

FY14 Q4 Report: July 1st - September 30th, 2014

Submitted: October 31st, 2014

**Reinforcing and Empowering Communities to Overcome the Effects of Conflict in Bambari and Surrounding Areas (RECOVER)
 Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)**



(Religious leaders during a social cohesion group work session in Bambari – July 2014)

COUNTRY CONTACT	HEADQUARTERS CONTACT	PROJECT SUMMARY
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1. Executive Summary

Since December 2012, Bambari and the Ouaka region have experienced a continuous state of instability, which has had dire impacts on the lives of civilians due to an increase in violence and a widespread loss of livelihoods. Mercy Corps designed the RECOVER program to mitigate the effects of conflict and to reinforce community resilience in Bambari. The present report summarizes the progress recorded during the fourth quarter of the project, July through September 2014.

Over the reporting quarter, Mercy Corps experienced an unprecedented level of violence in Bambari and its surroundings, leading to a rapid deterioration of an already volatile security situation. Isolated security incidents mentioned in the last quarter's report, coupled with new incidents, perpetrated by various armed groups, led to a massive displacement of populations to areas which are deemed to be safer – a total of nearly 25,000 people fled their homes to seek refuge in three internally displaced persons (IDP) sites. As a result of these events, and the complete instability of the region, Mercy Corps' field activities were significantly hindered. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that despite the level of constraints, Mercy Corps continued to maintain its presence, and carried out planned activities, whenever the security situation permitted. During the reporting quarter the following activities were undertaken:

- The training of play therapy mentors;
- The review of play therapy clubs (in order to add new children beneficiaries, as due to population displacement, some children are no longer able to attend);
- The reorientation of the protection activities' monitoring using community-based mechanisms, through the training of Protection Committees to target more IDP needs;
- The reinforcement of social cohesion activities through a refresher workshop for relevant stakeholders such as religious leaders;
- Ongoing gender based violence (GBV) services provided by the Listening Center and its community network;
- And the resumption of livelihoods restoration activities to support medium and small enterprises (MSEs);

This quarter also saw the submission and approval of a no-cost-extension for the period from October through January 22, 2015, to enable the RECOVER project complete its activities as scheduled which has been delayed due to the numerous security incidents impacting the project. Unfortunately, Mercy Corps continues to witness a series of barriers which are affecting the normal implementation of activities.

2. Program Overview

The RECOVER program was designed to respond to the mounting protection and relief needs of conflict-affected communities in northeastern CAR. The Ouaka Prefecture has been particularly affected by the invasion of Séléka rebels in December 2012 and March 2013, during which time the population faced widespread insecurity and human rights abuses. The region is one of the most vulnerable prefectures in terms of food insecurity in the country¹ and is home to over 30% of those displaced by the conflict.² Almost everyone in Bambari and the surrounding areas has been affected by the conflict either directly or indirectly. Many struggle to rebuild their livelihoods and cope with the psychosocial effects of having experienced or witnessed violence. Through RECOVER, Mercy Corps is building upon the foundation of its previous programming in Bambari providing much-needed assistance in the areas of psychosocial support, GBV prevention and response, health, and economic support to internally displaced persons

¹ WFP, Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) in CAR, June 2013.

² Estimation of Civil Population Displacement in Zones Evaluated by the Protection Cluster in CAR, February 20, 2013

(IDPs). The RECOVER program is responding to the urgent needs of those affected by the Séléka takeover through protection and socio-economic interventions.

Expected Results:

- 15,000 vulnerable people, including 2,000 IDPs in conflict-affected communities will have access to protection services, including prevention and response to GBV;
- 2,250 vulnerable people, including 100 IDPs in conflict-affected communities will have restored assets in order to promote economic recovery;
- 900 vulnerable people, including 100 IDPs in conflict-affected communities will have improved livelihoods and income generation opportunities;
- 15 communities (reaching approximately 75,000 people) will have increased capacity to prevent and mitigate the effects of conflict.

