

FY14 Q3 Quarterly Report

April - June 2014

**“Espoir pour les Communautés de Ouallam, Tillabéri”
ECOUT Program**

2014-2015



Beneficiaries’ identification during village assemblies using the HEA methodology in Banikane (Dingazi commune)

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I. Executive Summary

Mercy Corps is implementing an Emergency Food Security Program (EFSP) funded by USAID/Food For Peace entitled ECOUT¹ that is designed to meet the immediate needs of communities affected by recurrent food crises and build local capacity to adapt to, and build their resilience to, future stresses and shocks. The program will reach 56,000 of the most vulnerable individuals in the two communes of Ouallam and Dingazi in the Ouallam department of Tillabéri region, one of the most food insecure regions in Niger.

During this first reporting period, the program accomplished the following activities:

- 36 villages with a cereal deficit^{2 3} (18 in Ouallam and 18 in Dingazi commune) were selected for program implementation in coordination with the Sub-regional Committee for Disaster Prevention of Ouallam department (CSRPC), regional authorities and other humanitarian actors;
- 4,944 very poor and poor households were identified and selected based on the Household Economy Approach (HEA);
- 36 sites were identified with the local authorities for the implementation of Food for Work (FFW) activities that include the construction of half-moons, stone rows, rain water collection ponds, and stream banks;
- 279 beneficiaries (276 men and 3 women) were trained on land rehabilitation techniques by service agents of the Ministries of Environment and Rural engineering;
- 6,226 tools and materials were distributed to beneficiaries to carry out the FFW activities;
- 403 farmers from 3 villages in Dingazi commune completed seven (7) days of FFW activities;
- 26 hectares of degraded agricultural and grazing land were rehabilitated in three villages through the construction of 8,138 half-moons;
- Five (5) local food suppliers from Ouallam department were selected for next quarter's distribution of 494 tons of millet, 59 tons of cowpea and 10 tons of vegetable oil to 4,944 FFW beneficiaries selected to receive food through a voucher system; and,
- Four (4) agricultural input suppliers were selected for next quarter's distribution of 49 tons of millet seeds and 49 tons of cowpea seeds to 4,944 beneficiaries through voucher system.

The program also undertook preparation for an efficient program start up and implementation, including setting up the office in Ouallam, recruiting the majority of ECOUT's staff, and conducting the program baseline evaluation. Mercy Corps followed internal standards taking into account logistical, financial, and administrative aspects of program implementation.

II. Program Overview

Large parts of the Nigerien population have been affected by severe food insecurity in the last decade, particularly in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012, after a combination of drought and flooding decimated crops and forage. In August 2013, the pattern of drought followed by floods repeated itself, with staple crops meeting with prolonged dry spells and early cessation of rains just as they entered a critical development period. The Ouallam department of Tillabéri region was one of the hardest hit, with 59 percent⁴ of the population, the highest proportion in the country, moderately food insecure and immediately vulnerable to worsening conditions within the year.

¹ *Espoir pour les Communautés de Ouallam, Tillabéri* in French

² Villages with a cereal deficit are those where more than 50% of households are not able to meet their yearly cereal needs based on the Government of Niger (GoN) annual vulnerability analysis

³ Based on the Government of Niger (GoN) annual vulnerability analysis conducted in November 2013

⁴ Ibid

The ECOUT program will assist 56,000 beneficiaries (8,000 households) for 18 months in the two communes of Ouallam and Dingazi, to meet their immediate needs and build their resilience to shocks and stresses. The program will support agro-pastoralists affected by food insecurity to improve their nutritional status, through purchase of nutritious food during the lean season using food vouchers as well as unconditional cash transfers. ECOUT will improve access to dairy products to diversify household diets through vouchers for training activities, enabling women to earn a goat and animal feed. The ECOUT program also aims at increasing the capacity and resources of agro-pastoralist populations that support resilience. Specifically, the program will focus FFW activities on projects that rehabilitate pasture land and increase water efficiency. ECOUT will further contribute to the recovery and increased resilience of agricultural production in Ouallam department by providing farmers with training in climate-smart techniques, in return for which they will earn vouchers to purchase improved agricultural inputs. Lastly, the ECOUT program will contribute to the strengthening of the GoN's early warning system (EWS) for food insecurity, focusing on building the capacity of community-based early warning committees to effectively identify imminent shocks and communicate up to commune-level bodies. Mercy Corps will put a special focus on ensuring that both objectives are nutrition-sensitive, incorporating nutrition messaging throughout program activities.

