



Women in Gereng, Adamawa participate in a natural resource mapping workshop. Photo Credit: COMITAS Team/Mercy Corps.

ADAPTATION IN ACTION

Learning Snapshot from the COMITAS Program in Nigeria

MARCH 2024

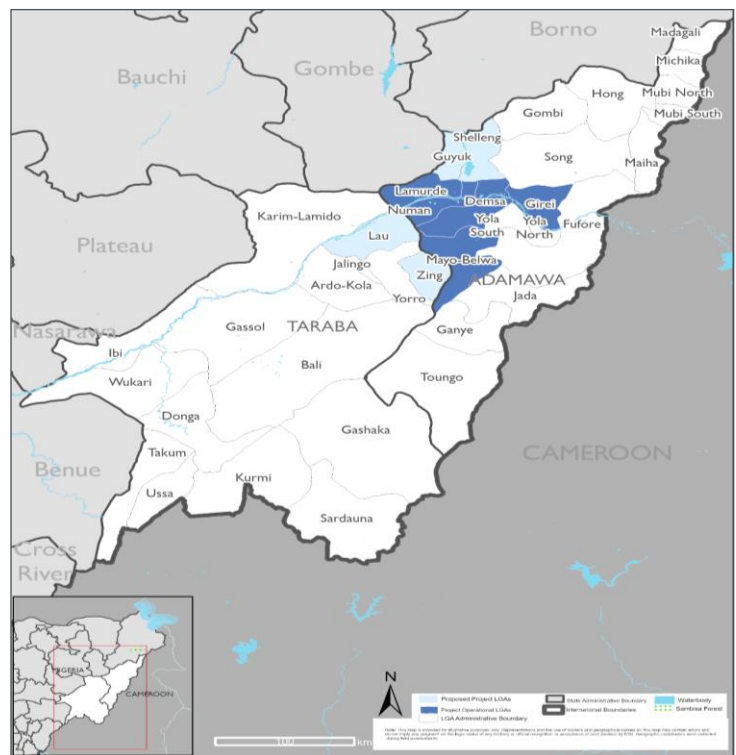
Mercy Corps works in contexts characterized by persistent fragility born out of conflict, climate change, weak governance, and public health crises. In these settings, action research is increasingly being recognized as a critical approach enabling programs to continuously adapt to shocks and stresses (Valters et al. 2016; Gajjar, S.P. et al. 2022; Lichtenheld, A. et al. 2021). Not only does action research generate evidence through active and often recurring cycles of reflection to identify experiential knowledge, but also directly harnesses that learning for the purpose of improving collective action (Burns et al. 2012; Pettit 2010). This Learning Snapshot seeks to document an ongoing action research process being undertaken collaboratively by Mercy Corps' Research and Learning Team and the Contributing to the Mitigation of Conflict over Natural Resources (COMITAS) II program in Nigeria to improve program adaptations to emergent contextual changes throughout the life of the program. This Learning Snapshot presents the action research process, adaptations undertaken by the program, nascent benefits being experienced, and the enabling and inhibiting factors that have affected the process.

Background

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Research and Learning Team conducted a research project entitled [Participatory Adaptations in the COVID-19 Era \(PACE\)](#) aimed at examining how Mercy Corps teams adapted their participatory programs to the wide range of constraints provoked by the pandemic, as well as concurrent dynamics and barriers to implementation, such as insecurity, climate shocks, and other public health emergencies. The project sought to produce practitioner-oriented recommendations and resources to help teams integrate participatory and adaptive approaches into their program design and organizational arrangements in a way that will enable better locally led responses to future crises. To do this, we undertook a multi-phased process that included: 1) interviews with program teams and data analysis, 2) action research partnerships with current programs, and 3) development and piloting of technical resources. This Learning Snapshot focuses on the second and third phases.

The action research partnerships were designed to apply, test, and contextualize emergent findings from the initial data analysis through the provision of tailored guidance and technical tools for program partners and the facilitation of active and collaborative reflection. As such, the action research partnerships informed the development of technical resources and provided a forum for piloting resources that have the potential to be scaled on an institutional level beyond the scope of the PACE research. This process sought to produce observational data on how program teams are experiencing and navigating barriers to community participation and applying adaptations in real time.

