

Final Results Report July 2012 – July 2013

Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali (EFSN project)

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



Beneficiaries redeeming vouchers in Bazi Haoussa village

COUNTRY CONTACT	HEADQUARTERS CONTACT	PROJECT SUMMARY
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1. Executive Summary

The USAID/OFDA Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali (EFSN) program, which started in July 2012, was implemented during a particularly volatile period in Northern Mali characterized by one of the worst humanitarian crises in the Sahel and the occupation of nearly half of the Malian territory by diverse armed groups¹. Mercy Corps' intervention was designed to provide emergency assistance to the most affected households in the Ansongo commune of Northern Mali, in order to help them meet their basic needs in spite of the effects of drought, persistent insecurity, and mass displacement. In late 2012, Mercy Corps distributed three months of value vouchers to the 2,315 most vulnerable households in the Ansongo commune, providing a cash injection into the local economy and allowing these households to meet their basic needs while awaiting harvests.

In early 2013, program activities were temporarily scaled back as a result of the international military intervention in Northern Mali; before conducting a rapid needs assessment to ensure that the program was still aligned with the most pressing needs of beneficiaries. Through this assessment, Mercy Corps found that the most vulnerable households were still in need of immediate assistance to procure basic goods. This was partly due to displacement. In fact, during the implementation period, the population of target communities grew by an estimated 15-20% as internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved into the Ansongo and were absorbed into host families, placing a further strain on already stretched household resources.

Thus, in early 2013, Mercy Corps requested approval from USAID/OFDA to adjust the scope of the project to shift funds from planned livestock activities to instead carry out two additional rounds of voucher distributions, allowing households to procure essential food and non-food items as well as animal fodder. Despite lingering security challenges, Mercy Corps completed two waves (5 months total) of **food vouchers distributions**, and a **package of WASH outreach activities** to increase food security and reduce the spread of water-borne illness, in the target communities. In total, 3,627 monthly household unconditional value vouchers were distributed (to 3,496 households, including approximately 130 households who participated in both rounds). These beneficiaries, as well as the wider Ansongo community, also benefited from a hygiene education campaign in order to reduce the spread of water-borne diseases.

2. Program Overview

In response to the food crisis and displacement in northern Mali, 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, 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. Mercy Corps' EFSN project was designed to provide immediate assistance to the most affected Malian pastoralists and agro-pastoralists households in the form of unconditional value vouchers for basic needs and commodity vouchers for fodder, while improving hygiene practices through awareness-raising activities.

¹ MUJAO – Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

The goal of the program was to improve the food security of 2,000 agro-pastoral and pastoral households in the district of Ansongo, Gao region. To achieve this goal, the program had the following objectives:

1. Vulnerable pastoralists and agro-pastoralists respond to basic needs and reconstitute their assets
2. Vulnerable pastoralists protect their animal assets

Gender

Mercy Corps integrated a gender-sensitive approach into all aspects of the program, considering gender to assess the needs of vulnerable households as well as in post-distribution monitoring, and conducting a gender analysis for Mali, analyzing the opportunities and barriers for inclusion of men, women, boys, and girls in key economic activities at the dawn of a recovery process. Mercy Corps also studied the current staff capacity for gender integration and developed plans to improve gender integration in operations and programs.

Faced with a restrictive environment during MUJAO occupation, Mercy Corps, in consultation with the local communities, developed different approaches to ensure that women and men benefited from program activities. For instance, during distributions, meetings, and trainings, women were offered separate spaces to participate and receive assistance, greatly reducing risk and allowing women-headed households, often among the most in-need, to benefit from assistance.

Accountability

Mercy Corps has always put accountability at the center of its interactions with all the project's stakeholders, including the primary beneficiaries, communities, local authorities, and program staff. Upholding the principles of "Do No Harm," Mercy Corps worked closely with community stakeholders and invited feedback from beneficiaries. Monitoring results produced over the life of the EFSN program demonstrate transparency and information sharing with program recipients, local leaders and implementers. Mercy Corps' participatory approach fostered a high level of trust between the community stakeholders and program staff, and Mercy Corps was able to gain constructive feedback to adjust its intervention strategy and inform future programming.

