

# PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATIONS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

## Adaptation Brief: Addressing Needs Emerging from Acute Crises

MARCH 2024

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.

Development and humanitarian programs are traditionally designed to address sector-specific community needs, and therefore, typically view unexpected challenges as barriers to planned implementation, rather than opportunities for adaptations. The pandemic changed this norm, as donors encouraged a direct response to COVID-19 and its secondary effects. Programs across various sectors adapted by integrating COVID-19 sensitization into their activities. In addition, program teams and community participants developed creative new ways to reinforce economic wellbeing, foster social cohesion, and promote civic engagement, which were being eroded as a result of the pandemic. These adaptations to address emergent challenges were often predicated on the presence of mature, capable community structures, which enabled them to leverage their existing skills for collaborative decision making and experiences from past initiatives.

Programs were most effective at adapting to emergent needs when they fostered a **culture of participation** and **local ownership** with community structures. Despite initial hindrances from lockdown measures, these enablers fostered a space in which committees had the skills, confidence, and will to harness existing methods, such as **CATALYSE**, to develop creative **context-specific programming**. This approach was underpinned by **robust and current context analysis**, which, through systematized monitoring and collaborative information gathering, enabled the identification of emergent needs and the generation of evidence-based responses. Programs with **prior experience**, relationships, and knowledge were particularly adept at efficiently addressing new crises, benefiting from lessons gleaned from other crisis response. **Donor flexibility** was also critical at permitting programs to adapt their objectives and activities to meet emergent needs, highlighting the importance of supportive funding relationships in facilitating responsive and effective adaptations.



Conversely, programs with **weak context analysis** struggled to address needs arising from acute crises, as they were unable to effectively assess new dynamics and design appropriate responses. This barrier was exacerbated by **rumors and misinformation** about COVID-19, particularly in regions that witness recurring seasonal disease, which not only impeded accurate context analysis and evidence-based adaptation, but also demotivated participants who felt that COVID-19 mitigation was beyond their control. Similarly, for communities that have long dealt with overlapping public health emergencies and violent conflict, **prior experience** with similar crises had the effect of **normalizing crisis**, which in turn, **reduced participant motivation** to address new, COVID-specific challenges, in favor of prioritizing urgent basic needs. As donors diverted funding to the public health response, a **loss of financial incentives** for community structures also undermined participant motivation. Some programs sought to mitigate these barriers by providing non-monetary, **in-kind incentives** and generating intrinsic motivation through the CATALYSE approach to nurture a sense of **local ownership**. Additionally, experiences of **donor inflexibility**, due to heightened oversight and involvement of donors during the pandemic, especially for shifts in sectoral focus and budget modifications, often led to delayed or obstructed implementation of new activities.

Particularly during the early stages of the pandemic, understanding the causes of disease spread and effective mitigation strategies were still nascent and rapidly evolving. As program teams continue to operate in this environment, they often struggled with uncertainty, heightened psychosocial health needs, and **increased pressure** about how to protect themselves.

Programs found that the pandemic, a resulting sense of common purpose, and a commitment to this adaptation to address needs emerging from acute crises generated the **will to respond** to issues previously considered out of scope, taboo, or too difficult to take on. In several cases, community structures began addressing cases of gender-based violence, which spiked during COVID-19 lockdowns, but had previously been viewed as an internal family matter. This dynamic created a positive feedback loop in which collective resolve further reinforced this adaptation to **address needs emerging from acute crises**. These benefits also unlocked creative thinking to **holistically advance multiple objectives**, for example, blending objectives related to social cohesion and public health. For established community structures, this period of crisis **tested and demonstrated community resilience**, revealing their capacity for autonomous, collective action in response to immediate threats, in a way that also had the potential to deepen long-team wellbeing.

## Lessons and Implications

**Invest in Robust and Ongoing Context Analysis:** Deep contextual understanding is essential for enabling programs to generate relevant responses for addressing needs emerging from acute crises. Programs should invest in in-depth research and assessments – such as conflict sensitivity analysis, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) analysis, and political economy analysis – as well as ongoing, systematic context monitoring. Collaborative efforts with committees can ensure that responses are grounded in local expertise and promote the sustainable use of knowledge by those structures.

**Center Community Voices:** Programs often rely on existing institutional approaches to ensure rapid deployment of assistance. However, programs found that local leadership is critical to designing adaptations that are relevant, swift, and effective. This requires teams to ensure that community participants have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to share their perspectives and generate solutions, and demands that teams safeguard space for participants to initiate action.

**Focus on Processes for Resilience:** Programs excelled at adapting when they emphasized collaborative problem-solving and conflict management, fostering skills for participants to tackle various crises. Programs should avoid focusing on specific sectors or solutions in favor of nurturing approaches and capacities for community resilience to diverse shocks and stresses, as local priorities shift over time, even beyond the life of the program.

## CONTACT

### Ryan Sheely

Senior Managing Director – Research, Evidence and Learning

[rsheely@mercycorps.org](mailto:rsheely@mercycorps.org)

### Bharathi Radhakrishnan

Researcher – Peace, Conflict, and Governance | Research and Learning

[bradhakrishnan@mercycorps.org](mailto:bradhakrishnan@mercycorps.org)

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45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204

[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)

96/3 Commercial Quay Edinburgh  
EH6 6LX Scotland, UK

[mercycorps.org.uk](http://mercycorps.org.uk)

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