MERCY CORPS

TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPACT

Annual Impact Report

AUGUST 2020–JULY 2021

44 countries are or have been home to Technology for Impact initiatives and/or Cisco Meraki networks installed as part of our partnership.

TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPACT
MERAKI NETWORK
BOTH

BULGARIA
GREECE
HUNGARY
ITALY
KYRGYZSTAN
SERBIA
TAJIKISTAN
UZBEKISTAN

COLOMBIA
EL SALVADOR
GUATEMALA
HAITI
HONDURAS
MEXICO
UNITED STATES

BURKINA FASO
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
ETHIOPIA
KENYA
LIBERIA
MALI
NIGER
NIGERIA
SUDAN
SOUTH SUDAN
UGANDA

AFGHANISTAN
GEORGIA
IRAQ
JORDAN
LEBANON
LIBYA
PAKISTAN
PALESTINE
SOMALIA
SYRIA
YEMEN
ZIMBABWE

INDONESIA
MONGOLIA
MYANMAR
NEPAL
TIMOR-LESTE

20 21

WHO WE ARE

Mercy Corps' Technology for Development (T4D) team collaborates with field teams and external partners to unlock new possibilities and reach more people through the power of technology.

OUR VISION

A world of digital inclusion and opportunity where the ethical use of technology empowers secure, productive and just communities.

In August 2020, as Year 4 of the Technology for Impact partnership began, the world was 5 months into the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the pandemic had significantly upended many people's lives and ways of working, but in many ways, we were still in the early days. We hadn't experienced wave after wave of new outbreaks and lockdowns, vaccines were still on the horizon, and major variants hadn't been detected. And unfortunately, the health and economic impacts of the pandemic are far from over, particularly in many of the places where Mercy Corps works.

COVID-19's widespread impacts are undermining global development efforts: For the first time in more than 20 years, extreme poverty (defined as people living on less than $1.90 per day) is expected to increase, with estimates of 88–115 million more people living in dire circumstances. This backsliding further undermines previous gains in addressing gender-based violence, food insecurity and unemployment. Our work is getting harder.

Over the past year, Mercy Corps' Technology for Development team has been responding to the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19. For example, we worked with Mercy Corps Nigeria to pilot a rumor tracker, which involved collecting input via text messages and interactive voice response to understand how misinformation was being spread and then tailoring our educational campaigns and community engagement in response to those rumors. This work subsequently informed a number of misinformation programs, including a multilingual chatbot that provided 3,000 people with immediate factual information. Tech-enabled programs like these have formed the basis of our vaccine hesitancy work, in which we are applying the same contextual understanding and community engagement to our response strategy.

Technology for Development has also helped program teams adapt to the secondary impacts of COVID-19 by digitizing programs to meet needs for remote engagement with participants or delivering cash assistance via mobile phones, analyzing the impact of food prices to inform humanitarian response efforts, and building internal technology capacity for monitoring and evaluation.

With the support of Technology for Impact, Mercy Corps is responding faster and working more efficiently, using saved resources to reach more people. In fact, an assessment has articulated just how much of an improvement digital solutions are making. For example, by integrating participant registration and payment technology, we were able to reach 13,000 more people per month by improving efficiency using algorithms that are able to instantly verify eligibility and trigger payments to vulnerable households.

Thanks to Cisco's investment in Technology for Development, Mercy Corps has been better equipped to respond to the unforeseen challenges of the past year.

With appreciation for our corporate partners, this resilient team, the engagement from our program and technical teams as well as implementing partners — and above all, the people and communities where we work — thank you for reading and for your support.

Alexa Schmidt

Alexa Schmidt
Director, Technology for Development

Read the Year 3 report here.

HIGHLIGHTS

9.4 million people have benefited from Technology for Impact programming to date, including 7 million from Years 1, 2 and 3.

82 programs incorporate Technology for Impact activities, including 30 new programs in Year 4.

44 countries have been home to programs supported by Technology for Impact.

TECHNOLOGY FOR IMPACT INITIATIVES

The Technology for Impact partnership is a 5-year collaboration between Mercy Corps and Cisco. Cisco has given T4D $8.5 million in funding and $1.5 million in product and technical expertise to support seven specific initiatives.

