

## Annual Report July-September 2012

### Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)



*A woman in Ansongo returns from the market where she exchanged her vouchers for sugar and other needed household items. Since the forceful takeover of the region, many goods such as sugar have become more difficult to obtain as travel has become more restricted.*

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## 1. Executive Summary

In 2012, Malians were struck with one of the worst food security crises in the Sahel and a rapidly changing political and security situation. The political coup in March of 2012, followed by the forceful occupation of Northern Mali by multiple armed groups, dramatically affected the livelihoods of households in Northern Mali.

In response to these situations, Mercy Corps conducted a rapid needs and security assessment, focusing on the Gao region. Launched on July 8, 2012, the Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali was the first program Mercy Corps operated in Mali. In Fiscal Year 2012, Mercy Corps achieved the following major results:

- **18,520 of the most vulnerable men, women, boys, and girls (2,315 households) in the Gao region of Northern Mali benefitted from receiving unconditional vouchers – reaching 54% more beneficiaries than proposed**, through complementary funds secured by Mercy Corps. Vouchers are not only helping families support their own food needs, but the needs of the community through solidarity amongst Malians;
- **Baseline survey completed, confirming the relevance of the unconditional value voucher** - Three hundred and twenty five (325) households were interviewed; representing 14% of the 2,315 targeted beneficiary households;
- **10 Mercy Corps team members recruited and secure operations established in Ansongo.**

This annual report covers the period of July to September 2012, when the program was initiated. The results reported here only cover this one quarter, therefore cumulative and quarterly results are the same. Since the data reported in this report mirrors the quarterly report submitted in October of 2012, this report will expand on the analysis presented in the quarterly report and provide additional depth to the ongoing work Mercy Corps is carrying out in Northern Mali with this project, challenges being faced, and efforts to improve the quality, accountability, and overall impact of the project.

This program is implemented in the Ansongo commune, which is the smallest administrative subdivision of the Ansongo District (“*Cercle d’Ansongo*”), itself a subdivision of the Gao region. The Ansongo commune was selected based on an analysis of humanitarian gaps (no other INGOs were present at the time of the program inception) and access (along the main road between Niamey, Niger and Gao town). Ansongo town is approximately one hour drive from the town of Gao, and approximately eight hours from Niamey, Niger, by road.

The security situation in Mali has been volatile since the coup of March 2012. In July 2012, at approximately the same time as this program was launched, north Mali was completely overtaken by Islamic armed groups, with the Gao region falling under the control of MUJAO<sup>1</sup> (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa). As a result of this shift in power over the program’s intervention area, Mercy Corps took careful steps to reevaluate its startup and operational strategies, as well as its security procedures. MUJAO has installed Sharia law over the region of Gao and is calling for it to be implemented across Mali. Following the April 2012 coup and subsequent attempted secession of the three northern regions of Mali, public offices

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<sup>1</sup> *Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest*

have closed their doors in North Mali and the Government of Mali no longer maintains control or a presence in Gao. To date, MUJAO has allowed humanitarian organizations, including Mercy Corps, to access communities in the Gao region provided they do not interfere with Sharia law, do not promote values or goods MUJAO deems illicit, and do not brand their assistance.

Consequently, and in conformity with the branding waiver allowed by USAID/OFDA for this program, none of the programmatic or administrative inputs or outputs is marked with the donor or Mercy Corps identities. Despite the fact that access to Ansongo has been relatively easy via public transportation and MUJAO has not blocked any program interventions thus far, besides one isolated incident where they attempted to interfere with one distribution. The situation on the ground remains highly unstable and tense. Mercy Corps continues to carefully and systematically review the security situation.

## **2. Program Overview**

In response to the food crisis and displacement affecting 1.76 million people in northern Mali,<sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps adapted its USAID/OFDA-funded *Projet d'Appui à la Sécurisation des Terres et Ouvrages de Réhabilitation des Aires Locales* (PASTORAL) program implemented across the border in western Niger. Following an assessment in the Gao region of Mali, Mercy Corps determined that a program similar to PASTORAL would help meet the emergency food security needs and build the resilience of 12,000 individuals in the Ansongo district of the Gao region. Building on six years of experience in western Niger, Mercy Corps is currently implementing activities to enhance the food security and resilience of 7,000 pastoralist and agro-pastoralist households along the international transhumance corridor through PASTORAL.

The Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali program is providing immediate assistance to the most affected Malian households in the form of value vouchers for basic needs and commodity vouchers for fodder. To stabilize the current situation and build resiliency of communities affected by the crisis, Mercy Corps is working along the livestock value chain to improve animal health and feeding practices.

### **Gender**

Mercy Corps recognizes that women and girls face specific challenges in Northern Mali. Under the new Sharia law and MUJAO rule, women and girls are expected to adhere to new rules, enforced by the armed groups. Mercy Corps' team has reported the following restrictions in Ansongo: full head covering (previously it was common for adult women to modestly cover their heads, now even girls are required to have a full head scarf), no meetings may take place between men and women, and women and girls have a 6 pm curfew, to name a few of the main changes. The population in Ansongo resisted further restrictions on women: MUJAO originally mandated that women would not be allowed to leave their homes even to visit the market. The population successfully resisted this restriction and more severe dress code regulations for women.

Mercy Corps' programs allow women and girls to exit their homes to redeem their vouchers in the local markets. Due to the additional restrictions on women and girls, some vendors have chosen to temporarily hire women in order to facilitate interaction with female clients.

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<sup>2</sup> UNOCHA (2012) "Mali Complex Emergency Situation Report" No5, 22 May 2012.

Women in Ansongo are often left as the head of household while their husbands travel with the animals in search of pastures and water, throughout the year. The insecurity in the region and the establishment of new checkpoints has reduced mobility. Women are increasingly reporting that their husbands who have travelled outside of the region are unable to send money back and they are forced to rely on coping strategies. Additionally, the banking system is dysfunctional in the North.

Young men also face unique difficulties under the current regime because they are targeted to join the rebel movement. Since there have been reports of child-soldiers' enrollment in armed groups in the North, families have chosen to send young men to the south to avoid potential involvement in the conflict.

Mercy Corps is placing an increased focus on measuring the impact of the program on men, women, boys and girls. All data will be disaggregated by sex and age and monitoring and evaluation tools are developed with specific considerations for access to females. Mercy Corps was unable to hire any female staff members in Ansongo the recruitment phase in July-September 2012, due to a lack of female candidates. The Mercy Corps team met with local authorities and MUJAO to discuss access to female beneficiaries with the all-male team. The authorities were understanding of the situation and have granted Mercy Corps access as long as the village counsel is present during distributions. Mercy Corps is currently investigating alternative ways to encourage increased female participation, specifically in the collection of monitoring data, such as through the use of local partner organizations or female cooperatives.

### **3. Program Start Up**

Mercy Corps has hired a cadre of experienced Malian staff who have previously worked in the Gao region, including Ansongo district. For security reasons, all of our Malian team members have family ties and origins in northern Mali; while expatriates, Nigeriens and Malians from the southern part of the country are currently restricted by Mercy Corps security protocols from traveling to and working in Gao region.

Mercy Corps' national team is based in the town of Gao and travels frequently to Ansongo for implementation. The team is supported and managed by a small support team in Niamey, Niger, which houses Mercy Corps' expatriate Country Representative, Logistics and Security Manager, Finance Manager, and Program Support Officer as well as their team members.

Our Malian team members travel frequently to Niamey to meet with senior leadership, handle financial and operational transactions for program implementation and archive all program documentation for safekeeping. In 2013, Mercy Corps will relocate its main country program office to Bamako to improve coordination with other stakeholders, while maintaining the program support office in Niamey.

## 4. Performance Summary

<b>Sector #1</b>		<b>Vulnerable pastoralists and agro-pastoralists respond to basic needs and reconstitute their assets</b>		
<b>Logistics Support, Relief Commodities</b>				
<b>Beneficiaries Targeted</b>	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget:	\$979,261	
<b>Beneficiaries Reached</b>	18,520 IDPs: 0	154%	0%	
<b>Geographic Area(s)</b>	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
<b>Sub-Sector: Non-Food Items (NFI)</b>				
<b>INDICATORS</b>	<b>BASELINE</b>	<b>TARGET</b>	<b>PROGRESS</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Total number of Non-food Items (NFIs) distributed, by type <sup>3</sup>	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	5% of vouchers were redeemed for NFIs, including 3.5% of hygiene items (soap)	September 27, 2012
Total USD cost of Non-food Items (NFIs), by type <sup>4</sup>	\$0	\$423,913	\$173,040.40	September 27, 2012
Total number of beneficiaries receiving Non-food Items (NFIs), by type, in compliance with Sphere standards <sup>5</sup>	0	12,000	18,520	September 27, 2012
<i>Additional Indicator</i>				
% of items purchased with vouchers that are food	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	95%	September 27, 2012

### Sector Summary

In Summer 2012, Mercy Corps raised private funds to complement USAID/OFDA funding. These additional funds allowed the program to reach an extra 315 households with monthly unconditional value vouchers over the course of three months, in addition to the 2,000 households targeted by this program. A total of 2,315 households in Ansongo commune are therefore reached by this program, providing coverage of 30% of the commune's population.