The PACE team identified the COMITAS II program in Nigeria as ripe for an action research partnership. COMITAS II – a consortium-based program with IOM and Search for Common Ground – seeks to mitigate conflict over natural resources between farmer and herder communities in Taraba and Adamawa states. Mercy Corps is specifically focused on addressing the root causes of conflict by enhancing collaboration between farmers and herders to manage competing claims over natural resources. It seeks to achieve this objective by improving the capacities of community-based Natural Resource Management Committees (NRMCs) and local authorities to manage conflicts through trainings, study visits, and awareness raising campaigns on sustainable resource management and interest-based negotiation (IBN) skills. The program also aims to support NRMCs, in partnership with local authorities, to identify and realize solutions for natural resource management through dialogue, action planning sessions, and implementation of community initiatives. The program envisions that these efforts will not only mitigate disputes, but also contribute to deeper trust between farmers and herders as well as with local authorities.



Map: Target Local Government Areas in Taraba and Adamawa States.

The previous iteration of the COMITAS program focused on Adamawa state and lasted from December 2020 to December 2022, aligning with the COVID-19 era under examination by the PACE research, while the current phase started in January 2023 and is expected to run until January 2024. The majority of the staff members comprising the program team also remained the same. This presented a unique opportunity to explore not only how the program adapted to COVID-19 and concurrent shocks, but also how it is continuing to apply adaptations and lessons learned from that period to emergent barriers to access. Notably, the primary adaptation employed by the COMITAS I program during the COVID-19 era was to **elevate representatives from the NRMCS as liaisons** to spearhead program implementation. The action research partnership aimed to create space to further explore and invest in that adaptation beyond the COVID-19 context.

The action research partnership between the PACE and COMITAS II teams was first established in April 2023, when the COMITAS II program was still undertaking initial start-up activities. From that time, the PACE team engaged in continuous accompaniment of the COMITAS II program, providing the team with technical guidance and resources requested by the program and MEL teams and facilitating regular reflection sessions that created rapid feedback loops to apply action learning. The PACE research team also conducted a two-week visit to Adamawa in July 2023 to provide the program and MEL teams with a training on participatory facilitation skills and participatory MEL, design technical resources for NRMC members, and observe a training of NRMC members.

Since the action research partnership is an ongoing endeavor, this Learning Snapshot does not document final lessons learned. Rather, in the spirit of action research as an iterative process for applied learning, this Snapshot seeks to capture our reflections to date, while they can still be actively harnessed by the COMITAS II program. It may also be valuable to revisit this learning at a later stage to assess how it has continued to take root.

Action Research as a Tool for Adaptation: Elevating Committee Representatives as Liaisons

Despite the growing push for use of evidence and learning in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding programming, practitioners continue to face challenges in translating research findings into programmatic approaches and tangible tools (Darcy 2013; Allen 2023). Action research helps bridge this gap between theory and practice. When used in fragile and dynamic contexts, action research generates evidence that reduces uncertainty and creates reflective space that promotes consistent adaptation. Organizations have found that action research improves program quality, produces context-specific resources, and enhances the capacity of teams (Swaminathan 2023). In the context of the action research partnership between PACE and COMITAS II, the process enabled iterative testing of new programmatic approaches that not built on the combined insights from its first phase and the experiences of other similar programs.



Figure 1: Systems map of Adaptation, Elevating Committee Representatives as Liaisons

The first phase of the COMITAS program began conducting its natural resource management activities in January 2021, at a time when intensifying insecurity, severe rainy season flooding, and COVID-19 prevention measures throughout Adamawa state inhibited access for the program team and participants alike. Although the program had initially planned to visit the newly formed NRMCs in their respective wards to conduct trainings and facilitate activities, the program team recognized that it had to adapt. In collaboration with the NRMCs, the program team identified committee representatives who were responsible for attending trainings and briefing sessions in the state capital before returning to their colleagues to share what they had learned. Through continuous remote coaching and mentorship from the COMITAS program team, the NRMCs then planned, implemented, and reported on community initiatives, enabling the program

not only to continue conducting activities during a period of reduced access, but also to maximize local ownership and enhance the durability of local structures for the future. During the initial data collection for the PACE research, COMITAS team members presented this adaptation¹ to **elevate committee representatives as liaisons** as a critical success during the COVID-19 era and voiced their interest in deepening such approaches throughout its ongoing second phase. The following sections describe the specific techniques and tools being employed by the COMITAS II program as a result of this collaboration.