III. Program Activities

Geographical targeting and beneficiaries' selection

During the reporting period, the ECOUT program initiated geographical targeting as well as beneficiary selection in Ouallam and Dingazi communes. This was accomplished in direct collaboration with the Sub-regional Committee of Disaster Prevention of Ouallam department (CSRPC). The program interventions will specifically target villages with a cereal deficit over 50% as identified by the government-led annual vulnerability analysis conducted in November 2013. By the time Mercy Corps started the process to identify participants in late April/early May, a number of other humanitarian actors had also begun delivering emergency assistance to the same general population of the area.

Strong coordination among actors was therefore crucial and thus a series of meetings were initiated to harmonize the whole intervention process in Ouallam to maximize the level of effort and resources among all partners. While Mercy Corps aims at building the resilience of communities through an integrated package of activities implemented during 18 months, most actors are planning to conduct emergency relief activities and provide assistance to the very poor households for only a few months over the lean season, until harvests start in September. Through the coordination process, Mercy Corps entered into an agreement with WFP to go for a joint effort in some of the villages (17) where we could both provide complementary interventions, with WFP assisting all very poor households and Mercy Corps assisting all poor households. This joint effort was unfortunately rejected on June 13th by the Deputy Secretary General of Tillabéri region, and Mercy Corps was informed that it should not intervene in the villages first targeted by WFP.

With the government's rejection of the joint effort, the ECOUT program thus decided to target 36 villages, 18 in Ouallam and 18 in Dingazi commune (see table 1). The HEA methodology was used to identify and select 4,944 very poor and poor households in those villages by way of their socio-economic status and household resources, in order to target the households whose livelihoods are most threatened. 72 village meetings were held with village representatives selected by the community and local authorities, to categorize each household in the village and then validate the list of selected as very poor and poor. Through this process, the program selected 2,095 very poor and 2,849 poor households, including 6% (280) female-headed ones. ECOUT will begin to support these households during the lean season through September or so with FFW, UCT and seed distribution activities, while continuing to coordinate with the other actors and the local authorities.

The ECOUT program will continue beneficiary selection to reach the ultimate target of 8,000 HHs. Mercy Corps will conduct a rapid assessment of current food security and vulnerability levels in the 31 villages (20 in Ouallam commune and 11 in Dingazi commune) that were showing a deficit between 40 and 49% during the GoN assessment in November 2013. Eight months after the survey, those villages are likely to face severe food insecurity and immediate vulnerability to worsening conditions as the lean season progresses. The ECOUT program will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture to identify those villages currently in deficit and coordinate with the CSRPC and regional authorities to confirm the villages that should be assisted. In addition, the program will revisit the selection process with partners towards the end of August and early September 2014, before emergency related activities come to an end. Mercy Corps will identify villages where humanitarian partners conclude their responses to lean season needs and build on their activities to lay the foundation for agriculture recovery to future shocks. Mercy Corps will share beneficiary lists with the CSRPC and regional authorities, to confirm the level of vulnerability, and coordinate agricultural and livestock training activities.

While the ECOUT program so far only identified 4,944 households at the end of the first quarter, Mercy Corps is confident that the total of 8,000 households will be identified and included in order to fully benefit from the program's longer term activities. The program is committed to supporting the coordination effort in Ouallam with the local authorities and partners to reach its goal of accelerating recovery and increasing resilience among food insecure communities in Dingazi and Ouallam.

Program achievements during reporting period

Description of Activities		Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description
		Achieved	Ongoing	No	
<i>Outcome 1: Agro-pastoralist populations affected by food insecurity have reduced nutrient gap</i>					
Activity 1.1.1	8,000 households benefit from food for work activities, receiving food through voucher system		X		36 sites (18 in Ouallam and 18 in Dingazi commune) identified for FFW activities 6,226 tools and materials distributed to beneficiaries in the 36 sites 279 beneficiaries (276 men and 3 women) trained on land rehabilitation techniques 5 local food suppliers selected for next quarter's food through vouchers distributions FFW activities will continue next quarter and two food distributions will be conducted
Activity 1.1.2.	8,000 households benefit from unconditional cash transfer (UCT)		X		Tender launched for the selection of a microfinance institution to complete cash transfers to 4,944 households 2 months of UCT will be provided next quarter
Activity 1.1.3	4,400 households benefit from vouchers to purchase goats (4,400 does, 600 bucks)			X	Women will be selected and goat purchase will be initiated next quarter
Activity	4,400 households benefit			X	MoUs will be signed with the Ministry

