

PARTICIPATORY ADAPTATIONS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

Adaptation Brief: Elevating Committee Representatives as Liaisons

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.

Most programs in the PACE study established local community structures or committees, often using Mercy Corps' [CATALYSE approach](#) for participatory decision making and community mobilization. These committees – and the engagement of committee representatives as liaisons – were crucial in planning and implementing activities, especially when COVID-19 restrictions hindered direct interactions with the program team. Furthermore, this adaptation showcases the strengths of localization to enable ongoing and highly contextualized program activities despite constraints such as insecurity, environmental shocks, poor infrastructure, and public health crises.

The adaptation's success hinged on several pivotal enabling factors, most notably, the existence of robust committee structures. To assist committee representatives in their new liaison roles and to bolster the quality of programming, program teams conducted various **capacity strengthening** activities that sought to nurture relevant skills and confidence for local leadership. Where representatives were able to circumvent access issues, programs **relocated trainings** to regional capitals, enabling representatives to cascade trainings back to their respective committees. Programs also provided consistent **remote coaching** through phone calls and digital platforms. In some cases, programs relied on **coordination with local stakeholders**, such as government authorities, to create a network of localized technical support. Central to the successful deployment of this adaptation was fostering a **culture of participation** and **local ownership**, underpinned by a commitment to center community voices, build authentic relationships, and maintain transparent and empathetic communication. This approach fostered a sense of agency and intrinsic motivation by committee representatives and their communities to proactively design and implement initiatives, demonstrating their commitment through the contribution of time, financial, and in-kind resources.



Efforts to empower committee representatives faced barriers, primarily due to the **digital divide** experienced by remote and semi-literate populations. Programs also found that technical resources and activity guides designed in English or French and laden with technical jargon were **poorly adapted** for direct use by representatives, causing confusion. Additionally, the pandemic's impact and the **prioritization of basic needs** over volunteer activities led to decreased engagement. Where COVID-19 restrictions hindered the disbursement of stipends and allowances, these **delays in financial incentives**, crucial for compensating committee members for their time and expenses, further **demotivated participants**.

The shift to more autonomous realization of activities by committee liaisons sometimes created **inconsistencies in implementation**, including diluted messaging or differing interpretations across target communities. Where programs selected traditional leaders to serve as liaisons, harmful cultural norms often **limited diversity and inclusion**, specifically of women and youth, in activities that were meant to promote collaborative decision making. In some cases, participants also raised concerns that traditional leaders might co-opt programming for their personal benefit, risking **intercommunal tension**.

The most immediate benefit of this adaptation was the continuation of activities in the midst of access constraints, which enabled programs to avoid strained relationships with participants, operational inefficiencies, and diminished social cohesion gains. Furthermore, by empowering committee liaisons, this adaptation resulted in improvements in **local ownership**. Programs anticipate that further cultivation of local leadership will enable liaisons to offer **sustained coaching and mentorship** within their communities, **increased geographical coverage**, and **improved program efficiency**. Ultimately, this adaptation holds the potential to foster **enduring community resilience**.

Lessons and Implications

Foster a Culture of Participation: Programs that effectively employed this adaptation were able to inspire a culture of genuine engagement and leadership by community participants to collaborate, advocate, and conduct activities. Meaningful participation can be promoted through consistent capacity strengthening, inclusion of community voices, and nurturing relationships based on humility, empathy, and trust. Programs should aim to recruit team members that embody these qualities, reinforcing them through onboarding and leadership development initiatives and performance assessments.

Map and Resource Existing Structures: Programs should more deliberately identify and harness existing structures, rather than creating new groups that are disconnected from the local ecosystem. Joint identification of existing community venues, safe access routes, and communication modalities can also enable these structures to continue functioning even during times of crisis. Program should ensure that facilitation guides and technical tools are developed or adapted to the language and style that are accessible to local structures, so that they can utilize these resources independently.

Collaborate with a Diverse Network of Local Actors: Local actors can serve as technical resources to mentor committees on their activities, advocates to promote committee activities and mobilize community members, and facilitators to navigate administrative approvals. Programs should seek to engage local authorities and institutions to support committee structures, especially during times of crisis. Programs should work to galvanize these actors at the outset, linking them with committee structures and supporting them to identify their respective roles in enabling committee activities.

Deliberately Select Committee Representatives: This adaptation can only be effective if committee members and liaisons are diverse, representative, and credible. While customary leaders and government officials play important roles in enabling community structures, their authority may limit meaningful and inclusive participation and even widen societal power imbalances. Programs should consult extensively with diverse and marginalized groups, including women and youth, and embed participatory approaches to identify representatives who are committed to community-driven change.

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* Citation: Sloan, B. and Marsh, S. 2024. Participatory Adaptations in the COVID-19 Era: Adaptation Brief, Elevating Committee Representatives as Liaisons. Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.