Community Entry Assessments

The COMITAS program had initially planned to conduct a community entry assessment as part of its start-up activities to assess the feasibility of program implementation in selected wards, especially those in Taraba state, which is an entirely new area of operation for Mercy Corps. Considering the unprecedented scope and severity of seasonal flooding experienced by communities involved in the first phase of COMITAS, the team recognized the community entry assessment as a valuable opportunity to be even more deliberate in identifying local vulnerabilities and capacities that would affect access in the event of new barriers resulting from climatic events. As a result, the team added a set of questions to its assessment tool to explore the types of climate shocks faced by communities in past years, coping mechanisms employed to maintain access to services in major population centers, and recommended approaches to maintain engagement throughout the program. These additions were intended to improve the team's context analysis in order to enable more proactive and participatory adaptation throughout the programming.

¹ Each adaptation featured in the PACE report is grounded in a systems map that identifies the enablers, barriers, consequences, and benefits of implementing the adaptation. For a full explanation of these factors, see the full report: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/covid-19-learning-and-preparing>.

Findings from the community entry assessment indicated that selected communities had faced a mix of flooding, drought, and house fires over the past years. In response to these climate shocks, communities had employed a range of coping strategies, including temporary relocation to neighboring communities or long-term displacement, although this approach was primarily adopted by younger and able-bodied individuals. Communities also created makeshift pathways using sandbags and used alternate modes of transportation, such as bicycles, motorbikes, and boats, to circumvent damaged roadways in the event that they needed to access major population centers during periods of severe flooding. The assessment suggested that women may have been more willing to be mobile during flooding. While unrelated to climate shocks, the COMITAS team also learned that increased insecurity in the form of armed attacks and kidnapping was prompting the community to consider engaging local vigilante groups as escorts to access livelihoods and collective services.

The COMITAS team harnessed these findings to produce a contingency plan in the event of new barriers to access. In general, the team sought to orient its workplan to implement the majority of community-based activities during the dry season. In addition, the team adopted a multi-pronged strategy based on geographic location and severity of climate shocks. For new NRMCS in Taraba, the team determined that in cases where NRMCS representatives could effectively navigate the roads, they could employ the same approach used during COMITAS I, to bring representatives to state capitals for trainings. For wards that entirely lost access, trainings would be postponed until the dry season when access was restored. However, in areas of Adamawa where NRMCS had already been trained and participated in community mapping and action planning workshops during COMITAS I, the team determined that NRMCS representatives might be able to facilitate activities for new NRMCS in neighboring communities. Ultimately, the 2023 rainy season was mild, and none of the target communities faced displacement or lost access. As a result, programming was able to proceed as planned. Nonetheless, the contingency planning required minimal investment of additional resources and would have enabled swift adaptation in the event of severe climate shocks.

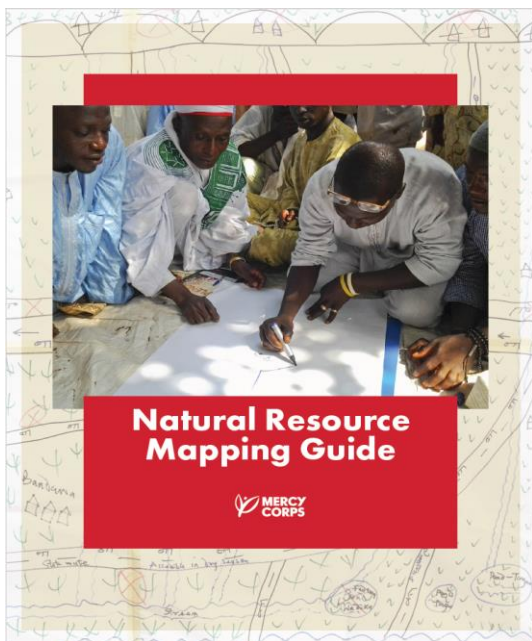


Photo Credit: COMITAS Team/Mercy Corps

On the other hand, certain assessment and planning activities did not have the intended effect. Another element of the community entry process was a technical assessment of water resources in selected communities, conducted collaboratively with relevant Nigerian agencies. The assessment intended to inform community development and climate resilience projects resulting from NRMCS action planning. The initial assessment found that water levels were sufficient to sustain local communities, if well managed. However, several months later, as the NRMCS began planning their projects, these findings were no longer relevant, as communities faced severely depleted water levels. As a result of these inaccuracies in its initial analysis, the COMITAS program has had to delay implementation of identified development and climate resilience projects and hire new consultants to reassess water resources. Despite the efforts of the COMITAS team to develop proactive and evidence-based approaches for climate adaptation, the volatility of the environmental context has demonstrated the challenges of advance planning and need for more adaptive techniques.