In August 2012, Mercy Corps conducted community mobilization meetings in the eight villages of Ansongo commune to describe the program and finalize beneficiary selection criteria. Traditional community leaders identified beneficiary lists based on the vulnerability criteria. Associating traditional community leaders to the beneficiary identification process is a standard procedure for Mercy Corps, which proved invaluable here in light of the volatile and unfamiliar

<sup>3</sup> Indicator interpreted as % of items purchased with vouchers that are NFIs.

<sup>4</sup> Indicator interpreted to mean total USD cost of vouchers

<sup>5</sup> Indicator interpreted as Total number of beneficiaries receiving vouchers.



*Sample Unconditional Value Voucher (front) for September 2012 distribution*

context. The percentage of households targeted in each village is proportionate to the estimated population of each village.

Each beneficiary household receives a total of four vouchers of 9,250 FCFA each, totaling 37,000 FCFA per month. The vouchers are printed in Niamey, Niger, to lower the risk of fraud. The front side of the voucher lists the rules, the numerical value, the written out value of the voucher, the expiration date of the voucher and the serial number. The back captures biographical data of the beneficiary, products purchased, quantity and price.

During the first week of every month starting in September 2012 and for the following two months until the rice harvest, Mercy Corps distributes one-month worth of vouchers to each beneficiary household at pre-determined public distribution sites. Households can redeem their vouchers for any products they wish expect tobacco and alcohol, with one of 18 vendors pre-selected by Mercy Corps in Ansongo town. The vouchers can be used at any time during their month of validity. Because the use of unconditional value vouchers is new in the Ansongo commune, the program team found it necessary to devote extensive time to explain the process to beneficiary households and participating vendors. As a result, the planned awareness raising sessions on water/sanitation and hygiene, nutrition and household economics, were postponed until next quarter and are now scheduled to begin after the October 2012 voucher distributions.

Vendors were selected for the diversity of their offerings, the quality of their products, the availability of stocks and their capacity to fulfill orders and renew stocks rapidly. Following an initial market survey to ensure the availability of goods in the Ansongo markets, vendors interested in participating in Mercy Corps' program were invited to sign an Expression of Interest and respond to a questionnaire administered by Mercy Corps team members. A selection committee comprised of field and senior leadership reviewed the 25 Expressions of Interest and contracted with the final 18 vendors. As the banking system is non-functional in Gao and as the security situation does not allow for cash to be transported by road, vendors travel to Niamey to be reimbursed for the value of the redeemed vouchers.



*September 2012 voucher distribution under the watchful eye of the Village Council members*

Mercy Corps found a generalized election by households to redeem their vouchers for food: 95% of items purchased with vouchers were food (principally rice, millet and oil), representing 99% of the total value of the vouchers. Only 5% of items purchased were NFIs, principally soap. While post distribution monitoring revealed that 53% of those surveyed were able to access

items through the vouchers that they could not pay for previously, Mercy Corps also found a majority of beneficiary households sharing their products with neighbors, indicating a level of vulnerability and need beyond what can be met by this program.

<b>Sector #2 Agriculture &amp; Food Security</b>	<b>Vulnerable pastoralists protect their animal assets</b>			
<b>Beneficiaries Targeted (individuals)</b>	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget	\$666,800	
<b>Beneficiaries Reached</b>	0 IDPs: 0	0%	0%	
<b>Geographic Area(s)</b>	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
<b>Sub-Sector: Livestock</b>				
<b>INDICATORS</b>	<b>BASELINE</b>	<b>TARGET</b>	<b>PROGRESS</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Number of animals benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	4,000	0	September 27, 2012
Number of people benefiting from livestock activities	0	12,000	0	September 27, 2012

With the program beginning early July 2012, Mercy Corps began program set up immediately with the deployment of an emergency response specialist to initiate and lead recruitment, office set up, coordination and program implementation. By the time the setup of a transparent and fraud-resistant voucher systems was finalized (August 2012), a process that takes one to two months especially in an insecure environment that is new to Mercy Corps, the rain had returned to northern Mali and pastures had regenerated.