> ### COMMUNICATION SECURITY & DATA PROTECTION AND PRIVACY
> *(mainstreamed into IT activities)*
> Exploring potential security gaps in Mercy Corps' current communications and data protection models, tools, policies and procedures so we can enhance security and ensure regulatory compliance.

> ### DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING AND ANALYTICS
> Integrating multiple data sources into program management and crisis analytics tools to generate more relevant, timely information and help Mercy Corps teams make more precise, effective decisions.

> ### DIGITAL CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE
> *(formerly Beneficiary Identity and Information Management)*
> Bringing complementary technology components, capacity and procurement/inventory processes into a single ecosystem to enable faster, better beneficiary registration and information management systems, with a focus on digital cash and voucher assistance.

> ### DIGITAL COMMUNITIES
> Providing reliable, actionable information to communities through a safe, accessible digital ecosystem to help them engage more equitably with community power holders, plan for their futures and respond to changes in their environment.

> ### FIELD TECHNOLOGY TESTING PROGRAM
> Funding trials of new and emerging technologies to expand Mercy Corps' capabilities and develop innovative solutions to advance humanitarian aid and development around the world.

> ### SOLUTION DISSEMINATION AND REPLICATION
> Building awareness of technology solutions and replicating them internally and externally to sustainably scale Technology for Impact initiatives.

> ### FIELD NETWORKING INFRASTRUCTURE
> Deploying the latest, most secure connectivity hardware across our offices and field locations to enable centralized equipment management, reduce costs, and ensure faster, more secure communications.

Digital transformation from within

When we think about the impact of Mercy Corps' humanitarian aid and development work, we often look at specific programs. The Technology for Impact partnership with Cisco gives us an opportunity to look at the impact of technology on our entire organization, revealing a much bigger picture that affects all of our programming around the world.
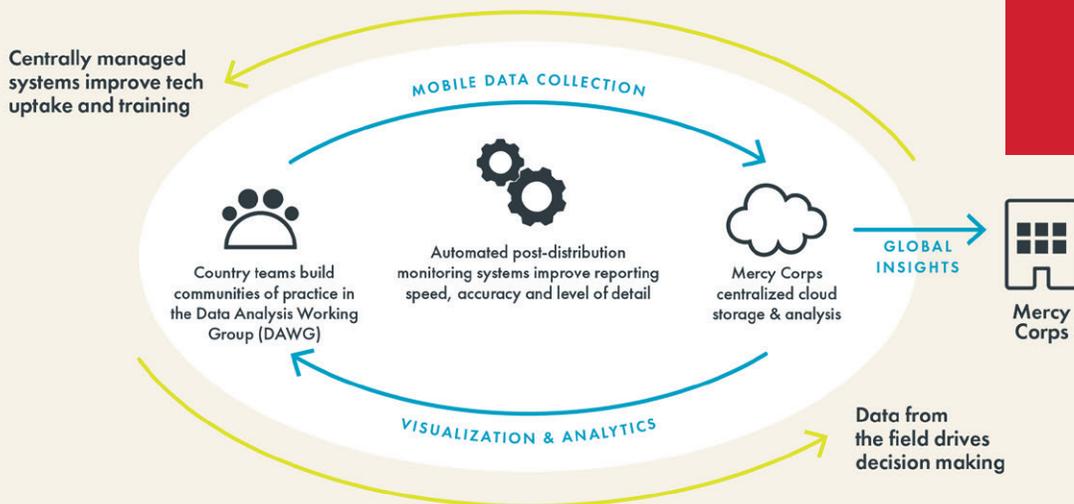
Over the past 4 years, integrating technology into our programming has transformed the way our teams work — and the way we work together. Team members that were once wary of change are now excited about the transformative potential of technology. Time previously spent on manual processes can now be spent on problem solving and innovation. Individual successes can be more easily replicated in new contexts. As an organization, we've learned, grown and continue to evolve, with technology driving us forward.

HIGHLIGHTS

Improved support and emphasis on monitoring and evaluation technology led to a **39% decrease in the use of paper** for data collection from 2018 to 2020.