Community Facilitation Guide

As part of its ambition to further elevate NRMC representatives as local champions and empower them to facilitate activities, the COMITAS team sought to invest in tailored tools for the representatives. During the primary data collection for the PACE study, the research team had piloted a participatory tool that sought to remotely document community experiences by having committee representatives lead the process without direct involvement of the research or program teams. The tool led community participants through a series of collaborative and analytical exercises, which were recorded on flipcharts and shared with the research team. Former or current participants of the COMITAS program were involved in piloting the approach. Ultimately, the data gleaned from this exercise was not incorporated into the PACE study, as a result of its poor quality, and the approach was deemed inappropriate for use as a research tool. However, the COMITAS and PACE teams agreed that the tool could be adapted to guide the NRMCs through more action-oriented programmatic activities, such as community mapping and action planning sessions.



The COMITAS team already had a facilitation guide that it used during the program's first phase to support the NRMCs to map the presence of natural resources and services in their communities, assess how those resources were being managed, and identify sources of tension and conflict. However, the guide included sectoral jargon and assumed that a skilled facilitator would be able to translate the prompt questions into interactive engagement among participants. In adapting the tool to support a community-led approach, the prompts were rephrased as directive instructions to ensure clarity of the process, the content was revised to ensure the use of simple language and local terminology, and visual aids and examples were added. The team subsequently undertook an extensive process of translating the tool into Hausa and Fulani. Finally, a graphic designer was hired to add formatting and photos that would make the tool more accessible and visually appealing to users.

Based on the initial piloting of the tool in Taraba state in December 2023 and in Adamawa state in February 2024, the NRMC participants valued the resource as an investment in sustainability. They generally found the facilitation guide self-explanatory and easy to use without additional support from the COMITAS team, even for illiterate participants. They were able to complete all of the exercises in line with the intended objectives and within the allotted time, despite the tiring process. Participants felt that the interactive approach and clear sequencing of the exercises enabled them to paint a comprehensive picture of their communities and generate new ideas for natural resource management. They also offered useful recommendations, including additional refinement of the language to align with local dialects, increased font size, inclusion of more photos that reflect local livelihoods, and proposed additions to the list of map symbols to represent other natural resources and services that had emerged throughout the process. The team is planning to incorporate these changes in subsequent rounds of piloting.

The participants also emphasized that more time was needed for the facilitators to familiarize themselves with the guide in advance of the sessions. The guide had been designed to empower the NRMCS to select their own facilitators, while the COMITAS team provided them with a briefing on the guide and other preparatory support. However, the COMITAS team reflected that this approach may need to be balanced with deliberate efforts to identify and invest in NRMCS members who demonstrate potential as facilitators. The COMITAS team also envisions training NRMCS representatives on the skills and techniques to strengthen their



Photo Credit: COMITAS Team/Mercy Corps

participatory facilitation of such sessions. In July 2023, the PACE research lead provided the team with the two-day training that included sessions on the principles of adult learning, learning styles, conflict sensitivity, managing energy levels, facilitating opening and closing sessions, and techniques for brainstorming, small group work, and experiential learning. The training was highly interactive and focused on skill building through practical exercises and peer-to-peer feedback. Following the training, the team identified ways to further adapt the content and delivery methods to eventually cascade it down to the NRMCS.

Advancing Inclusive Mediation Web-Based Tool

In September 2022, the Peace and Conflict Technical Support Unit (TSU) launched a two-year, multi-country program, entitled Advancing Inclusive Mediation (AIM), which seeks to increase skills and knowledge of inclusive mediation among local communities, Mercy Corps, and the broader peacebuilding community of practice. One of the core components of the program is the development of an interactive, web-based tool with a web map enabling community partners and Mercy Corps teams to more effectively assess conflict incidents and prioritize relevant responses. As part of its engagement of NRMCS and interest in further elevating representatives to autonomously lead community-based mediation efforts, the COMITAS team viewed the web-based tool as a potentially valuable element to layer into its existing programming.

Since the tool launched in December 2023, the COMITAS team has provided NRMCS members with training on how to enter data on conflict incidents as well as community efforts at conflict management and mediation. The emergent findings and visualizations are readily accessible to the NRMCS, creating immediate feedback loops that enable the NRMCS to identify innovations in mediation and evidence of what works in a way that can be further scaled. This process of documenting and publishing success stories is also helping to build the confidence of NRMCS members involved in the mediation efforts. Moving forward, the team envisions that the web tool will help communities experiencing conflict to identify and engage NRMCS representatives from neighboring areas who can support them to mediate disputes.