3. Security

For a long time considered the only calm region of the country, despite a few isolated security incidents, the Ouaka province has been transformed into one of the most chaotic areas in CAR, especially considering security events that took place during this reporting period. The ongoing rivalry between Ex-Seleka factions and Anti-Balaka militias has led to an unprecedented displacement of the population of Bambari and its surroundings, and claimed heavy exactions and human rights abuses. The quarter saw the reinforcement of the Ex-Seleka contingents, from other northern areas of the country, thus, significantly increasing their numbers, to protect their so-called “headquarters” of Bambari. The influx of new fighters generated internal tensions between the Fulani Ex-Seleka soldiers and the Goulas³, and consequently increased tensions amongst the population. Furthermore, attacks perpetrated by Anti-Balaka militia increased both towards Muslim communities (Fulani in general) and also other vulnerable communities more broadly. The existing tensions within Bambari led to three major clashes during this quarter, including two between Ex-Seleka and Anti-Balaka forces, and one internal to Ex-Seleka (25-27 Aug.), for the control of Bambari and revenues linked to it. The latter plunged Bambari into a state of insecurity and fear, claiming the lives of more than 50 individuals.

Unfortunately, on the 1st October, as Mercy Corps continued to maintain its presence, despite the level of security threats, to ensure minimal services were being delivered to target beneficiaries, a group of “uncontrolled” youth and Ex-Seleka fighters attacked and looted Mercy Corps premises in Bambari. Ex-Seleka fighters are often uncontrolled in the sense there are many different commanders and diverse groups involved in Seleka, which means there is little central control over activities. This action created a high level of trauma for staff that were present during the attack and forced the halt of all project operations. To date, Mercy Corps has not yet recovered from this personal trauma and asset losses, though an assessment of the situation is ongoing. This assessment will be led by the Mercy Corps CAR Country Director and aims to determine whether the situation is suitable to resume project activities and reopen the office.

4. Performance Summary

Despite the best efforts of the dedicated project team to roll out all sectors’ activities during the reporting period, only limited activities were implemented, due to the above-mentioned security environment in target areas. Upon the return of program staff to the field (on July 14th), following their relocation to Bangui in late June following the increased violence, a rapid assessment was undertaken to identify current needs in

³ The Ex-Seleka faction is composed in majority, of Goulas (a tribe, originally from the extreme north of CAR), and some Fulanis, from the center and the Eastern regions; the current Commander in Chief of the Ex-Seleka is Goula, while one of his leading deputies is Fulani.

the population, as the situation in Bambari has been drastically transformed (two-thirds of the population were displaced, creating empty neighborhoods⁴).

In the sections below, details on achievements and constraints are provided by sector and subsector.

Award-level Beneficiaries

Cumulative Period Targeted		Reporting Period Reached		Cumulative Period Reached	
Total	IDP	Total	IDP	Total	IDP
17,250	2,200	21 ⁵	0	8,208	0

Note: Unlike previous months, in addition to the IDPs already living with host families across the town, the new situation in Bambari created IDPs living on three sites located across the town; and Mercy Corps is now working to reach the 24,000 IDPs (IDP figure by the end of September 2014). Due to the security context project staff can no longer reach the beneficiaries originally targeted in areas outside Bambari and will instead focus on the immediate needs presented by the current IDP situation in the town.

Progress to Date

SECTOR #1 Economic Recovery and Market Systems (ERMS)	<i>Objective: Address the urgent socioeconomic needs of vulnerable conflict-affected populations, particularly youth and women, in order to boost economic Recovery and ease the impact of displacement</i>				
Geographic Area (s)	Bambari and surrounding areas, Ouaka Prefecture, CAR				
Cumulative Period Targeted	Total: 2,250		IDP: 200 (will depend on final targeting)		
Reporting Period Reached	Total: 0		IDP: 0		
Cumulative Period Reached	Total: 0		IDP: 0		
Subsector 1.1 New Livelihoods Development					
INDICATORS	Disaggregated	Applicable	Cumulative Period Targeted	Reporting Period Reached	Cumulative Reached
Number of people assisted through new livelihoods development activities, by sex	Male	Yes	450	0	0
	Female	Yes	450	0	0
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Number of new MSEs started	N/A	Yes	900	0	0
Percentage of people, by sex, continuing in their new livelihoods by program completion	Male	Yes	80%	0	0
	Female	Yes	80%	0	0
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	N/A	Yes	\$58,800	0	0
Subsector 1.2 Microfinance					

⁴ Approximately 9 neighborhoods are completely empty, while 2 are partly empty and only 3 remain mainly intact (the Muslim dominated ones);

⁵ Note that due to the loss of most data during the attack on Mercy Corps office and the loss of all assets and resources, the Mercy Corps cannot provide an accurate update here. It is unlikely that this information will be retrieved at a later stage.