Protection Mainstreaming

Mercy Corps integrated protection mainstreaming into the design of the EFSN program to protect beneficiaries, community members and program staff. As mentioned above, Mercy Corps established complaint mechanisms to invite feedback from voucher beneficiaries and community members, ensuring that program staff addressed the any concerns, clarified issues, and worked with communities to uphold transparency.

To protect beneficiaries, Mercy Corps intentionally split the vouchers into small denominations and spread the distributions over months (once per month for five months), thus mitigating the exposure of targeted beneficiaries to eventual risks both at home and at markets. In addition to the above, Mercy Corps ensured timely cycles during all rounds of distribution; reducing the amount of time beneficiaries needed to spend collecting and redeeming vouchers (see PDM results below).

3. Key achievements over the life of the program

In general, project beneficiaries, local authorities and other stakeholders in Ansongo were highly satisfied with the EFSN program. A final evaluation of the program, conducted by an external consultant, concluded that Mercy Corps provided needed emergency food assistance that stabilized communities and built the capacity of Ansongo households in appropriate hygiene practices.

The assistance of Mercy Corps significantly improved the food availability situation especially during the lean seasons of 2012 and 2013. In July 2013, 56.8% of households in the target area had grain stocks of 100 kg or more, compared to 24.8% at the same period the previous year. In addition, 97% of respondents reported that their children were eating more meals per day after the project. See the final evaluation report, in annex, for more information.

Major successes of the EFSN program can be summarized as follows:

- **Through the distribution of 3,627 monthly value vouchers to the most vulnerable households, 31,464 of the most vulnerable men, women, boys, and girls** (corresponding to 3,496 households) were able to access basic goods at the time they needed them most. The program reached **262% of our beneficiary target**. Voucher distributions helped mitigate food insecurity and offered potentially life-saving support to households who were unable to meet their basic needs due to the effects of drought and conflict. With vouchers, households were able to purchase essential food and non-food items and retain their livelihoods assets, notably livestock.
- Through five months of voucher distributions, **the program injected \$787,600 into the local economy**, allowing market vendors to maintain their activity and contributing to economic recovery in Ansongo.
- **Participatory, need-based project design was maintained and outreach to communities and local authorities was made routine to ensure sustainability and ownership**. This led to continuous community involvement in various stages of the program and created strong understanding between Mercy Corps, the beneficiaries, community leaders and the local administration.
- Thanks to WASH outreach activities and a conditional portion of vouchers for hygiene products, **the population of Ansongo has adopted better hygiene practices**, such as hand washing before meals. According to regional health authorities, this has contributed to a reduction in cholera.

4. Overall Program Performance Summary

Sector #1 Logistics Support, Relief Commodities		Vulnerable pastoralists and agro-pastoralists respond to basic needs and reconstitute their assets		
Beneficiaries Targeted	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget:	\$979,261	
Beneficiaries Reached	31,464 IDPs: 0	262% 0% *While targeted beneficiaries included IDPs, IDP beneficiaries were integrated into host families, thus were not counted separately.		
Geographic Area(s)	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
Sub-Sector: Non-Food Items (NFI)				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Total number of Non-food Items (NFIs) distributed, by type ²	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	Previous Distributions = 1% April/May Distributions= 16% of total voucher value was redeemed for NFIs	June 30, 2013
Total USD cost of Non-food Items (NFIs), by type ³	\$0	\$423,913	\$787,600	June 30, 2013
Total number of beneficiaries receiving Non-food Items (NFIs), by type, in compliance with Sphere standards ⁴	0	12,000	32,643	June 30, 2013
<i>Additional Indicator</i>				
% of items purchased with vouchers that are food	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	September-November 2012 Distributions= 99% April/May 2013 Distributions=84% of total voucher value was redeemed for food	June 30, 2013

Beneficiary Selection

For each round of voucher distribution, the selection of beneficiaries was carried out jointly by Mercy Corps program staff, community leaders/elders and local authorities. Engaging traditional community leaders in beneficiary selection helped to establish Mercy Corps' legitimacy with the community and mitigate any distrust or tension associated with project activities. In August 2012, Mercy Corps conducted community mobilization meetings in the eight villages of Ansongo district to describe the program and inform beneficiary selection criteria. The selection was based on vulnerability criteria established in partnership with local leaders, prioritizing notably the

² Indicator interpreted as % of items purchased with vouchers that are NFIs.

