

# PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATIONS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

## Adaptation Brief: Deploying Technological Solutions

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.

Nearly every program facing access challenges during the pandemic explored technological solutions, particularly video conferencing and social media, as a way to continue their participatory activities. These adaptations were generally effective at supporting context monitoring and action-oriented tasks. However, they were consistently less effective for activities – such as technical trainings or dialogue sessions – which sought to strengthen skills, nurture relationships, promote collaborative decision making, or resolve disputes. Meanwhile, several programs turned to low-tech solutions, such as radio or conference calls, or hybrid solutions, which blended in-person and virtual activities.

The primary barrier to the use of technological solutions was the **digital divide**, characterized by limited access to technology, low digital literacy, and mistrust of digital tools, especially in remote and underdeveloped areas. Low rates of smartphone ownership (particularly among women) and poor network connectivity were compounded by deepening economic hardship during the pandemic, which prevented participants from purchasing phone credit. In some cases, participants did not view digital tools as a credible forum for information sharing or decision making. Programs also noted the **poor transferability of facilitation techniques** from in-person sessions to a virtual environment, leading to less interactive sessions and reduced participant engagement, as program teams struggled to adjust the content and techniques for online delivery.



To overcome the digital divide, program teams either **provided resources**, such as tablets, radios, or phone credit, to participants or **mapped existing resources** in the community. Many programs also provided their participants with **training on digital literacy and technology**, via video tutorials or written instruction on

how to use specific platforms. In some cases, programs were able to leverage existing **familiarity with technology**, especially among younger participants, to accompany those with lower levels of digital literacy. Additionally, several programs utilized hybrid solutions, supplementing virtual activities with direct outreach to ensure access for participants who lacked internet connectivity or digital literacy skills, or to overcome mistrust in digital platforms as a tool for community engagement.

For technical trainings and collaborative sessions, programs found that technological solutions often **reduced efficiency**. In an attempt to achieve the intended outcomes of these activities while still meeting set targets, programs decrease the number of participants per session, decrease the duration of sessions, and increase the number and frequency of sessions. Despite these efforts, programs noted **reduced knowledge acquisition** by participants compared to in-person trainings, primarily due to the poor transferability of facilitation techniques to virtual platforms. At a time when the pandemic was already disrupting social interactions, technological adaptations further **reduced social cohesion gains**, as virtual spaces were not conducive to nurturing relationships and disrupted traditional norms and practices of dispute resolution. In these cases, programs often opted to delay or cancel such activities. The digital divide also disproportionately impacted women, elderly, and participants with lower levels of educational achievement or financial means, resulting in **reduced diversity and social inclusion**, as these participants tended to drop out of activities, including those utilizing low-tech solutions, such as radio or conference calls.

While COVID-19 era movement restrictions and limitations on social gatherings restricted the number of participants that programs could convene in-person, technological solutions created opportunities to **increase the number of participants** involved in activities by reducing logistical burdens. In some cases, digital alternatives also expanded participation beyond the intended demographic, giving access to other members of the household. Furthermore, technological adaptations often **increased participation of women and youth** by mitigating traditional norms around gender and age. Virtual activities, in which women could participate remotely from home, enabled them to more easily balance household duties and to circumvent cultural barriers that restrict their public engagement without male accompaniment. Meanwhile, youth harnessed their relative technological skills to assert themselves in virtual discussions and even take on new leadership roles, which shifted intergenerational norms. While technological adaptations reduced the efficiency of certain activities, they **improve the efficiency** of routine communication with participants and action-oriented tasks by saving time and resources previously spent on travel and venue rentals. As a result, programs were able to increase the frequency of their engagements with community participants, which facilitated more **robust and current context analysis**. This up-to-date analysis further enabled programs to respond to emergent trends and changes in local dynamics.

## Lessons and Implications

**Employ low-tech and hybrid solutions:** Programs should consider integrating low-tech and hybrid approaches to transcend the digital divide and ensure that diverse participants can benefit from activities. Where participants are unable or unwilling to engage with digital platforms, radio and phone calls remain powerful low-tech tools for communicating information and even creating participatory space. Meanwhile, a mix of virtual and in-person activities can balance the advantages of each.

**Invest in digital literacy:** Most programs are likely to maintain some reliance on technological solutions to navigate future shocks and stresses. To prepare for these inevitabilities, programs should integrate capacity strengthening activities to improve the technological skills and digital literacy of participants and in a way that aligns with their literacy and numeracy levels.

**Expand internal technical resources:** Adapting in-person activities to virtual formats necessitates modifications in content and delivery. Additional technical support and resources, like video tutorials and guidance on facilitating participatory online sessions using virtual whiteboards and breakout groups, can help teams effectively transition Mercy Corps approaches, such as CATALYSE, to online environments.

## 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)

### About Mercy Corps

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.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204

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

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

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

---

\* Citation: Sloan, B. and Marsh, S. 2024. Participatory Adaptations in the COVID-19 Era: Adaptation Brief, Deploying Technological Solutions. Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.