Integrated registration and payment technology resulted in a **330% increase in monthly participant reach**, using algorithms that instantly verify eligibility and trigger payments to vulnerable households.

The automated post-distribution monitoring system reduced data processing and analysis from **3 weeks to 15 minutes** for emergency assistance programs, informing rapid adaptations.

Centrally managed systems improve tech uptake and training

MOBILE DATA COLLECTION

Country teams build communities of practice in the Data Analysis Working Group (DAWG)

Automated post-distribution monitoring systems improve reporting speed, accuracy and level of detail

Mercy Corps centralized cloud storage & analysis

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Mercy Corps

VISUALIZATION & ANALYTICS

Data from the field drives decision making

Building a foundation of tech-driven programming

As we've learned and experimented, technology has become fundamental to how we work.

In the early days of our partnership with Cisco, integrating technology into established programming could feel daunting at times. Mercy Corps country teams had established ways of working, and the learning curves associated with implementing new tech solutions were steep. Now, however, technology has become a familiar and welcome element in our work, thanks in large part to the positive experiences and outcomes we've seen to date.

Our approach to governance programming is now digital. For the first time in Mercy Corps history, we've organized agency-level technology selections and data standards for monitoring and evaluation. And, our cash programming, which accounts for half of Mercy Corps' humanitarian portfolio, is now digital. In fact, Mercy Corps has become a globally recognized leader in cash distribution for humanitarian aid and development because of our use of technology to make cash programming more efficient, accurate and effective.

In a recent analysis of technology solutions used in the Cisco-supported Digital Cash and Voucher Assistance and Data-driven Decision Making and Analytics initiatives, the Technology for Development team looked at how technology has impacted our work in three key areas: relevance, effectiveness and efficiencies, and overall sustainability of our cash programming.

Based on a Cisco-supported landscape analysis conducted before the Technology for Impact partnership launched, we knew that processes for identifying beneficiaries, collecting information about them, distributing cash and voucher assistance, and evaluating how the support was used were often conducted manually. Manual processes were time consuming, less accurate, and prone to human error, duplication and potential corruption. From that initial analysis, we designed a system that included digital registration and verification of participants, mobile data collection, digital payment distribution, and ongoing digital monitoring of how the assistance is used. Integrating technology generated higher-quality data and reduced the time required for analysis.

Looking specifically at our cash and voucher assistance programs in Nigeria and Gaza, our analysis found that technology solutions led to positive outcomes including more people assisted, more accurate and efficient participant selection and registration, improved security, and faster processing of data and delivery of services. For example, whereas previously it took two working days a week from three full-time staff to reconcile paper vouchers, it took our teams 75%–80% less time to process four times as many electronic vouchers.

Our analysis also showed how technology can provide insights not possible with manual analysis to help us improve and adapt programming. In Nigeria, for example, data on what participants were purchasing with their vouchers revealed a lack of diversity in the types of foods they were selecting. Our team was able to complement the vouchers with information on the importance of buying a range of foods and extend vouchers to be used for not only dry-good staples, but also fresh produce.

These findings validate our belief that technology has massive potential to increase the scale, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid, and also pave the way for integrating technology more deeply and in more ways in our programming worldwide.

> With electronic vouchers, it took our teams 75%-80% less time to process four times as many vouchers as compared with manual, paper processes.

Automating post-distribution monitoring enables adaptation

One of the most important ways for Mercy Corps teams to understand the impact and effectiveness of aid and cash distribution programs is through post-distribution monitoring (PDM). Information gathered from surveys of participants helps program teams discover challenges to distributing assistance effectively, understand how people are using the assistance, and identify potential areas for improvement or adaptation.

Since the PDM process is standard and relatively consistent across food, cash, hygiene kits, winterization kits or other types of distribution programs, it presents an ideal opportunity for automation. Mercy Corps' emergency response teams worked together with Technology for Development to automate the analysis and reporting of PDM data using a variety of tech tools and applications. The goal: dramatically accelerating data availability to ensure that decision makers can review PDM information *before* the next distribution takes place.

