PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATIONS IN THE COVID-19 ERA
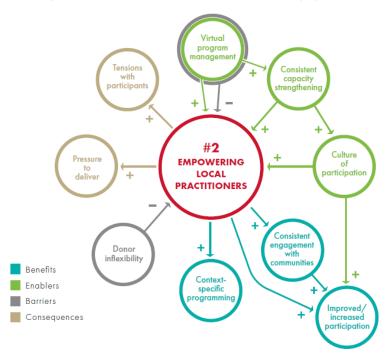
Adaptation Brief: Empowering Local Practitioners

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These Adaptation Briefs are part of a larger study entitled Participatory Adaptations in the COVID-19 Era (PACE), which examines how Mercy Corps teams adapted their participatory programs to the wide range of constraints triggered by the pandemic, as well as concurrent barriers to implementation, such as insecurity, climate shocks, and other public health crises. These Adaptation Briefs summarize each of the four main adaptations identified through the research. The analysis of each adaptation is grounded in a systems map (see below) that maps the enablers, barriers, consequences, and benefits of implementing the adaptation.

Mercy Corps programs have historically partnered with local, national, or regional Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for a range of technical and operational reasons. In emergency response contexts, CSOs are often critical to accessing vulnerable populations, whereas for governance and peacebuilding programs, engaging CSOs is central to nurturing effective and responsive governance systems and vertical social cohesion. The onset of COVID-19 led programs to increasingly rely on existing or new CSO partnerships as well as local mobilizers to sustain program implementation and community engagement.

Partnerships with local CSOs flourished when they fostered a strong **culture of participation** and mutual respect, often through spaces for co-creation and collective learning. Programs described deliberately creating opportunities for CSO partners to actively participate in designing programmatic resources, participant selection processes, budgets, and work plans. In some cases, the same collaborative approach was employed in developing program contingency plans in response to COVID-19. The most robust partnerships valued mutual and transparent communication, involving CSO partners in donor discussions and strategic decision making. **Constructive leadership** was often critical to modeling behaviors of empathy and humility and encouraging

program teams to contribute to equitable and authentic relationships with the CSO partners. These relationships also enabled more holistic understanding of partner strengths and weaknesses, better communication, and more effective coaching and mentorship. **Consistent capacity strengthening** efforts, when done with respect and the intention to empower, further enabled CSO partners to effectively conduct activities and increasingly own the process. For programs that had existing partnership relationships before the pandemic or prior experience with remote management, **virtual program management** tools and approaches enabled programs to provide ongoing coaching and invest in collective adaptation.

The shift to **virtual program management**, while beneficial for programs with well-established partnerships, posed significant barriers for new initiatives. The reliance on remote interactions for program design undermined initial relationship building, inhibiting the harmonization of communication and work styles between Mercy Corps and partners teams. It also complicated the accurate assessment of partners' organizational capacities, leading to misalignments in delegating program responsibilities, which in turn delayed implementation and necessitated the revision of capacity strengthening plans. **Donor inflexibility** regarding compliance rules and timelines exacerbated these challenges, restricting Mercy Corps' ability to effectively prioritize partner needs and undermining trust essential for partnership sustainability.

CSO partners experienced heightened **pressure to deliver**, often exacerbated by power imbalances and limited funding, a challenge that intensified during the pandemic with expectations to maintain timelines and performance despite uncertain, evolving contexts. In some cases, engaging CSO partners and community mobilizers led to **tensions with community participants**, especially when these local actors had not been involved in the program at the outset, or due to perceived conflicts of interests by mobilizers.

Programs that empowered CSOs and community mobilizers, especially those based in target communities, not only resumed activities more quickly post-lockdown, but also better maintained **consistent community engagement**, benefiting from the physical presence, credibility, and cultural knowledge of local practitioners. Involving local practitioners in program design and implementation also led to **context-specific programming** that was better tailored to local needs, which increased community buy-in and **improved participation**, demonstrating the value of local contributions to program quality.

Lessons and Implications

Involve Local CSO Partners in Co-Design: This adaptation demands the proactive involvement of CSO partners to co-design both the strategic program vision and activity approaches. Programs should prioritize CSOs who are physically present and have deep relationships in target communities. Particularly in virtual settings, fostering open dialogues, conducting thorough capacity assessments, and seeking extended periods for program start-up and refinement are essential for building authentic relationships, strengthening partner capacity, and aligning institutional frameworks.

Invest in Sustained and Tailored Capacity Strengthening: When collaborating with local CSOs, program teams should focus on both sector-specific technical skills and broader professional and institutional capacity strengthening. This should involve customized, ongoing support such as accompaniment, refresher training, and coaching, aiming for long-term empowerment. Additionally, ensuring that CSO partners have essential resources like IT equipment and vehicles is crucial for their effective operation, requiring collaboration between program teams and donors.

Hire Locally: Programs should standardize their hiring practices to include local community members, while being careful not to hire skilled staff away from local CSOs. These individuals are crucial for monitoring local dynamics, contextualizing activities and adaptations, and consistently mobilizing and mentoring community participants. Programs should adopt deliberate capacity strengthening practices that promote staff development, decentralize power, and stimulate the local economy. Additionally, involving local academics and technical experts as trainers and consultants has the potential to further enrich program effectiveness and community engagement.

Map Existing Resources: Adopting an asset-based approach by mapping existing community capacities and resources, including local activists, venues, and civic initiatives, enhances program design and implementation. Engaging local associations, even those not meeting formal grantee standards, through collaborative arrangements for office space use and IT support ensures program continuity during restricted access and extends impact beyond the program's lifecycle.

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Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.
Now, and for the future.

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