As a result, providing emergency livestock feed vouchers was no longer necessary, and Mercy Corps opted to review this activity, considering a potential change until Spring 2013 (April) when pastures are expected to begin drying up again. This is the period when traditionally, households who can afford livestock feed, provide it to their herds. Mercy Corps will target the most vulnerable livestock-owning households in Ansongo commune, those who will not be able to afford supplementary feed, for this activity. As such, the activity will allow participating households to maintain their livestock until the rains resume in June/July 2013, and avoid a repeat of this year's decimation of herds.

During the baseline survey, Mercy Corps found that approximately half of the population sample have livestock. Of this population, 30% keep animals for subsistence farming and only 3% maintain what can be considered a herd. Most households reported owning cows, goats, and sheep. Re-shaping of the livestock activities will incorporate this information.

Mercy Corps is also starting a new program focused on livestock activities in the same region and the activities will be developed to complement each other.

## **5. Monitoring & Evaluation**

### **Baseline**

Mercy Corps has placed a significant focus on monitoring and evaluation during this quarter, evolving and adapting tools and practices to the situation. The baseline survey was conducted in August 2012 and included a wide base of information in Ansongo. Mercy Corps also conducts post-distribution monitoring with a survey, sampling 10% of households that receive vouchers and all vendors who participate in the program. These surveys collected additional information to help Mercy Corps better understand the actual situation in Ansongo. They served the dual purpose of providing critical feedback on activities and collecting general information on Ansongo to allow Mercy Corps' program to remain relevant to the population's evolving needs. Mercy Corps is continually seeking to improve M&E practices that will help us to best meet the needs of the beneficiaries.

During the baseline survey conducted in August 2012 with 14% of the beneficiary households, the average family size in the target areas was found to be 8 people per household, which is larger than the proposal anticipated. 39% of the population sample reported having at least one pregnant or lactating woman as a household member, and 39% of the population households reported one to three elderly persons in the household, with 17% reporting at least one disabled person in the household. 87% of households surveyed reported earning the equivalent of \$70 US or less monthly and 67% reported spending \$70 or less per month. 74% of households surveyed reported that their main source of income comes from agricultural activities.

### **Post distribution Monitoring**

Mercy Corps conducts post-distribution monitoring in each target community within two weeks following the distribution of vouchers. The team conducts a household survey, a vendor survey and a monthly market surveys as primary surveys.

In September, two of the pre-qualified vendors did not receive any vouchers for redemption by beneficiary households, due to higher prices in their stores and unavailability of certain items desired by the households. As each voucher worth 9,250F CFA needs to be redeemed in full with one vendor, households elected to shop at other stores that had lower prices and the full array of products they wanted. Through monitoring, Mercy Corps observed that many vendors were initially having difficulty completing vouchers, and the team therefore spent extra time explaining the process to them. Many illiterate vendors ended up hiring literate youth to help with the record-keeping during voucher redemptions, thereby creating temporary jobs in the community. All 16 vendors were satisfied with the process in the end, including the reimbursement process in Niamey, which allowed them to submit their vouchers and receive the checks in the same day.

Results of the September market price survey for locally produced items, such as food items, remained relatively stable over the quarter. Food items that are brought in from outside the region have slightly increased during the period. Post-distribution monitoring with households reveals that 33% found that the prices were steady with the vendors during the redemption cycle, with 29% stating the prices were higher.

However, price monitoring did not reveal that participating vendors were increasing prices; and the increase in price is therefore attributable to market fluctuations rather than to the vendors

inflating prices for participants. Therefore, the amount of \$70 per monthly unconditional voucher continues to be an appropriate amount to help families respond to basic needs.

### **Accountability**

Mercy Corps has established a reliable complaint mechanism to capture feedback through two avenues:

- 1) a form that is left with the community and can be filled out and submitted to Mercy Corps at any time;
- 2) beneficiaries can drop in to the Mercy Corps office in Ansongo.