Because of automated PDM reports, the Mercy Corps Pakistan team was able to improve communications about emergency cash assistance to female participants who were less likely to own cell phones and shift to partnering with financial service providers that had lower transaction fees. In Indonesia, the emergency response team was able to enhance COVID protocols around emergency supply distribution sites and establish clean water points in locations more convenient for participants.

Sharing knowledge internally to improve programs globally

An essential component in establishing technology as a foundational element across our programming is sharing what we've learned with our Mercy Corps colleagues and helping build a community of practice to continue the dialogue. The Data Analysis Working Group (DAWG), launched in Year 4, has been a valuable and effective way to do just that.

Any Mercy Corps employee can join the DAWG — the only requirement is an interest in data and a desire to learn about how to analyze and apply it. In virtual sessions, team members from country programs share what they've learned from activities such as visualizing data, creating information-rich data dashboards, using specific tech tools and methodologies, and using GIS data to map community needs and response programming. Sessions are available in different time zones, in both English and French, and recorded so anyone who could not attend can still benefit. Sharing information in this way is an important step in understanding commonalities in the challenges and opportunities across our diverse portfolio of programs, and in informing a consistent set of tools to make those programs more efficient and effective.

Applying proven methods to new challenges

It's tempting to see innovation as a process of creating something new — a new device, or app or platform. But there's more to it than that. Innovation is also about finding new ways to use existing solutions, or about seeing a problem through an unexpected lens.

When the COVID pandemic hit, humanitarian aid and development organizations were challenged to keep crucial programming going while also supporting vulnerable communities through a massive global health crisis. For Mercy Corps, that meant tapping into community engagement systems we already had in place, and replicating approaches we knew had the power to counter dangerous mis- and disinformation with crucial, credible facts.

HIGHLIGHTS

1,867 COVID-related rumors were analyzed in Nigeria and Puerto Rico to inform targeted, factual information responses.

118,000 people in Puerto Rico saw 10 COVID-related campaigns informed by rumor collection and social media monitoring.

Over 700,000 new users leveraged WiFi hotspots, COVID-19 information sharing, and other digital solutions to engage in their communities and access information for improved decision making.

Responding to the COVID "infodemic"

Countering rumors and false information online helps people access and act on facts to protect their health.

As soon as COVID-19 became a household name in early 2020, it was clear that the coronavirus wasn't the only dangerous thing spreading. Mis- and disinformation about what the virus was, how it spread, where it came from, and how it could be prevented or treated compounded the threat. The World Health Organization called it an "infodemic" — an overabundance of misleading, rapidly spreading information that elevated the already alarming risk of contracting the coronavirus.

In the Borno State of Nigeria, for example, poor nutrition, lack of basic health and sanitation resources, ongoing violent conflict, and a widespread mistrust of the government had already created a precarious situation when it came to public health and safety. Rumors and conspiracy theories claiming that the virus wasn't real, wasn't deadly, was created by the government, or could be easily treated with traditional remedies undermined public health efforts, leaving people even more vulnerable to the disease.

> "I managed to get a whole family vaccinated. The piece [called] 'Vaccine risks and benefits vs COVID-19 risks' was key."
>
> **—Community leader from Puerto Rico**

With funding from Cisco's COVID-19 investment, Mercy Corps' Technology for Development team was able to provide resources for country teams to monitor, analyze and counter mis- and disinformation online in Myanmar, Nigeria, Uganda and Liberia.

In Nigeria specifically, Technology for Development and Mercy Corps Nigeria created Gaskiya (Hausa for "truth"), a pilot project that applied our deep experience in community engagement, along with the community listening and responsive information approaches we had developed in creating Signpost, a Cisco-supported app designed to get crucial information to refugee communities and displaced people.

The Gaskiya Project

1   Gather information from the community about what kind of messages they are seeing online.

2   Analyze the messages for rumors and misleading information, identifying which messages pose the greatest risk.

3   Respond with targeted, factual information to counter misleading and false messages online.

The Gaskiya project used SMS and interactive voice response (IVR) technology, working with local community members known as "Truth Champions" to collect rumors and misleading information people were seeing online. SMS helped us reach people on standard cell phones, and IVR helped us overcome the challenge of low literacy, with voice recordings of surveys instead of text. We developed a tool to monitor and analyze rumors and questions in the community. Our analysis focused on identifying and categorizing the misleading messages people were seeing online, the platforms on which they were being exposed to these messages, and the people who were sharing the information.

