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**SCALE**

Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture  
Livelihoods and Environment

# IN-PERSON TRAINING IN TIMES OF COVID

Lessons and Insights from the Fall 2021 Zimbabwe Training  
*January 2022*



## Summary

As part of its technical support to the Care-led Takunda Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSa) in Zimbabwe SCALE conducted a two-week Permagarden and Resilience Design training of trainers course in support of the Takunda and Amalima Loko from October 4-15, 2021. SCALE sent a three-person team to implement the training; it was a unique opportunity to gather in-person, and this report offers some early reflections and lessons learned in implementing effective in-person training while maintaining strong COVID safety protocols.

**SCALE** (Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment) is an initiative funded by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and implemented by Mercy Corps in collaboration with Save the Children. SCALE aims to enhance the impact, sustainability and scalability of BHA-funded agriculture, natural resource management, and off-farm livelihood activities in emergency and non-emergency contexts.

## Background

### SCALE's Experience Training During COVID

As a learning award, SCALE's ability to provide technical assistance and capacity strengthening support is central to its core objectives. This ability has been tested during the pandemic as public health protocols have restricted travel and group gatherings, requiring SCALE to find new ways to deliver quality training to implementing partners and stakeholders. Earlier this year, SCALE compiled a brief on [Tips and Strategies for Enhancing Remote Learning](#), drawing from lessons learned implementing online capacity strengthening efforts over the past 18 months.

Although SCALE's remote learning efforts have largely met partners' needs, some topics are difficult to cover using online and remote learning. Trainings on the Permagarden and Resilience Design (RD) in Smallholder Farming Systems Approaches, in particular, rely on practical application of the techniques to communicate the concepts effectively to participants and prepare them to cascade the techniques to farmers while maintaining technical quality. SCALE's attempts to conduct training on these approaches over the last year of the pandemic have met obstacles. For example, SCALE planned and restructured a Permagarden training for the Madagascar RFSA's Fiovana and Maharo multiple times as the COVID situation in the country shifted, in an effort to deliver in-person training in the safest possible way. At first envisioned as an in-person training and then as a hybrid remote/in-person training, the training was ultimately canceled for health and safety reasons.

### Permagarden & Resilience Design Training in Zimbabwe

When the CARE-led Zimbabwe Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA), Takunda, requested support for an RD training of trainers as part of its inception year, the SCALE team knew it would be important to provide in-person support. An in-person training would be most effective to ensure the Takunda team applied the approach consistently across its 20 pilot sites, on which it planned to monitor farmers' adoption and adaptation of the techniques before cascading the approach more widely in the program implementation area.

Conducting the training in person also provided a key opportunity for SCALE to review and gather input into several newly developed resources, including a draft RD Facilitators' Guide, and the RD and Permagarden Minimum Standards and quality monitoring checklists. SCALE therefore undertook a series of key measures before and during the training to monitor conditions and ensure that in-person engagement could be conducted safely.

### Key Measures and Adaptations

#### Getting to a Go/No-Go

Based on the Madagascar experience, SCALE, Mercy Corps/Zimbabwe and Takunda monitored the COVID situation for several months before committing to a two-week in-person Permagarden and Resilience Design training. The partners considered key factors such as rising staff vaccination levels and dropping infection rates and gathered new information every week or two in the months prior to the proposed training dates. A final go/no-go decision deadline for the trip was set 10 days out from



the training team's departure, to allow as much opportunity as possible to cancel the training if infection rates were to rise.

The training was located in the Takunda implementation area where the team was extremely well informed of health and safety protocols. Takunda monitored the COVID situation and stayed in close contact with the SCALE team to assess whether any changes to travel plans were required.

The training team were also briefed by Mercy Corps's Public Health Advisor for COVID the week before the go/no-go decision date, providing an important check on risks and assumptions and to better inform planning.

All members of the training team were fully vaccinated before travel and travel approvals were secured from the Takunda and MC/Zimbabwe leadership prior to seeking approval from Mercy Corps HQ leadership.