INDICATORS	Disaggregated	Applicable	Cumulative Value Targeted	Reporting Period Reached ⁶	Cumulative Reached
Number of people, by sex, or MSEs newly receiving financial services or continuing to receive financial services due to USAID/OFDA support	Male	No	0	N/A	N/A
	Female	No	0	N/A	N/A
	Other	No	0	N/A	N/A
Percentage of financial service accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	No	0	N/A	N/A
Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	N/A	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Subsector 1.3 Livelihoods Restoration					
INDICATORS	Disaggregated	Applicable	Cumulative Value Targeted	Reporting Period Reached	Cumulative Reached
Number of people assisted through livelihoods restoration activities, by sex	Male	Yes	225	0	0
	Female	Yes	225	0	0
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Percent of beneficiaries by sex reporting their livelihoods restored within three to six months after receiving support	Male	Yes	80%	0	0
	Female	Yes	80%	0	0
Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	N/A	Yes	\$28,500	0	0

Sector I – Summary:

Due to the changed security context, Mercy Corps staff were temporarily relocated to Bangui in June.. Upon their return and resumption of activities, Mercy Corps deemed it necessary to carry out a rapid market assessment. Using focus group discussions and simple observation methods, a quick analysis of market and business dynamics was produced; the table below provides a brief overview of the situation as of the end of July based on the data collected:

Types of concerns raised	Results from the participants
✓ Current livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ More than 90% of respondents have lost their livelihood activities in the last 3 to 6 months; ✓ Many households rely on women undertaking small-trade for income;
✓ The business situation and interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All stakeholders reported the difficulties linked to the transport of goods, illegal taxation, road blocks, harassment from armed groups, and the fall of purchasing power from community members; ✓ Only one source of supply (through DRC border) for goods to Bambari remains,

⁶ Microfinance related activities under Sector 1 have been removed due high risks currently observed; refer to request submitted and approved by USAID/OFDA in March 2014.

⁷ Though men would not have been excluded from community-based microfinance groups; it would have been the choice of each group.

	<p>whereas there were 5 before the crisis;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Price hikes for basic food items in Bambari; ✓ The town-market is not operational, coupled with the closure of the Chadian border crossing;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Priorities for the household and alternative solutions for immediate needs; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All respondents declared food to be their main concern, followed by their security, and their health; ✓ Some respondents (about 35%) demonstrated interested in part-time/temporary jobs, and/or self-employment;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Business perspectives in Bambari 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pending the return of security and stability; ✓ Respondents advocated for the creation of a corridor with Bangui, using International Forces to improve trade;

However, given the level of optimism demonstrated by a high number of potential target beneficiaries, who participated in the assessment, Mercy Corps decided to continue activities to support medium and small enterprises for livelihoods restoration. Mercy Corps had to restart the selection process as many target beneficiaries had been displaced; therefore the Mercy Corps’ livelihoods team is working to first identify the whereabouts of the ninety-three solidarity group⁸ members that expressed interest for new livelihoods development during the last reporting period. These potential participants are distributed across the three IDP sites (hosting predominately Christian communities), and the three remaining neighborhoods (Muslim dominated areas).