Description of Activities		Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description
		Achieved	Ongoing	No	
1.1.4	from one-month animal feed vouchers and vaccinations for their goats				of Livestock and private veterinary service provider during next quarter
Activity 1.1.5	4,400 households benefit from training in animal husbandry, animal health, fodder management, and nutrition/ hygiene around dairy production			X	Training needs will be identified, materials prepared, and training initiated in FY14 Q4.
Activity 1.1.6	Community-level nutrition messaging and behavior change activities related to ENA and household dairy consumption			X	Nutrition messages will be integrated in program activities and communities sensitized next quarter
<i>Outcome 2: Agro-pastoralist population affected by food insecurity have increased capacity and resources that support resilience</i>					
Activity 2.1.1	Land rehabilitation and small infrastructures projects conducted under food for work activities		X		26 hectares of degraded land rehabilitated in 3 villages of Dingazi commune 8,138 half-moons constructed Rehabilitation of an additional 1,331 hectares will continue next quarter
Activity 2.1.2	8,000 households benefit from agricultural inputs, via voucher system		X		4 agricultural input suppliers were selected Seeds (winter crops and vegetables) will be distributed next quarter through voucher system
Activity 2.1.3	8,000 households trained in climate-smart agricultural techniques			X	Training needs will be identified, materials prepared, and training initiated in FY14 Q4
Activity 2.1.4	30 EWS structures benefit from training and capacity building support			X	Gaps in the current EWS at community and sub-regional levels and identification of strengthening needs will be carried out in the next quarter

Land rehabilitation and small infrastructure projects conducted under Food for Work activities

During this quarter, the ECOOUT program identified 36 sites (18 in Ouallam and 18 in Dingazi commune) totaling 1,357 hectares to be rehabilitated through FFW activities. Degraded pasture or agricultural land was identified by the community for rehabilitation during village assemblies. These sites and the work to be carried out were validated during field visits with local leaders and services agents of the Ministry of Rural Engineering. The work (see table 1) will contribute to longer term pastureland productivity and forage availability for the communities as a whole and include:

- Construction of 424,741 half-moons to capture rain fall and slow its runoff so as to prevent erosion, increase soil moisture and promote plant growth;
- Construction or rehabilitation of two rain water collection ponds (239 m³);
- Protection or rehabilitation of 260 meters of river banks to slow water flow and prevent erosion; and,

- Construction of 8,970 linear meters of stone rows to slow water runoff and increase infiltration

Table 1: Number of beneficiaries per site and FFW project identified by communities

Com-mune	Village	FFW project	# Beneficiaries	Com-mune	Village	FFW project	# Beneficiaries
Dingazi	Dakala Beri	Rain water collection ponds	92	Ouallam	Diaga koira	Half-moons	73
	Fazaw	Stone rows	230		Gao Tchirey	Half-moons	55
	Kouffey	Half-moons	187		Goroutché	Half-moons	53
	Tchigo	Half-moons	62		Gardan windi	Half-moons	151
	Banimate	Half-moons	50		Kondabey	Half-moons	53
	Iyambangou	Half-moons	82		Mossi Windi	Half-moons	31
	Dingazi Laba	Half-moons	98		Gnamsal	Half-moons	188
	Banikane	Half-moons	110		Soudjey	Half-moons	162
	Koiria Sabo	Half-moons	168		Tchewanwindi	Half-moons	162
	Bereyzeido	Stone rows	143		Zongo	Half-moons	56
	Diep Beeri	Stream banks	99		Sargane Gole	Half-moons	240
	Soudjeydo	Half-moons	107		Sargane Boura	Half-moons	296
	Bobal	Rain water collection ponds	100		Sargane Babawindi	Half-moons	623
	Hallikoira	Half-moons	86		Galabangou	Half-moons	98
	Goubeize Bangou	Half-moons	70		Goura Goura	Half-moons	56
	Korou	Half-moons	162		Deygorou	Half-moons	44
Kassa	Half-moons	84	Garbey Malo Koiria	Half-moons	184		
Fourmey	Half-moons	224	Samtigue	Half-moons	265		

276 men and 3 women were chosen by their communities to oversee the work. Due to the need for literate individuals, mainly men were chosen for this task. A one-day practical training was held at each site by the service agents of the Ministry of Rural Engineering and the Ministry of the Environment. Additionally, 279 community surveyors were trained on the different soil rehabilitation structures, including knowledge about technical requirements and quality assurance. The project team and government service agents will supervise the work in each site on a weekly basis and advise beneficiaries to ensure the quality of construction or rehabilitation. At the end of the reporting period, 26 hectares of pasture and agricultural land had already been rehabilitated and 8,138 half-moons constructed in the villages of Banikane, Dingazilaba and Kororia Sabo in Dingazi commune.