³ Indicator interpreted to mean total USD cost of vouchers

⁴ Indicator interpreted as total number of beneficiaries receiving vouchers.

participation of female-headed households, the elderly, people with disabilities, and internally displaced people. Traditional community leaders set up selection committees which helped identify beneficiary lists based on the agreed vulnerability criteria. The percentage of households targeted in each village was proportionate to the estimated population of each village. The program was also sure to include minority ethnic groups (Tuareg, Fulani, and Arab) who are mainly pastoralists, and live in settlements in the area.

Before the second round of distributions (April-May 2013), Mercy Corps adjusted the criteria for beneficiary selection based on the findings of our rapid assessment, to ensure that the most vulnerable households in Ansongo receive additional assistance. Based on this criteria, and as confirmed by local leaders, approximately 10% of the households receiving vouchers in the second round were households who had also received vouchers during the first round of distributions.

• ***The main criteria used during first round of vouchers were:***

- Female-headed households;
- Head of household with disability;
- Elderly without support;
- IDP head of household; and
- Single females.

• ***While the main criteria used during second round of vouchers were:***

- Female-headed households without supplemental income;
- Elderly without supplementary income;
- Host families fostering IDPs;
- Households having less than 2 meals per day; and
- Households with more than 3 children under 5 years.

Vendor Selection

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 finally contracted with 18 vendors during the first wave of voucher distributions in September-November 2012 and 11 during the second round of distribution (April-May 2013). As the banking system was non-functional in Gao and the security situation did not allow for cash to be transported by road, vendors were reimbursed for the value of vouchers in Niamey, where they traveled to replenish their stocks.

Unconditional Voucher Distributions

2,315 vulnerable households received vouchers for three consecutive months during the first round of distributions (Sept.-Nov 2012) through the EFSN program and with complementary private funding raised by Mercy Corps. An additional 1,312 vouchers were distributed to extremely vulnerable households for an additional two months at the onset of the annual lean season (April-May 2013), after the military intervention that dislodged MUJAO from Ansongo. In the second

round, about 10% of the households had received vouchers during the first round of distribution. In total, the 3,627 monthly vouchers benefited 3,496 households (of which 47% were female-headed) i.e. an estimated 31,464 individuals, approximately 30% of the total population of the district.

In the first round of voucher distributions, beneficiaries received four vouchers of 9,250 FCFA each, totaling 37,000 FCFA per month. In the second round, voucher amounts were increased to 45,000 CFA (approximately \$90) including a conditional portion of 6,000 FCFA (about \$12) for the purchase of hygiene items (soap, bleach, and aquatabs for water purification). This round of vouchers also included the purchase of small quantities of animal feed. To ensure timely voucher distribution cycles, the project put in place a distribution calendar. Vouchers were distributed at pre-identified sites over a five-day period, and beneficiaries visited participating vendors of their choice to redeem vouchers.

Vouchers were printed in Niamey, Niger, to lower the risk of fraud. The front side of the voucher listed rules, the voucher’s value (listed numerically and written out), the expiration date and the serial number, while the back captures biographical data of the beneficiary and signature, products purchased, quantities and price. Vouchers were printed under small and reasonable denominations to mitigate the risk of losses by beneficiaries and allow easy manipulation during redemption. Each month, a different color was used for vouchers, further minimizing the likelihood of fraud.



Figure 1 - Unconditional Voucher Design (Front and Back)



Figure 2. Hygiene Product Voucher Design (Front and Back)

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Throughout the EFSN program Mercy Corps carried out awareness-raising activities on WASH practices to reduce the risk of cholera and other water-borne illnesses. The final rounds of voucher distribution included a conditional component (about \$12) for the purchase of water purification or hygiene products, providing an incentive for families to use soap and other hygiene products, and also encouraging vendors to supply these goods.

In addition, Mercy Corps worked with local water supply chain actors and local government to provide 15 water-carrying kits, including water receptacles and handcarts, to the water transporters' association. This was meant to increase the capacity and quality of services delivered by private water transporters in the area. To ensure sustainability, Mercy Corps supported and built the capacity of the association, allowing its leadership to manage revenue and make investments in equipment and rehabilitation of water points. The association also agreed to play a role in the regular cleaning of the market area, using their empty handcarts to remove garbage.