The launch of RECOVER’s first component (the ERMS sector) to support livelihoods restoration is fully underway and expected to meet all project targets. The implementation strategy and tools for the component were developed and validated by Mercy Corps’ program management team. Also, with the view to showing more transparency in the process, six community meetings were held in Bambari – four in IDP sites in and two in Muslim-dominated sub-neighborhoods – to increase community awareness about this opportunity, its processes, expectations, and eligibility criteria. Simultaneously, Mercy Corps, under the guidance of the Program Manager, refined the business appropriate training modules for entrepreneurs, which included a section on “working in associations” – a strong foundation to improve social cohesion within self-formed community groups. Membership in the solidarity groups demands a social responsibility and is capable of having a strong impact given the current context. By targeting solidarity group members for the cash grants, the program emphasizes recipients’ proper use of funds, as one member’s misuse of funds could jeopardize the entire group’s and/or community’s eligibility for future assistance from Mercy Corps. For the ERMS sector, the major milestones achieved during this period are as follows:

Preliminary interviews with prospective small-business groups

Of the ninety-three expressions of interest registered in various communities, eighteen have been dropped as groups were located in the four targeted communities surrounding Bambari which are currently not accessible. Additionally, 20 other groups were left out as their members were displaced during the crisis. Therefore, over a period of three-weeks, Mercy Corps’ two Livelihoods Facilitators (LFs) interviewed the remaining fifty-five, self-formed solidarity groups to assess their intent, their need, and their potential for developing viable and

Entrepreneurs’ Selection Process

1. *Community Information Sharing*
2. *Self-formation of solidarity groups among interested entrepreneurs*
3. *Group applications with individual business plans supported by Mercy Corps’ LFs*
4. *Preliminary interviews with individual groups to discuss proposed project and group cohesion*
5. *Eligibility verification including home visits*
6. *Final review of business plans and cash grant applications by Program Manager*

⁸ As it is no longer possible to complete the Mercy Corps Resilience Group model in the given timeframe and context owing to security related challenges, instead Mercy Corps is currently forming solidarity groups for ERMS activities which will facilitate different community members working together around common aims. This will create a stronger sense of interdependency and support social cohesion between individuals from different communities.

profitable businesses. This filtering process led to the identification of fifty-three potential groups who meet RECOVER’s initial selection criteria⁹ which included business experience, the quality of the business plan, past achievements of the group and the vulnerability of the group members. These groups were invited to work with Mercy Corps’ LFs and complete the written application form¹⁰. Applicants were expected to respond to four main sections: i) personal information; ii) general information about the solidarity group; iii) outline of the business plan; and, iv) costs and sales analysis section.

Review and approval of completed application forms

For this period, given the level of urgency linked to getting the livelihoods restoration component on track, forms were completed and simultaneously submitted to the RECOVER Program Manager for technical review and approval. During the period, eight groups’ applications were reviewed, while six received the final approval to be included in the Mercy Corps’ livelihoods restoration and business support activities. Despite the level of vulnerability in such a context, the selection process was rigorous with the expectation that beneficiaries will use startup funds to successfully launch businesses. Primary factors leading to a group’s approval included a strong organizational structure, viability of the individual business plans and sound analysis of cash flow and earnings projections. Reasons that some groups were eliminated at this stage include male domination in a group, a lack of cohesion or mutual understanding of the group, a poorly developed business plan and/or poor viability of the proposed activity, etc. Groups which were not selected were provided constructive feedback and were invited to re-apply with the same or different LF during any next round of applications. It is anticipated that there will be two rounds of applications and the final number of beneficiaries will depend largely on the pool of qualified applicants. After the selection process has been completed all of the beneficiaries who qualified will participated in a three day training on business management skills which , upon completion, will be followed by the distribution of the inputs.

SECTOR #2 PROTECTION		<i>Objective: Strengthen services for conflict-affected children and assist survivors to reintegrate into their communities</i>			
Geographic Area (s)		Bambari and surrounding areas, Ouaka Prefecture, CAR			
Cumulative Period Targeted		Total: 15,000	IDP: 2,000 (will depend on self-identification)		
Reporting Period Reached		Total: 21	IDP: 0		
Cumulative Period Reached		Total: 8,208 (54.7%)	IDP: 0		
Subsector: Psychosocial Support Services					
INDICATORS	Disaggregated	Applicable	Cumulative Period Targeted	Reporting Period Reached	Cumulative Reached
Number of people trained in psychosocial support, by sex	Male	Yes	0	0	11
	Female	Yes	11	0	20
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Percentage of targeted children reporting an improvement in their sense of safety and well-being at program close, disaggregated by sex	Male	Yes	75%	0 ¹¹	0
	Female	Yes	75%	0	0
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Subsector: Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence					

⁹ The two groups who were eliminated in this phase did not meet the vulnerability and other eligibility threshold.