While Mercy Corps did not publicly share the information about where the office is located in Ansongo due to security concerns, since the community is so small, community members feel comfortable visiting the Mercy Corps team at the office. During the reporting period, two complaints were received, both in Seyna Sonrai. One was in relation to the selection of vendors and the other was related to beneficiary selection. In both cases, the Program Manager responded by transparently sharing information on how vendors and beneficiaries were selected. In the case of the beneficiary selection, the Program Manager explained that the Village Counsel helped select beneficiaries rather than detailing the vulnerability criteria. Since the individual did meet the criteria, he was added to the program.

### **Protection**

Mercy Corps is aware of the potential for negative unintended consequences for the most vulnerable individuals. While Mercy Corps was selected beneficiaries, the team consulted local leadership and then carefully conducted spot-checks of the households in order to ensure vulnerability criteria was met. During these household visits, additional beneficiaries were added that met the criteria. Through observations, Mercy Corps realized the potential for local leadership councils to influence beneficiary choice of vendors. Mercy Corps responded by meeting with the leadership and informing them of the need to refrain from influencing the beneficiary's choice.

Another way Mercy Corps has addressed this concern, is by setting up additional market days specifically for voucher redemption, so that only those receiving vouchers are present and vendors who have been trained on program needs are present. The events are not closed off to the public, but team members report that mostly beneficiaries and vendors are present on these days, minimizing the risk of influence during the actual exchange of vouchers. Mercy Corps also asks beneficiaries whether they were persuaded or influenced on their choice of either goods or vendor during post-distribution monitoring. Vendors are also asked similar questions during the post-distribution survey and are interviewed at the time of voucher redemption to capture additional stories in a systematic way.

Mercy Corps has a Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) policy as part of our Code of Conduct that all employees receive at the time of hire. As part of their orientation, all new team members received the Code of Conduct and signed a waiver that they had read and understood it. Mercy Corps Mali also has an expatriate team member trained on PSEA community-based complaints mechanisms and investigations.

### **Impartiality and Transparency**

In addition to the above, Mercy Corps' impartiality has been guaranteed by thorough staff reference checks at the point of hiring, and a transparent approach with MUJAO leaders and village committees, in line with the humanitarian charter and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct. To maintain its ability to operate safely, Mercy Corps does not brand any assistance provided to the communities with donor or its own visibility.

## **6. Coordination**

Since this is the first project Mercy Corps has carried out in Mali, there has been a strong focus on developing productive relationships with other actors. In order to establish operations in Ansongo, the Mercy Corps contacted the local authorities and the armed groups controlling the area. A local organization, FAABA, helped Mercy Corps set up the program and identify beneficiaries. Mercy Corps has also met with the base leaders for Médecins du Monde Belgique, Action Contre la Faim, and Save the Children in order to exchange project information and listen to their experiences and ideas.

There are limited other actors currently carrying out projects in Gao, so most coordination has taken place at the Niamey and Bamako level. Mercy Corps has been challenged by the fact that most INGOs operational in northern Mali are present in Bamako, while Mercy Corps is working on moving operations to Bamako in 2013. Mercy Corps has also taken advantage of regularly sharing program information with the expertise of the Mercy Corps team in Niamey, Niger. In Bamako, Mercy Corps has coordinated with UNOCHA, joined the food security and livelihoods cluster and has held individual coordination meetings with the ICRC and several other international NGOs operating in Northern Mali. Mercy Corps is making all efforts to share information and learning in a transparent manner with interested parties.

## **7. Cost Effectiveness**

Mercy Corps' activities have been very cost effective during the first fiscal year as demonstrated by the high achievements and low level of spending. On the SF425 report submitted October 31, 2012, Mercy Corps had spent a total of \$227,277.67 (14% of the total program budget). Mercy Corps was also able to secure private funds in order to reach an even greater population with the program's activities.

## **8. Conclusion**

During this first quarter of operations, Mercy Corps has successfully completed the set-up and planning phases of the program and begun implementing activities in compliance with Mercy Corps' internal standards for program management. Mercy Corps successfully recruited and trained a team that has gained wide acceptance within the Ansongo community in order to implement the Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali program.

Despite the numerous challenges encountered in the Ansongo commune, Mercy Corps has successfully provided one-month worth of unconditional value vouchers to 2,315 households, surpassing the initial household target by approximately 16%. The following two months of unconditional value vouchers were critical as Ansongo households awaited the harvest of their staple food, rice, anticipated in December 2012.

Mercy Corps continues to improve upon their monitoring systems and remote management practices as the country team further establishes their presence. Future reports will include further details about the progress of activities. During this reporting period, Mercy Corps set up systems to collect success stories, which will be documented in future reports.