We then worked with public health professionals and translators to develop targeted messages about COVID related to the trending topics, and shared accurate information back to the communities through trusted, influential community members.

We're now applying a similar approach to COVID vaccine-related communications in Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Puerto Rico, where the government has implemented a massive educational campaign to support vaccination efforts. Misinformation has been rampant in Puerto Rico since the beginning of the pandemic, and our programming is helping to address harmful misinformation with factual information disseminated through social and media campaigns and through partnering with community-based organizations and trusted leaders.

From virus misinformation to vaccine hesitancy

The Gaskiya pilot program to counter rumors, mis- and disinformation about the coronavirus in Nigeria provided valuable evidence and experience in community listening and responsive information. The community-centric approach and tools from Gaskiya are now helping to inform our agency response to vaccine hesitancy in Nigeria and other regions.

As we've seen around the world, rumors and conspiracy theories online could pose an even greater risk in the context of vaccination programs. Mis- and disinformation about the vaccines themselves and their distribution could lead to or exacerbate existing perceptions of inequality, governance grievances, and broader hesitation among local communities. Because of the impact we saw in the community-led rumor tracking in Nigeria and Puerto Rico, Mercy Corps is now applying community-oriented rumor tracking and broader social media monitoring to analyze and inform our vaccine approach in Nigeria, as well as Iraq and Pakistan. This work has also informed our broader mis- and disinformation experience, even outside of COVID-19 programming.

Encouraging youth-led digital peacebuilding

In Iraq, entire generations have grown up amid intense sectarian violence, with three major wars over the past 40 years — nearly 60% of the population is under the age of 25. Today, ethnic and sectarian tensions are routinely exacerbated and amplified online, where mis- and disinformation is used to attack minorities and even blame specific groups for COVID-19, including marginalized communities, the government or international aid workers.

Social media and online platforms have also been used constructively, though, helping activists organize, mobilize and promote peaceful protests. To encourage more of these constructive uses and counter disinformation, Mercy Corps designed a program to encourage young people to propose and implement their own solutions to mis- and disinformation in their communities. In three-day workshops, young people will identify the impacts of mis- and disinformation and plan projects to address it, culminating in a design sprint to develop specific projects addressing issues such as community tensions around rural/urban dynamics, water scarcity or community members perceived to have ties with violent extremists. By the end of 2021, four projects will receive funding to bring them to life.

> "I learned a lot, and I felt that now I have an important lens to quickly detect misinformation and know its negative impact and mechanisms to verify it easily and quickly..."

—Talal Fawzan, activist, Mosul

Leading a tech-driven approach to humanitarian aid

As Mercy Corps teams have learned, experimented, and piloted new solutions and programs with support from Cisco, we've shared what we've learned with the broader humanitarian community. That means sharing information, inviting other organizations to collaborate, and making tools and solutions we've developed available for others to use.

In this way, we've been able to lead the way toward a tech-driven approach to humanitarian aid, applying technology to better understand what communities need and when they need it most, tapping into the power of data to make better decisions, and informing government policy and investment to make life better for people in communities facing poverty, conflict, economic instability, natural disaster and extreme hardship.

Tools Mercy Corps has developed and shared

Social Media and Conflict: Understanding Risks and Resilience
A framework to help analyze and understand pathways to violence between online and offline spaces, and research and recommendations to social media platforms, donors and other stakeholders

Connectivity research and field guide
Research on WiFi access and well-being outcomes and a guidance toolkit for establishing WiFi connectivity in refugee camps, developed in collaboration with the Signal Program at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative

HIGHLIGHTS

An 88% accuracy rate for food price predictions in Syria is helping humanitarians better understand Syrian food insecurity and enhance decision making to address it.

Over 1,000 readers from 125 different organizations have read Mercy Corps' reports on food price predictions and other economic forecasts in Syria.