Mercy Corps employed an integrated approach in an effort to improve hygiene and sanitation amongst the targeted population of Ansongo district. Following the restrictions imposed by the armed groups in the region, different strategies used included public awareness broadcasted campaigns and house to house visits in the villages and settlements, ensuring that outreach targeting women was conducted by female agents. Following the January 2013 military intervention, Mercy Corps increased WASH-focused activities, using visual aids that were previously unallowable during the period of occupation. Mercy Corps also conducted a three-day participatory hygiene and sanitation training targeting 81 individuals, mainly the water supply chain actors in Ansongo town. The trainings focused on personal and environmental hygiene, including garbage collection and disposal, hand washing, water handling and storage, use and maintenance of latrines, and the prevention of waterborne diseases. During door-to door visits, Mercy Corps identified sanitation and hygiene problems, discussed proper and improper hygiene practices as well as the location community water and sanitation resources. Furthermore, the awareness-raising sessions paid special attention to the role of women and men in promoting a healthy community and environment.

Sector 2- Agriculture and Food Security, Subsector: Livestock

Sector #2 Agriculture & Food Security		Vulnerable pastoralists protect their animal assets		
Beneficiaries Targeted (individuals)	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget	\$666,800	
Beneficiaries Reached	149 IDPs: 0	1.2%	0%	
Geographic Area(s)	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
Sub-Sector: Livestock				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	DATE
Number of animals ⁵ benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	4,000	298 (2 animals per household)	June 30, 2013
Number of people benefiting from livestock activities	0	12,000	149 (11% of the 2 nd wave)	June 30, 2013

⁵ Activities have been reshaped due to new context; will be updated in next reporting quarter.

With approval from USAID/OFDA in April 2013, Mercy Corps chose to adapt the program scope to better meet the immediate needs of beneficiaries and opted for a second round of unconditional vouchers rather than the planned distribution of vouchers for supplementary animal feed. Nevertheless, approximately 11% of the beneficiaries receiving vouchers during the second round (149 of 1,312) redeemed part of their voucher for supplemental animal feed, benefiting approximately 262 animals. Approximately 2,000 pastoral households in the zone also benefited from 2 months of fodder distribution under the Gates-funded Hope for the Sahel's Pastoralists program.

• **Highlights from the February 2013 Gao Food Security assessment:**

- 94% of households were experiencing some level of food insecurity in Gao, according to the Households Food Insecurity Access Score (HFIAS);
- 62% of households in Gao were experiencing moderate to severe hunger according to the Household Hunger Scale (HHS);
- More than 70% reduction in sales reported by vendors in Gao;

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

At program inception, a baseline evaluation was conducted to set baseline values for objective-level indicators that would be tracked at program end, in order to measure any change that was brought about as a result of the intervention. Mercy Corps conducted post-distribution monitoring (PDM) in each target community within two weeks following the distribution of vouchers. The team subsequently conducted household surveys and vendor surveys and carried out monthly market surveys to ensure that the voucher scheme did not distort local market prices. Internal monthly progress reports were submitted to country leadership and quarterly reports to USAID/OFDA on a timely basis. The routine monitoring of program activities was carried out by program staff, including those from Mercy Corps Mali's Monitoring and Evaluation unit. Regular monitoring of the program helped to inform decision making related to program implementation and ensure that the designed intervention continue to meet the needs of beneficiaries and contribute to the overall program goal (*See details in quarterly reports submitted*).

The results of post-distribution monitoring exercises can be summarized as follows:

Voucher Delivery Process

- 98.9% of respondents were entirely satisfied with the voucher process;
- 97% were satisfied with the amount of time spent at the voucher distribution site;
- 85% spent under 2 hours at the voucher distribution site;
- 99.3% were satisfied with the choice of competing vendors;
- 98.6% reported having clearly understood the process of redeeming and exchanging vouchers as well as the difference between conditional and unconditional vouchers;
- 97.7% spent less than 2 hours to redeem their entire voucher.

Quality of Items

- 100% of respondents were satisfied with the quantity of goods redeemable;
- 99.6% were satisfied with the quality of goods redeemed.

Choice of Items

- 100% of respondents used some of their voucher to purchase food;

- In the second round of distributions (April-May 2013) 100% used the conditional part of their voucher for hygiene-related items;
- In the second round of distributions (April-May 2013) 10% redeemed part of their voucher for supplementary animal feed.

