

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Participatory Adaptations in the COVID-19 Era

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Climate change, armed conflict, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters are all shocks and crises that can limit the ability of humanitarian and development organizations to engage with and access communities. The COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying policies and restrictions created such challenges, especially for practitioners implementing participatory programs that require face-to-face interactions. To understand how programs can better adapt to shocks that limit community engagement, Mercy Corps conducted a qualitative study called Participatory Adaptations during the COVID-19 Era (PACE) that investigated how 15 global Mercy Corps programs across 10 countries adapted during the pandemic. Through interviews with program teams and systems mapping analysis, PACE provides actionable insights on how to adapt programming when faced with shocks that limit community engagement. Specifically, PACE identified four main adaptations applied by program teams, as well as the unique enablers, barriers, benefits, unintended consequences, and lessons associated with each adaptation.

The first adaptation involved **elevating committee representatives as liaisons** to sustain program activities in the absence of direct implementation by program teams. This adaptation highlights the importance of building on pre-existing community structures, providing them with consistent capacity strengthening, and fostering a cultural of participation as a means of not only enabling committees to function autonomously, but also to develop a sense of local ownership. However, this adaptation suffered where programs struggled to overcome the digital divide, sustain participant motivation, and adapt their technical resources for use by committee representatives. In some cases, it also resulted in inconsistencies in implementation and undermined program quality. Where programs opted to elevate traditional leaders as committee representatives, this adaptation limited diversity and inclusion in collaborative decision-making processes. Anticipated benefits of this adaptation include improved program efficiency, broader geographical coverage, and the cultivation of local champions capable of offering sustained coaching and mentorship within the community. To further invest in this adaptation, teams should foster a culture of participation through genuine community engagement; mapping and utilizing existing structures; collaborating with a diverse network of local actors; and deliberately selecting committee representatives to include historically marginalized groups and non-traditional community leaders.

The second adaptation centered on **empowering local practitioners** (including civil society organizations and field mobilizers) to co-design, implement, and adapt programs. Sustained and tailored capacity strengthening, virtual program management tools, and authentic and mutual partnerships were all enabling factors that nurtured a culture of participation and deepened the effectiveness of this adaptation. However, donor inflexibility often restricted the ability of program teams to effectively prioritize and resource partner needs. Local practitioners also occasionally experienced heightened feelings of pressure to deliver and tensions with community participants in the context of fast-changing crises. Despite these challenges, empowering local practitioners – especially those physically based in target communities – not only facilitated quicker resumption of activities as access constraints eased, but also enabled better development of context-specific activities and improved consistency of community participation. Future efforts to employ this adaptation should involve local CSO partners in program co-design at the outset; invest in sustained and tailored capacity strengthening initiatives; hire team members and technical experts who are physically present among participants; and map existing venues, equipment, associations, and initiatives that can be available to local practitioners during times of reduced access and beyond the program duration.

The third adaptation focused on **deploying technological solutions**, including low-tech and hybrid solutions, such as radio broadcasts and blending virtual spaces with in-person engagement. Technological adaptations were generally effective at supporting context monitoring and action-oriented tasks, even improving program efficiency by saving time and resources on travel and venue costs. However, they were consistently less effective for activities that sought to strengthen skills, nurture relationships, promote collaborative decision making, or resolve disputes. As a result, participants experienced reduced knowledge acquisition and fewer social cohesion gains as compared with in-person activities. Additionally, the digital divide disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, leading to exclusion of participants with lower levels of digital literacy or poor access to technology. Programs sought to address the digital divide by offering digital literacy training, providing equipment or phone credit, and mapping existing community resources to improve participation. Technological adaptations also inadvertently mitigated traditional norms around gender and age, enabling women to circumvent cultural barriers to participation by engaging remotely in activities, while youth harnessed their relative technological skills to assert themselves in discussions. This adaptation would benefit from further investment in low-tech and hybrid solutions; capacity strengthening activities to support the digital literacy of teams and participants; and internal technical resources such as digital tool guidance, video tutorials, and content modifications.

The fourth adaptation involved **addressing needs emerging from acute crises**, which led many programs to adjust the focus of their activities. Successful implementation of this adaptation relied on mature community structures, a commitment to centering community voices, and robust context analysis. While experience with previous crises enabled some communities to leverage past learning, in other cases, the normalization of crises undermined participant motivation to address emergent shocks and stresses. Rumors and misinformation only further led to feelings of disempowerment and complicated efforts to develop accurate and up-to-date context analysis. Donor flexibility and willingness to empower programs to modify their activities was invaluable to employing this adaptation. Conversely, programs struggled when donor inflexibility, due to heightened oversight and delayed approvals, impeded program responsiveness. Ultimately, this adaptation not only

enabled programs to address new community priorities, but also encouraged holistic problem-solving and stimulated community resilience. PACE found that programs seeking to implement this adaptation should invest in collaborative, robust, and ongoing context analysis; center community voices in analyzing new dynamics and generating locally led solutions; and focus on processes for community mobilization and collective action, rather than sector-specific solutions, to strengthen local resilience capacities.

The experiences of programs in the PACE study demonstrate the range of adaptations that can be implemented to maintain – and even enhance – community participation during crises that present barriers to access. These adaptations were most constructive when community participants were involved in their design and execution. Moreover, programs that had already been investing in centering community voices, context monitoring, regular capacity strengthening activities for civil society partners and local committee structures, coordination with external actors, and participatory processes were better placed to leverage these enabling factors to adapt more readily and effectively. These adaptations subsequently led to improved local ownership, increased participation of traditionally marginalized groups, and enhanced collective action, in a way that has the potential to deepen long-term resilience of communities. Moving forward, organizations should *proactively* integrate participatory and adaptive approaches into their programs before new shocks occur and adaptation decisions need to be made.



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