Mercy Corps CEO Tjada D'Oyen McKenna urged lawmakers to support international COVID vaccine programs, which include responsive information modeled after Technology for Development's rumor tracking work.

Using data to predict and plan for a crisis

Data automation and analytics give aid organizations the insight they need for timely, relevant responses.

Leveraging the crisis analytics work and capabilities we developed during the first three years of the Technology for Impact partnership with Cisco, Mercy Corps teams have been able to expand our capacity for collecting, analyzing and drawing useful insights from publicly available data in partnership with Amazon Web Services (AWS). The results are not only improving the efficiency and relevance of Mercy Corps programming, but also proving useful to other organizations.

In Syria, for example, Mercy Corps used digital data automation and analytics tools to design a predictive model for the price of food. Previously, teams tracked prices in person by going to markets and documenting changes in prices, but they weren't able to see ahead and forecast the impacts of a dramatic inflation event. Mercy Corps used World Food Program data to predict the minimum expenditure basket, or the cost for a typical household to meet its essential needs. Using the model's projections, the Syria Crisis Analytics team was able to determine that, over a four-month period, the average unskilled worker would need to work up to 141 more hours to purchase essential items. Quantifying this information gives humanitarian agencies valuable insight into what people in the region will need in the near term. They can then use these insights to plan for increased food insecurity and target regions and groups that will be most severely impacted by an inflation event.

In Yemen, where the world's largest humanitarian crisis has left more than 24 million people in need of aid — approximately 80% of the population — food prices have doubled and the cost of basic living has quadrupled since 2015. Mercy Corps partnered with the information and analysis nonprofit ACAPS on the Yemen Economic Tracking Initiative (YETI), an effort to provide information on key trends, risks and developments in Yemen's economy to inform economic and policy measures that promote economic stability and peacebuilding.

By overlaying qualitative information on conflict, humanitarian and political developments with quantitative data on economic trends and risks, YETI serves as a tool for decision making by both humanitarian organizations and policymakers.

Organizations in the humanitarian aid and development sector have been using the tool and supporting its ongoing development. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in the UK, for example, substantially reduced its funding to Yemen for 2021, but directed a large investment to YETI, demonstrating the tool's value.

Mercy Corps teams see huge potential for this approach in other applications, such as building a migration model to understand how food prices will impact displaced people in Nigeria. In all cases, the multilayered context and information that comes from collecting and analyzing large volumes of data from multiple sources can help aid organizations justify requests for increased investment, maximize the impact of current investments, and direct aid to the people who need it most in advance of a concerning increase in food prices.

> "If you are looking for (long awaited for) regularly updated data about currency and food prices in different locations throughout Yemen, you should check [the ACAPS] YETI project. One less data black hole to worry about in Yemen."
>
> —Majd Ibrahim, financier and humanitarian worker

AI helps warn communities before a flood

Timor-Leste is one of the most vulnerable communities in the world to water-related disasters such as floods — not only because of the frequency of the events, but also because the country does not have the infrastructure in place to warn government officials and local communities in advance of a disaster. Without time to prepare or evacuate if necessary, local communities are vulnerable to losing homes, livelihoods and lives.

The Mercy Corps country team in Timor-Leste has been working with the nation's government and the private service provider Similie to lay the groundwork for a national early warning system that gathers hydro-meteorological data from installed sensors and applies artificial intelligence (AI) to determine thresholds for disaster risks and standard operating procedures for actionable alerts. The program's focus has generated interest within the national meteorological agency, with additional support from the government of South Korea, which is investing in Timor-Leste.

"As climate change increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, this technology will become even more critical in assisting vulnerable households to prepare for disaster and minimize their losses," says Kirsten Mandala, Mercy Corps disaster risk reduction and climate change program manager.

Urging U.S. leadership to address the COVID-19 crisis and its ripple effects

On March 18, 2021, Mercy Corps CEO Tjada D'Oyen McKenna called on the United States to play a stronger leadership role in the global response to COVID-19. In her testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, D'Oyen McKenna outlined the global implications of the pandemic and opportunities for the U.S. to lead a multifaceted response.

