **Informing ≠ decision making:** There is still a disconnect between evidence and decision making. Only 14 of the 29 ABAs (less than half) were perceived by country teams as clearly informing decision-making processes, such as collective local plans, however even fewer translated into actual response decisions, such as a shift in programming.

✓ **When responders ask for ABAs, impact follows.** ABAs directly requested by area-level response actors (6 out of 29) were the most successful at driving action — proving that demand-driven, operational partner-led planning is the surest path to uptake.

✗ **Lack of collective area-level decision making inhibits impact:** Coordination bodies were the primary audience in only 9 of the 29 ABAs, and only 3 ABAs explicitly aimed to inform sub-national coordination decisions. Even when evidence was strong, decentralized coordination structures often lacked the mandate or funding to act upon it

✗ **Lack of local authority decision-making power:** While several ABAs [7 in total] included local authorities as participants in the research, only 3 ABAs directly targeted local authorities as decision makers. The few ABAs directed at local authorities often faced limited uptake, even when the research was well-received. In two such cases, country teams cited lack of funding for local authorities to be able to act on findings.

### Example of ABA - Colombia

IMPACT - through its initiative REACH - conducted an ABA in La Guajira, critical entry point for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants (VRM) in Colombia. Its aim was to evaluate the coordination dynamics between humanitarian organisations and communities, understand perceptions of humanitarian aid and its accessibility, and identify areas for improvement.

More information, as well as the recommendations that resulted from this analysis, can be found [here](#).

## What Needs to Change: Moving from Local Input to Local Action

To make area-based community-driven decision-making real, humanitarian architecture must evolve:

- **Empower decentralized coordination bodies** to make and resource decisions at the area level — not just collect inputs.
- **Incentivize funders** to support ABAs with dedicated, flexible, follow-up programming funds.
- **Measure success of community participation efforts by influence**, not just output — linking evidence to decisions taken, funding allocated, and response delivered.

## Conclusion

IMPACT's experience of over 29 Area-Based Assessments in 18 countries prove that localized, participatory planning is possible at scale. The bottleneck isn't in research or engagement — it's in structural commitment to decentralize decision-making and accountability. As the humanitarian system resets, this must change.

**Let's stop asking if local voices can be heard. Let's ask why we still aren't acting on what they're saying.**