¹⁰ To accommodate groups with a low-literacy level, Mercy Corps’ LFs would help complete the application for them, but with the group physically present to guide them.

¹¹ This activity began but was interrupted by the escalation of the situation in Bambari.

INDICATORS	Disaggregated	Applicable	Cumulative Period Targeted	Reporting Period Reached	Cumulative Reached
Number of individuals benefitting from GBV services, by sex	Male	Yes	0 (will depend on cases referred)	0	1
	Female	Yes	0 (will depend on cases referred)	21	177
	Other	Yes	0	0	0
Number of people trained in GBV prevention or response, by sex	Male	Yes	7,500	0	3,512
	Female	Yes	7,500	0	4,633
	Other	Yes	0	0	0

Sector II – Summary:

○ Psychosocial support services

Psychosocial support services network

Mercy Corps' psychosocial support services through the community-based counselors (CBCs) have been significantly disrupted and challenged during the reporting period as a result of the series of clashes that occurred in Bambari. Not only were nine out of the eleven CBCs among the displaced population, but also all related GBV awareness activities, including discussion meetings, door-to-door, and mass campaigns, became impossible due to the movements of populations.

However, with the increasing need to address GBV issues in such a volatile context, Mercy Corps, with support from the UNFPA sub-office in Bambari, decided to create mobile listening centers on the IDP sites. These were created during the previous reporting period to respond to the high GBV protection needs among IDPs in Bambari. A total of three UNFPA tents were erected during the reporting period, and available CBCs were deployed and supervised by Mercy Corps' GBV officer, to continue enhancing psychosocial support for those in need. Using UNFPA tents Mercy Corps provided Community Councilors to the three IDP sites, who provided psychosocial support and referred survivors to the Mercy Corps GBV Officer when the cases needed more technical support.

Play therapy programming for conflict-affected children and youth

Over the reporting period, Mercy Corps succeeded in carrying out the training of play therapy mentors. As a result of the new context of displacements and instability in Bambari, Mercy Corps opted to gradually train the mentors, as children initially identified as participants are now scattered across the IDP sites, thus creating the need to revisit the composition of play therapy clubs. The first wave of training targeted twenty-seven individuals of which thirteen were women and fourteen were men. During the 5-day training, the mentors were shown how to handle and manage these clubs. Participants were trained in a variety of modules including planning games, monitoring and evaluating activities, children's rights, and facilitation techniques.

Promotion of social cohesion (conflict preparedness and response)

During this period, Mercy Corps, despite its efforts, failed to bring community and religious leaders together to the table dialogue, as the gap between both sides has significantly increased. However, Mercy Corps succeeded in carrying out two major activities:

- ✓ The project held a three-day training with the 20 most influential leaders (10 Muslim and 10 Christians, including 4 women and 6 men) identified in Bambari, to exchange dialogue on issues among which include, *i*) The trends of the conflict and its disadvantages for local development, *ii*) conflict management tips, and *iii*) conflict reduction mechanisms. During the three days, participants had the opportunity to discuss topics such as the most common conflicts in various

neighborhoods, potential conflict solutions from the communities, community-based initiatives to build social cohesion, and the importance and role of local elders’ committees, etc.

- ✓ Mercy Corps held two separate meetings with Christian and Muslim youth of Bambari. The meetings were designed to reduce existing tensions, and engage youth in the tolerance and acceptance of each other’s community. In total, 50 youth (25 Muslims and 25 Christians, including 10 women) met during the exercise to tackle the root causes of violence in Bambari, and the need for young people to engage in productive and resilient activities.