D'Oyen McKenna noted that COVID-19 has sickened millions and killed hundreds of thousands of people in the world's most fragile regions, while also magnifying pre-existing inequities and exacerbating challenges such as food insecurity, global poverty, gender inequality and violence. She then urged U.S. lawmakers to support increases in budgets for humanitarian development and conflict prevention, make longer-term investments in agricultural food systems to address the root causes of hunger, and encourage multilateral investments in fragile states. She also called for support for foreign assistance programs to complement COVID vaccine programs with public information campaigns and inclusive community planning efforts like Mercy Corps' to build trust in public health initiatives around the world.

> "On March 18, 2020, one in every 45 people globally were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Today, that number has increased by 40% to one in 33, or 235 million people."
>
> —Tjada D'Oyen McKenna, Mercy Corps CEO

Pivoting and adapting to changing contexts

Integrating technology into Mercy Corps programming is a learning experience every step of the way, from launching an initial pilot to assessing impact after a program has been implemented. Everything we learn provides an opportunity to improve, as well as extend tools and processes to new and changing contexts.

COVID-19 made adaptation a necessity to keep crucial programming in place despite the need to keep socially distant and in order to meet rapidly changing, urgent needs in fragile communities. Partnerships we've developed over the past several years have been integral in helping us make quick pivots and build on our experiences implementing specific programs with broad potential.

HIGHLIGHTS

32,855 people voted on 21 infrastructure projects in Kabul, using a digital civic engagement approach that connects communities online and offline.

More than 140 people engaged with digitized learning modules on business development, entrepreneurship and inclusivity through Mercy Corps Liberia's youth programming.

Mercy Corps' Digital Cash and Voucher Assistance programming reached **nearly 60,000 households** (over 280,000 individuals) with over $8.7 million of assistance.

Digitizing programs to maximize reach

Adding digital components extends the reach of our programs, especially during the pandemic.

In July 2019, Mercy Corps began the Liberia Employment and Entrepreneurship Program (LEEP), designed to help Liberian youth access employment by supporting job training and entrepreneurship skills. The target population is 11,000 vulnerable out-of-school youth who face limited economic opportunities due to the impacts of the recent Ebola epidemic and the fallout from a 14-year civil war. Many of these youth have few other educational resources to draw on — throughout the country, the net school enrollment rate is only 47.9%.

In the middle of this program, another shock hit — COVID-19. This program had originally been designed to reach young people through training modules implemented at youth centers, but those in-person activities were quickly halted. With support from Cisco's COVID response funding and expertise in tech-enabled programming, Technology for Development supported the Liberia program to adapt the offline curriculum to include a digital training component.

Achieving this pivot was challenging: Not all participants had access to phones, and when they did, in most cases they were basic feature phones. With this in mind, Technology

for Development and the Mercy Corps Liberia team set out to select a technology partner that could deliver digital content via texts from mobile networks. While other options like web-based platforms exist, Mercy Corps wanted to design with the most accessible digital tools in mind and also wanted options that the program team could sustain — most international partners were cost prohibitive because they were not registered in Liberia. Once the vendor was selected, Technology for Development supported digitizing content, contracting between the content provider and mobile network operator, and breaking the curriculum into short SMS texts. Although this increased the cost of digitization, the benefit of the short texts extended the program's reach, making curriculum available to users without smartphones or stable internet.

Now that the content is available through a digital platform, a lot more people can access it. In the months since launching, Mercy Corps has observed that most participants are choosing a blended approach: While still attending in-person training, they are also accessing content on their phones and taking quizzes to assess their progress and retention.

Digitizing a program is a complex process that must take into account the digital literacy and access of program participants and country team members as well as the functionality and affordability of local tech providers in the context of the national ecosystem. In places like Liberia, with limited and expensive infrastructure (e.g., for integrating SMS content with mobile network operators), the process is much more time intensive. As more programs in countries underserved by mobile networks seek to make this type of transition, we anticipate similar hurdles.

Having flexible funding enabled Technology for Development to help support a digital pivot with resources and expertise and was integral to making the transition happen quickly in light of the pandemic.

"Working with the T4D team enabled the LEEP program to identify and develop a tech-supported remote training package, unique to the local market and available to all youth, with a view to model a sustainable mechanism for delivering youth skills development at scale."