Outcome Journals

During the action research visit, the COMITAS team voiced an interest in adopting more complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation methods to better assess outcome-level changes, center community voices, and establish a more autonomous approach for measuring progress. Through the action research partnership, the team identified Outcome Journals as a participatory method that would not only empower the NRMCS to

identify the types of changes that they wanted to measure, but also enable them to lead the process of data collection and analysis in a way that can inform locally led action and adaptation. Outcome Journals are a tool for monitoring changes observed in program participants. What makes it a journal is the practice of regularly recording changes over time, based on set 'progress markers.' What makes it an outcome journal is the focus on changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and norms, rather than activities or outputs. The team envisioned involving the NRMCS to develop the progress markers, maintain the journals on a bi-monthly basis, and contribute to participatory analysis of patterns and trends emerging over time.

With coaching from the PACE researchers, the COMITAS team started by identifying two domains, which are broad outcome-level changes that the team is interested in monitoring. The establishment of domains enabled the team to narrow the scope and create a common framework for analysis of potentially diverse measures, according to contexts and interests of the NRMCS across the 18 target wards. The team selected 1) Quality of Negotiations and 2) Joint Natural Resource Management Efforts, reflecting their belief that program activities would lead to changes in the ways that participants negotiate to manage conflicts and in the types of collective actions taken to address those conflicts.



Photo Credit: COMITAS Team/Mercy Corps

The MEL team conducted a series of participatory sessions with the NRMCS in Taraba in October 2023 and in Adamawa in February 2024 to develop progress markers reflecting what the NRMCS would *expect to see*, *like to see*, and *love to see* with respect to each domain. For example, in considering progress markers related to the Quality of Negotiations, one NRMCS indicated that they would *expect to see* a role for community leaders in negotiations and involvement of both farmers and herders in the process; *like to see* a principle of fairness in managing the negotiation and that all parties recognize the benefits of negotiation as a means of dispute resolution; and *love to see* that both farmers and herders benefit from the negotiated agreement. While the overall

quality of the progress markers varied considerably across NRMCS, the participants generally found the two domains intuitive and clearly aligned with the program activities and felt that the participatory approach to identifying progress markers was familiar and accessible. The participants overwhelmingly appreciated how the process created space for constructive deliberation around collective priorities and an opportunity to define for themselves what success might look like.

At the time of publication, the team had not yet been able to continue rolling out the process of the Outcome Journals due to staff turnover, but envisions providing the NRMCS with training on how to fill the bi-monthly journal template in order to document changes in their identified progress markers over time. Other Mercy Corps peace and governance programs within Nigeria have also taken interest in the Outcome Journal approach and are beginning their own piloting, recognizing the powerful potential of participatory monitoring to further empower local community structures.

Enablers and Barriers of Action Research

Action research is an inherently collaborative process in which researchers serve as “creative inquirers” who play a facilitative – rather than directive – role, guiding practitioners through recurring cycles of planning, implementing, and reflecting (Stringer 2020). Lazika and Deschamps specifically highlight five core principles essential to action research relationships: 1) build trust to nurture openness, 2) be part of the team to understand the culture, 3) understand the system to focus on the right levers of change, 4) put principles into action, and 5) iterate (Lakiza 2019). The following sections explore the specific enablers and barriers that have affected the action research partnership between the PACE and COMITAS II teams thus far.

Enablers

From the outset of the action research partnership, one of the core enablers was the will of the COMITAS II program manager to learn from their COVID-19 experience and to continuously invest in team and community capacities to adapt to new shocks and stresses. The program manager was proactive and transparent in sharing ongoing programmatic challenges and opportunities for collaboration and mobilizing team resources to harness new approaches and tools throughout program implementation. Despite rallying his team members to conduct activities at a rapid pace, he was also deliberate in his commitment to staff wellbeing, which further motivated them to test new and innovative adaptations.

The action research partnership also benefited from preexisting relationships between the research and program teams. Having worked together for several years in Nigeria, the PACE research lead and COMITAS II program manager were already familiar with each other’s communication styles and preferences, knew how to leverage each other’s skill sets, and trusted the intent behind the collaboration. This enabled the action research partnership to take root through virtual reflection sessions prior to in-person interactions. During the visit to the team, the PACE research lead was able to build relationships with new team members, gaining insight into the wider team dynamics, internal capacities, and interests. The combination of structured trainings, facilitated reflection sessions, and informal personal discussions also served to nurture a collective ethos of learning that endured once interactions became remote again.