Accountability

As part of the program's focus on protection mainstreaming, Mercy Corps developed a complaint mechanism to allow community members to express their positive or negative feedback about project activities. Community members were invited to complete complaint forms that were left in each community. Throughout the EFSN program, five complaints were received from identified project beneficiaries; these were related to the distribution of unconditional vouchers. A reporting matrix was put in place to register all related information and to maintain transparency in dealing with cases. All complaints were handled by the Mercy Corps field team, and no major issues were raised (the complaints were mainly related to miscommunication or misunderstanding of information). The field-based Project Manager ensured that all complaints received a response that was satisfactory to the individual filing the complaint.

In July 2013, Mercy Corps contracted an external consultant to lead the final evaluation of the program, which helped to inform this report. More details are presented below and the final evaluation report can be found in annex.

Gender & Protection

The final evaluation noted that gender and protection issues were effectively mainstreamed during the project implementation. For instance, during the distributions and the exchanges of Mercy Corps vouchers, vulnerable groups (e.g. women, the elderly and handicapped persons) were served before other beneficiaries at all project sites. At the beginning, this was not readily accepted by some beneficiaries, but in the end the priority service for vulnerable groups was easily applied throughout the project sites during the voucher distribution and redemption.

Overall Cost Effectiveness

As a whole, the cost-effectiveness of implementation of the EFSN project was enhanced through: (i) use of Mercy Corps experience in Niger (PASTORAL program) (ii) use of Mercy Corps technical support advisers during the planning stage (with prior knowledge of successful approaches in other countries) and during the first stage of implementation (support of Monitoring and Evaluation Advisers for the preparation of effective workplans) and market analysis (between Niamey, Bamako and the US) for the purchase of equipment and supplies.

6. Constraints Encountered and Adjustments Made

The EFSN program faced several challenges, notably related to the changing context in Northern Mali, which led to adjustments in the program implementation strategy. Throughout the life of the program, Mercy Corps continued to monitor contextual changes to ensure that the intervention responded effectively to the needs of the Ansongo community.

Over the first six months of the program, Mercy Corps was limited by the restrictions imposed by armed groups (MUJAO) in power in the Ansongo district at the time. This had an impact on the implementation of trainings and outreach activities, which were carried out on a door-to-door basis. In addition, the Sharia law imposed prohibited the use of visual aids for educational purposes, thus,

WASH outreach activities in the first phase of the program were conducted without such aids. Insecurity and mounting tensions also led to the disruption of program activities, and often activities had to be postponed and rescheduled.

In January 2013, heightened volatility in the region led to an intervention by the Malian and French militaries, and after several weeks of clashes, the Malian government regained control of the North. During the height of hostilities in Gao, Mercy Corps temporarily scaled back program activities. In early February 2013, a rapid-needs assessment was conducted to re-evaluate the needs of beneficiaries, and Mercy Corps found high levels of food security among the target population.

Based on the results of this assessment and the cumulative analysis from all information collected, Mercy Corps adjusted its program activities for the remainder of the project and altered the beneficiary selection criteria. 1,312 households were identified to receive two months of additional unconditional cash vouchers in April and May of 2013. As the rainy season approached, anticipating a risk of resurgence in cholera, Mercy Corps also increased the focus on access to clean water and good hygiene practices.

7. Conclusion

Despite security challenges in the region, the EFSN program made significant progress towards its goal– to improve the food security of 2,000 agro-pastoral and pastoral households in the district of Ansongo.

Mercy Corps provided relevant emergency assistance to vulnerable households, which according to authorities, helped reduce the food deficit in the district. The EFSN program in Ansongo showed that cash transfers can help men and women meet some of their practical and immediate needs, which provides a starting point for other longer-term development programs to build on. According to local representatives of the Ministry of Health, Mercy Corps' WASH-outreach activities also helped reduce the number of cholera cases in target villages.

However, the levels of cereal food stocks observed in Ansongo communities are not enough to sustain the households until the end of the 2013 lean period. Given the high impacts of previous climatic shocks and of the 2012-13 insecurity, there are still many households in Ansongo that are in need of assistance, mainly to recover their livelihoods.

Currently, Mercy Corps is designing new interventions to support economic recovery in Northern Mali. The upcoming proposed program will address the recovery needs of vulnerable households of the Ansongo district by focusing on the most significant agro-pastoral livelihoods, supporting market linkages, and reinforcing safety nets to help beneficiaries build resilience to future shocks.