The program also initiated discussions with the village authorities and relevant land tenure commissions at the department level to establish and strengthen surveillance committees to ensure the sustainable management of the rehabilitated land. Further work will be undertaken early next quarter to formalize agreements and train the committees.

Food for work activities and food distribution through voucher system

The signing of the grant agreement towards the end of May 2014, well into the lean season, required the program to revise its strategy to meet communities' immediate needs. FFW activities will take place over one month, between late June and late July, followed by three months of unconditional cash transfers between August and October, rather than the initially planned three months of FFW and one month of UCT. The transition to a cash-based approach needs to be made in July at the start of the rainy season, to allow beneficiaries to fully engage in their production activities while continuing to support their immediate food needs until harvest. This aligns with the Government of Niger's programming approach. Cash transfers will continue until October as the harvest of cereals will not be complete before November (or even December for late varieties) in the two communes. Households therefore still need to be supported during those months of transition.

The ECOUT program provided the 36 FFW sites with 6,226 tools (1,900 shovels, picks and hoes, 200 100 meters ropes, 50 meter tape measurers, and 126 compasses) enabling beneficiaries to carry out the work according to government technical standards. These tools will remain within villages and be managed by the village development committees for site maintenance or to conduct other work beneficial to the community as a whole. 403 beneficiaries from the villages of Banikane, Dingazilaba and Korja Sabo in Dingazi commune completed seven days of FFW activities at the end of the reporting period. Another 4,541 will start work at the very beginning of next quarter at 33 sites, so that each beneficiary completes around 26 days of work. The government authorities at both the community and department levels confirmed that work continuation in July will not impede farming activities as the arrival of rain has been delayed this year, and because only one member per household is involved.

The ECOUT program has also identified five food suppliers from Ouallam department to provide different foods: millet, cowpea and oil. Beneficiaries will be able to purchase millet, cowpea and vegetable oil with vouchers totaling 32,500 XOF (\$68) during two distributions that will be organized with the food suppliers in 10 of the 36 sites early in the next quarter. The vouchers will be sufficient for households, with an average size of seven members, to access a daily ration of 500g of cereal, 57g of legumes, and 10g of oil per person per day required to meet energy requirements. The selection of food suppliers locally will benefit the local economy and stimulate market dynamics at a time when the purchase power among the population is usually low. This will also have the benefit of preventing accessibility issues that could have otherwise been faced if vendors' trucks had to travel from Niamey or other large urban centers to reach targeted villages when road conditions may worsen due to sporadic rainfall.



Surveyors trained by government service agents and constructed half-moon in Banikane (Dingazi commune)

Improved agricultural inputs distribution, via voucher system

The ECOUT program will distribute locally adapted and improved varieties of millet and cowpea seeds early in the next quarter to coincide with the beginning of the rainy season. These varieties are better suited to irregular rains and have been chosen to strengthen farmers' resilience to weather-related shocks. The program has already identified and selected four agricultural input suppliers from which beneficiaries will be able to redeem their vouchers valued at 18,500 XOF (\$39) for 10 kg of millet and 10 kg of cowpea seeds. Distributions that will be organized in 10 of the 36 sites at the beginning of July. Households will be able to seed two hectares of land and reap enough harvest to feed their family for 5.5 months if estimated yields are obtained at the end of the season. The program will further support beneficiaries and train them in climate-smart production techniques in coordination with the service agents of the Ministry of Agriculture next quarter.

IV. Monitoring & Evaluation

During this first quarter of the ECOUT program, Mercy Corps' M&E department prepared the M&E plan and designed and conducted the program's baseline evaluation using a sample of 276 households in 10 villages. The baseline survey confirms the findings of the rapid assessment that Mercy Corps conducted in November 2013, noting a deterioration of food security levels among populations of the two communes of Ouallam and Dingazi, due to a reduction of their food stocks impacted by the irregular rains and drought. It also shows that the main activity for the majority of the population is agriculture but only about a third uses sustainable agricultural practices. Climate-smart agriculture trainings to be delivered by the program will specifically address this shortfall. The training curriculum and topics will focus on the needs and interests of farmers. Emphasis will also be put on topics relevant to women's productive activities and include knowledge about relevant nutrition-related food production. Targeted communities also have very low knowledge of their community-based EWS and response mechanisms. The ECOUT program will work closely with the relevant authorities and community members to ensure this gap is closed and that EWS and community-based response plans are established, functioning and linked to the regional and national EWSs.