During this quarter, the Social Cohesion Facilitator reviewed the community-based micro project proposals with the representatives of concerned communities. They mainly tackled issues such as budgeting (with regards to market dynamics), feasibility (with regards to the security context), and timeframe (in reference to the project’s remaining period). Seven mini-proposals out of fifteen have been reviewed, while five are in the process of review, and three are completely out of reach due to their locations in very insecure areas.

- **Prevention and response to GBV cases (Listening Center’s activities)**

Survivors support center activities

Over the reporting quarter, the Listening Center has faced major challenges carrying out its normal activities. This came in addition to the fear already existing in the population with regards to the distance to be covered in order to reach the Listening Center. Not only that, most of them were very anxious about the possibility of the perpetrators becoming aware of them accessing services, but survivors were also preoccupied by the level of insecurity on the roads leading to the Listening Center (located at the regional hospital).

Rape cases	0
Physical violence	11
Sexual violence	0
Psychological violence	8
Denial of resources	2
Forced marriage	0
Cases outside GBV	0
Total	21

For a number of weeks, the network of community-based counsellors has not been properly functional as a result of the displacement of populations from various neighborhoods. During the reporting quarter Mercy Corps noted the occurrence of many GBV-related incidents, but this is not reflected in the officially reported number in the above-mentioned cases (see table). The team had received some reports and was in the process of compiling this data when the looting of the office occurred. Additional incidents were also partly noted through conversations with other agencies, community leaders and individuals. There has also been an increase in the reluctance to disclose and/or denounce a GBV-related experience, to prevent potential reprisals from perpetrators.

GBV outreach activities

It was only possible to carry out a very limited number of activities during this quarter. Some community-based counselors found themselves among the displaced people and had to concentrate on adjusting to their new location and environment (a shelter, home management, and new survival mechanisms). As they are strongly committed to supporting Mercy Corps in achieving its GBV outreach activities, the CBCs succeeded in carrying out a few activities, mainly counselling and meetings, whenever the security context allowed.

Community-Based protection committees outreach activities

During this quarter, the community-based protection committees’ members (CPCs) were significantly reshuffled as a result of the ongoing evaluations of CPCs with regards to their outputs to ensure they are effectively performing their roles. There had originally been 80 individuals identified for membership in twenty committees; however, upon resumption of its activities in mid-July, the Mercy Corps’ protection team found only 44 available CPCs, as many had fled Bambari for more secure areas. Given the new context of Bambari, Mercy Corps organized a 2-day workshop for the forty-four individuals, to re-direct their work (daily duties) and match the requirements of protection monitoring in IDPs sites. Mercy Corps’ facilitators introduced topics including IDPs rights, post-crisis trauma, and IDP sites settings and

management, etc. The 44 were shared across the existing three IDP sites and the two relatively secured neighborhoods of Bambari. It is important to mention that, as CPC's activities were interrupted several times during the last quarter, the committees were asked to continue the same topics of education and children's rights for the awareness activities, while they also monitor other protection-related issues within their assigned areas.

5. Coordination

During this quarter, the major achievement remains the collaboration with the UNFPA sub-office of Bambari, which is providing immediate GBV services to the IDP populations and other people in need in Bambari, as affected people could not easily access the Mercy Corps' Listening Center (located within the regional hospital). The multiple meetings also included other UN agencies such as UNHCR, and OCHA, who facilitated and played a strong role in bringing services closer to the people on sites.

6. Conclusion

Despite the multiple barriers with regards to the deterioration of the situation in Bambari and its surroundings during the current quarter, Mercy Corps opted to maintain a full presence in Bambari and explore all possible ways of rolling out its planned activities. Mercy Corps remains aware of the high level of aggravation of the already vulnerable, as nearly ninety per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty, with no clear understanding of their immediate future.

Given the new context, Mercy Corps revisited its project plan and was awarded a no-cost-extension to enable the completion of the remaining program activities. Unfortunately, Mercy Corps' office in Bambari was attacked, looted and the staff intimidated, thus holding back all efforts made to date and posing many challenges to the progress of the project. With this context in mind, Mercy Corps is currently conducting a security assessment in the implementation area which will help inform the remainder of the program and determine how best to resume activities.