### Prior to Training Start

Between the go decision and the start of the in-person training on October 4, the training team obtained PCR testing two days before and four days after international travel and completed four-day quarantine periods in Harare after arrival. The training team shared their negative PCR results with Takunda leadership to provide transparency and reassure the training cadre that their trainers were taking safety seriously. After completing their quarantine period, the training team attended a security briefing given by the Mercy Corps/Zimbabwe security focal point, including current information on the COVID situation in Zimbabwe.

SCALE emailed the full training cadre the week before training started detailing the COVID measures that would be taken during training, including full-time masking and socially distanced indoor and outdoor sessions, with compliance monitored by a designated COVID safety point person and village health agent.

The training team traveled to the program implementation site in a ventilated CARE vehicle, in which all passengers wore masks.

In addition to Takunda staff, participants included the CNFA-led Amalima Loko RFSA as well as Muonde Trust, a local organization with permaculture expertise. Representatives from district livestock, agriculture, and environment offices also joined the training.



## During the Training

CARE continued to monitor the COVID-19 situation throughout the training, ready to provide updates on changes in health and safety protocols. Because Zimbabwe has strict masking requirements in place, the training team and participants wore masks at all times, even when outdoors. Similarly, Zimbabwe's requirements governing all public buildings, including the hotel where the training was held, necessitated regular temperature checks and use of hand sanitizer when entering and exiting. These protocols provided an extra layer of protection not only for the training participants, but also for the broader community they were circulating in over the course of the two weeks (e.g., other hotel guests, people on the street, in grocery stores or restaurants after training hours, etc.). Should any trainer or participant feel ill or develop any symptoms, they would alert SCALE and/or the CARE representatives and begin isolating at the hotel immediately, while monitoring symptoms closely in line with local health measures.

Each week of the training included three days in the classroom and two days outside in a field setting. For the classroom sessions, CARE reserved an extra-large conference room to allow plenty of space for distancing. Tables were oriented in wide arcs and participants were limited to two per table, so people could see and hear one another without being too close. The two large entrances to the room were kept open at all times, and opened onto a corridor lined with open windows, which allowed for very good ventilation. The hotel provided a hand sanitizer dispenser on one wall in the room and CARE provided masks for all attendees (although most brought their own). For the field days, participants remained masked at all times, had temperature checks at the start of each day, and regularly used one of three handwashing stations throughout the day.

During sessions, there were often times when participants needed to work in groups. When in a classroom (indoor) setting, the training team placed flip charts in four areas of the room, far from the others. Then each group selected one person to take notes on the flip chart while the other members stood in a broad circle to avoid clustering together. A COVID monitor was selected each day and would check in with groups to enforce social distancing and mask wearing.





One important way the training team made sure that participants were able to stay safely distanced and still receive quality consistent technical information was by nominating local experts from within the training cohort to serve as training co-facilitators. Particularly useful during the field days, this allowed the lead trainers to provide a smaller subset of the group with additional technical information, who would then be able to cascade that information to their groups. Since the whole purpose of a TOT is to prepare participants to lead their own training sessions, this offered an excellent opportunity for trainees to practice leading their own groups while still in the training setting. In this way, COVID measures led to the identification of strong leaders and facilitators to serve as key focal points throughout implementation, not only for cascading in their own program but also for sharing learning with other implementing partners.

Even with good measures in place during the training sessions, indoor tea and lunch breaks posed some unique challenges. The training team found that a few simple tactics helped considerably and may serve as useful pointers for future trainings. For example:

- Tea breaks were taken in the same room as the classroom sessions, cutting down on time spent mingling with other conference groups in hallways, vying for tea at different stations. The hotel also carefully coordinated and timed tea and lunch breaks each day to minimize groups overlapping and to avoid crowding.
- The hotel provided a dedicated catering manager for the training room, limiting the number of hotel staff coming in and out of the room and handling food, dishes, and bottles of water.

One important challenge during tea and lunch breaks was not being sure how to advise people regarding mask wearing while eating. It was not always realistic for people to replace their masks in between bites and sips, so during tea breaks participants were instead advised to spread out in the room. During lunch breaks, however, this was not easily managed since there was only one dining room area, with limited outdoor seating. Ensuring that participants have access to outdoor eating spaces may be an important consideration for future training venues.

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