—Mwesigwa Bikie Isharaza, Interim Director of Programs, Liberia

A new framework for digital peacebuilding

In close collaboration with the Peace and Conflict team, the Technology for Development team has continued to expand and build on our approach to digital peacebuilding and addressing the weaponization of social media.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND RESILIENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT
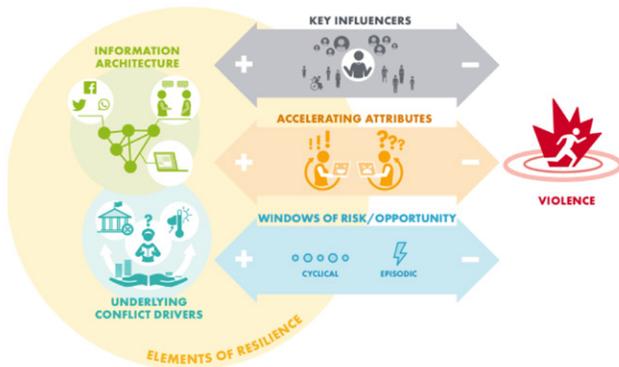
This threat has become increasingly visible in contexts where we work — from online mobilization and recruitment, to violent performative acts to draw more online followers. In response, we've developed a framework that examines both the risk factors (e.g., underlying conflict drivers and windows of risk) and the resilience opportunities (e.g., positive key influencers and windows of opportunity).

We are now working with teams in four countries to develop a strategy around this framework to identify and respond to future programming opportunities. Already in Iraq, we are working with youth to leverage the framework to identify the highest risk in their communities and entry points for programs of their own design to address these risks. In Nigeria, we are monitoring windows of risk and key influencers' campaigns alongside the COVID-19 vaccine distribution and uptake.

A chatbot provides immediate, factual responses to COVID questions

Our rumor tracking work in northeast Nigeria highlighted information needs throughout communities. Building on our Gaskiya partnership, Mercy Corps supported Clear (formerly Translators without Borders) to develop a multilingual COVID-19 chatbot to help improve understanding of the virus, address rumors and increase access to factual information for people in northeast Nigeria.

The chatbot is named "Shehu," a word that is used across all three languages in the region — English, Hausa and Kanuri. Responding to frequently asked questions about COVID-19, the bot also shares updated vaccine information and provides counter narratives to the most common myths. As of August 2021, we have received over 45,000 messages and communicated with over 3,231 users.

When people send questions, Shehu responds immediately, delivering credible information and explaining rumors. It will respond to questions such as, "How can I catch COVID-19?", "If I feel sick, what should I do?", and "Can vaccines prevent me from infecting others with COVID-19?"

Like Gaskiya, tracking the chatbot interactions and questions helps Mercy Corps and Clear better understand what information people need and support program responses to better address these gaps.

NOW FOR YEAR 5

Looking ahead, our focus in the final phase of our partnership is ensuring that the gains Technology for Impact has achieved continue to spread to all facets of Mercy Corps' work and are sustained beyond the life of this partnership. Additionally, given how COVID has exacerbated conflicts and instability, we are doubling down on our digital peacebuilding work to respond to this strain on social cohesion.

In the 4+ years of working together, partnership activities have become part of the foundation of the organization — from tech-enabled programs to digital data collection to advanced analytics of primary and secondary data about the contexts in which we work. Technology for Impact has irreversibly changed how Mercy Corps operates, and we are enormously grateful for Cisco's invaluable collaboration in that transformation.

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PARTNERS AND FUNDERS

Technology Collaboration

ACCENTURE DEVELOPMENT

ONA

TWILIO

Implementation

CLEAR GLOBAL

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

INTERNEWS

Partnerships

ACAPS

THE DEVELOPER SOCIETY

DIMAGI

GENIUS TAGS

NAGIS

Funding

AWS

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"Over the past four years, Mercy Corps has shown how the use of technology in humanitarian and development programs enables faster and more effective responses, creating the opportunity to reach more people."

—Tae Yoo, Senior Vice President
   Corporate Affairs and Social Responsibility
   Cisco

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