Photo Credit: COMITAS Team/Mercy Corps

The experience of the PACE research lead as a former program manager in Nigeria also gave her an intimate understanding of the cultural and institutional norms that were affecting program implementation and resources required to support the team. This awareness allowed her to speak in programming language with the team, translate research findings into practical considerations, and glean and interpret relevant observations as further data. It also enabled her to recommend actionable and evidence-based programming approaches and to develop and refine tailored technical tools to address team needs.

Finally, the introduction of the action research partnership during the startup phase of the program seemed to have a positive effect on the process. This timing enabled the program team to acclimate to the recurring reflection sessions and availability of ad hoc support from the outset. Interactions with the team occurred at the pace required by the programming – necessitating immediate technical input prior to an activity, and at other times slowing considerably while the team was preoccupied with implementation demands. In some cases, the reflection sessions were requested by the team to simply deliberate with a third party on perceived shortcoming and potential changes in activity facilitation, even if no clear and actionable guidance was provided. Nonetheless, the existence of this space to debrief, reflect, and brainstorm appeared useful to encourage a culture of purposeful adaptation.

Barriers

One of the biggest barriers impeding the action research partnership between PACE and COMITAS has been a series of staffing challenges, including hiring delays and turnover. Although the COMITAS program started in January 2023, the team was unable to fill key roles until July, due to heavy compliance procedures within the Human Resources Team. These staffing gaps delayed program implementation and stretched existing team members beyond their typical duties, which limited opportunities for engagement and action learning. Once the team was fully staffed, they accelerated implementation to catch up with their work plan, which similarly undermined their availability to participate in reflection sessions or pilot experimental approaches. The team also endured the departure of a crucial team member midway through the implementation, again placing added burden on other team members and eroding critical expertise needed to undertake one of the identified program adaptations.

These implementation delays were compounded by a series of access constraints at the outset of the program. By mid-April 2023, election activities initially scheduled for mid-March were still ongoing in Adamawa, due to contested results and multiple reruns. The state government suspended all humanitarian activities during this time. Even after the election results had been finalized, the COMITAS team found it difficult to engage local communities amid ongoing fears of political violence. Again, these delays meant that the team was under greater pressure to expedite implementation once the situation stabilized.

Although the team exhibited a strong will to engage in the action research partnership, the envisioned adaptations were deprioritized in moments of short staffing and time constraints. As a result, the team frequently had to postpone piloting activities and reflection sessions. The predominantly remote engagement also limited opportunities to more organically slot into ongoing program activities and team discussions. This experience demonstrates the challenge of adaptation when activities are not already built into program design and donor reporting expectations.

Conclusion

The action research partnership between the PACE research team and COMITAS II team demonstrates how collaborative and iterative learning practices can support programs to adapt their work to deepen participation and address barriers to implementation in real time. While the various adaptations being piloted by the COMITAS II program are still nascent, the team is already witnessing tangible signs of progress towards further elevating committee representatives in a way that can contribute to sustainable community resilience in the long term. Based on this experience, there is considerable potential to further scale and test similar action research initiatives.

Moving forward, program and research teams should:

- › **Continue investing in learning processes to understand how participatory adaptations can be applied in diverse contexts.** The PACE research and COMITAS II action research partnership have generated critical evidence around the adaptations that are both feasible and effective in the COVID-19 era and beyond. However, there is considerable need to explore their applications to various climate shocks and stresses and complex emergencies across a range of socio-political and operational contexts.
- › **Identify opportunities for action research partnerships early in the program cycle.** While adaptation can occur at any time throughout the program duration, it is critical for program and research teams to have time to invest in the relationships, practices, and evidence that will enable teams to more readily and creatively generate new options.
- › **Involve technical advisors or multi-skilled researchers who can bridge the theory-practice gap.** In the face of regular and urgent programmatic demands, program teams often struggle to translate existing learning into action-oriented tools and resources or to extract learning from their ongoing experiences. Effective action research demands the engagement of versatile individuals who can speak both languages in a way that fuels consistent and effective feedback loops.
- › **Allocate funding for new tool development and piloting in designing program budgets.** Even where the will and expertise exist to produce technical resources that can enable new adaptations, budgetary constraints often limit these efforts. Programs should plan for adaptation by ensuring sufficient funding to address emergent barriers and pilot new solutions.

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