V. Coordination

Mercy Corps worked closely with regional, departmental and communal authorities, notably the Sub-regional Committee of Disaster Prevention of Ouallam department for the identification and selection of target villages and beneficiaries. Mercy Corps took an active role in the coordination process to

harmonize the whole intervention in Ouallam through a series of meetings organized with WFP, ECHO, USAID and their local and international partner NGOs to maximize the level of effort and resources among all actors. Mercy Corps participated in coordination at the national and regional levels through the 3N⁵ initiative, meetings organized by OCHA and the food security cluster. This program has also undertaken discussions with the ministries of environment, rural engineering, agriculture and livestock to define their roles and involvement in the program activities, and to sign Memorandas of Understanding early next quarter. Finally, the head of USAID's mission in Sahel, Ms. Susan Fine, visited the program at the end of the quarter, accompanied by representatives of USAID's mission in Niger and the Prefect and Mayor of Ouallam and Dingazi communes.

VI. Challenges

The main challenge faced by the ECOOUT program during the reporting period was the initial lack of coordination between actors intervening in Ouallam department. This caused delays in geographical targeting and beneficiary identification. By the time the ECOOUT program started, a number of humanitarian actors had already planned to offer emergency assistance to populations of the same communes of Ouallam and Dingazi for the lean season. A series of meetings were therefore conducted including USAID/FFP, ECHO, WFP and their partners on May 14th in Niamey, and with the Sub-regional Committee on May 16th in Ouallam, and with USAID/FFP, and WFP and their partners and local NGOs on May 23rd in Ouallam. These meetings were necessary to avoid the duplication of interventions among partners.

Despite these efforts, ECOOUT was only able to target an initial number of 4,944 very poor and poor households in 36 villages of Dingazi and Ouallam communes for the program's lean season activities. While we have not reached the total number of ECOOUT program beneficiaries at the end of the first quarter, Mercy Corps is confident that the total of 8,000 households will be included and benefit from the integrated package of resilience building activities as planned during the program's life cycle. Next quarter, Mercy Corps will work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture to assess and identify the additional villages in deficit as the lean season comes to an end, and will also coordinate with the Sub-regional Committee of Disaster Prevention of Ouallam department and regional authorities to confirm the villages that should be assisted as part of the ECOOUT program. In addition, the program will continue coordinating with other agencies and both regional and local authorities and will revisit the selection process with partners towards the end of August and early September before emergency related activities come to an end. Mercy Corps will identify villages where humanitarian partners are ending their response to lean season needs and build on their action to lay the foundation for agriculture recovery to future shocks.

VII. Next steps

Mercy Corps undertook preparation this quarter for an efficient program start up and implementation following logistical, financial, and administrative guidelines. The program office was opened in Ouallam and the majority of the staff recruited. Two thirds of the program beneficiaries were identified, the baseline assessment conducted and program activities initiated. This included the identification of 36 sites and start of FFW activities, rehabilitation of 26 hectares of pasture and agricultural land, and selection of food and agricultural input suppliers for next quarter's distributions.

The next quarter will focus on the following activities:

⁵ Government of Niger « Nigeriens Feed Nigeriens » initiative, adopted in April 2012, and aiming at contributing to food security and reduced malnutrition of the Nigerien population and supporting their participation in national production and livelihoods improvement

- Continued rehabilitation of 1,331 hectares of degraded land with 4,944 participants via FFW activities;
- Distribution of food and agricultural inputs to 4,944 households via voucher system;
- Post-distribution monitoring;
- UCTs to 4,944 households;
- Targeting of women that will earn a goat through participation in voucher for training activities;
- Design of goat husbandry curriculum and initiation of women's training activities;
- Development of a curriculum on climate-smart agricultural practices and training of farmers;
- Assessment of gaps in the current EWS at the community and sub-regional levels and action planning with EWS committees to close these gaps; and,
- Development of nutrition messages and community sensitization on goat milk consumption.

[end of report]