

Quarterly Report January – March 2015

IRTOUN “Rise Again”

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)
and
USAID / Food For Peace (FFP)



Picture – Potato Harvest by the Naata Association in Ouattagouna, photo by Moussa Traore, Mercy Corps

COUNTRY CONTACT	HEADQUARTERS CONTACT	PROJECT SUMMARY
Allison Huggins Country Representative, Mali Address: Quartier Baco Djicoroni ACI Rue 573, Porte 571 Bamako, Mali Telephone: +223 71 18 67 49 Email: ahuggins@ml.mercycorps.org	John Stephens Senior Program Officer Address: 45 SW Ankeny Street Portland, OR 97204 Telephone: +1 503 896 5850 Email: jstephens@mercycorps.org	Award AID-OFDA-G-14-00025 Start Date: 11 February 2014 End Date: 11 February 2016 Report Date: 31 January 2015 Total Award: USD \$2,827,487

1. Executive Summary

With the support of USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace (FFP), Mercy Corps’ Irtoun program offers a package of integrated activities designed to enhance food security and economic resilience of communities recovering from the effects of conflict in Ansongo, Northern Mali. In the second quarter of FY15, the program is on track to exceed its objectives per its implementation plan. Mercy Corps continues to coordinate with local stakeholders and technical agencies of the government of Mali to ensure that the program is in line with local needs and is helping to facilitate a clear path for recovery.

During the reporting period, the program achieved the following:

- Monitoring and continued trainings on agricultural practices with 50 groups and 11 individual producers benefitting from gardening inputs;
- Monitoring and business coaching to 74 young entrepreneurs; and
- Support, training and monitoring of 87 VSLAs.

Table 1. Award Level Beneficiaries

Total beneficiaries targeted	25,060 beneficiaries (3,580 households)
Total beneficiaries reached this quarter	36,036 beneficiaries ¹ (5,148 households)
Total cumulative number of beneficiaries reached	36,036 beneficiaries ¹ (5,148 households)

Sector #1	Objective 1: Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods
Agriculture & Food Security	
Beneficiaries Targeted	24,010 beneficiaries (3,430 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	19,649 beneficiaries ¹ (2,807 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	19,649 beneficiaries ¹ (2,807 households)
Sector #2	Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks
Economic Recovery & Market Systems	
Beneficiaries Targeted	12,250 beneficiaries (1,750 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)

Please note: Total beneficiary numbers are a count of direct and indirect beneficiaries (household members) that also benefit from activities undertaken by direct beneficiaries.

¹Indirect beneficiaries are estimated based on average figures for household size

2. Program Overview

In response to an extended period of conflict and drought in northern Mali, Mercy Corps designed the Irtoun program to enhance food security and economic recovery in Ansongo by strengthening agricultural production, helping vulnerable families protect their animal assets, and restoring livelihoods while building longer term economic resilience.

The objectives of the program are:

1. To help vulnerable households in the Ansongo circle recover productive agro-pastoral livelihoods; and
2. To allow vulnerable households to restore income-generating activities and withstand economic shocks.

Immediate food security needs are being addressed through vouchers-for-work (VfW) to enable food and non-food items (NFI) purchase, as well as animal feed vouchers, acknowledging the importance of

livestock as a food and livelihood resource among agro-pastoral households in the region. Through a market-based approach, Irtoun also focuses on relaunching market gardening activities, including the most important cash crops of the region such as potato, and on addressing the needs of pastoralists for improved fodder and health care services for their livestock. VfW projects support livelihood recovery by helping communities to rehabilitate land and repair irrigation schemes and agricultural infrastructure degraded during the conflict.

Additionally, Irtoun assists micro-entrepreneurs affected by insecurity through business-skills training and a small cash grants to re-start their businesses. Finally, all Irtoun beneficiaries are encouraged to join community-based village savings and loan associations (VSLA), which act as a form of financial safety net to strengthen recovery efforts and drive community-based economic growth through access to basic financial services, including savings and credit, and improved financial management skills.

By supporting conflict-affected populations to resume and strengthen economic livelihoods across key sectors, Irtoun provides the essential ingredients for communities to solidify a peaceful and productive future.

3. Contextual Update

During the first quarter of 2015, the Algerian-sponsored peace talks between the government and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), which includes the MNLA and four other rebel groups but no Islamist groups, saw the production of a draft peace accord which attempts to address grievances of northern Malians and communities’ interests in autonomy (e.g., locally elected leadership, ethnically representative armed forces), while satisfying the state’s authority and security needs in the North (e.g., disarmament of combatants, military redeployment). Despite significant participation in the development of the peace accord, the CMA rejected the accord in March 2015, and at the time of writing, it is unclear whether CMA-aligned groups will sign, despite considerable international pressure. CMA groups are reluctant to sign the peace accord, as they are concerned about losing their supporters who are skeptical of the government’s intentions. Uncertainty and skepticism around the peace process, uneasy tensions within and between ethnic communities, and heavy youth involvement in armed groups could undermine efforts to negotiate peace.

The January-March period was characterized by a resurgence of insecurity in the Gao region, largely due to backlash against the stalled peace process. Notably, a number of attacks within Ansongo circle have been particularly alarming for the Irtoun team. The attack on a humanitarian truck belonging to ICRC along the Gao-Ansongo route, during which the driver was deliberately killed by armed men claiming allegiance to the jihadist Mujao group, is a particular cause for concern for humanitarian organizations working in Ansongo circle, as it is the first attack where humanitarian workers were deliberately targeted and killed in over a year. Project teams have noted a strong presence of armed jihadists and associated bandits along roadways between Ansongo and Menaka, and several recent attacks on UN positions and vehicles, including the MINUSMA base in Ansongo, indicate an escalation in the presence of these groups. Banditry and attacks against the local population have hindered pastoral and commercial activities, with a negative impact on local economic activities. Against this backdrop, communities are beginning to prepare for communal elections to take place. As a result of these security threats, Mercy Corps has revised its security management protocols and retrained staff on basic security precautions.

4. Performance Summary

Sector #1	Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods
Agriculture & Food	

Security				
Beneficiaries Targeted	24,010 beneficiaries (3,430 households)	Budget:		\$ 1,375,056
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 19,649 beneficiaries ¹ (2,807 households)	Cumulative: 19,649 beneficiaries ¹ (2,807 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Bourra, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 1.1: Livestock				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.1.1: Number of animals benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	2,000	2,000	September 2014
Indicator 1.1.2: Number of people benefiting from livestock activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	490	797	September 2014
	Female: 0	510	203	September 2014
Sub-Sector 1.2 : Improving Agricultural Production				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.2.1: Projected increase in number of months of food self-sufficiency due to distributed seed systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households ²	N/A	10 months	8.1 months	April 2015
Indicator 1.2.2. Number of people benefiting from seed systems/agricultural input activities, by sex	Male: 0	240	315	December 2014
	Female: 0	960	885	
Sector #2				
Economic Recovery & Market Systems	Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks			
Beneficiaries Targeted	12,250 beneficiaries (1,750 households)	Budget:		\$ 354,819
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)	Cumulative: 16,387 beneficiaries ¹ (2,341 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Boura, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 2.1: Livelihoods Restoration				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.1.1: Number of people assisted through livelihoods restoration activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	60	30	In progress
	Female: 0	90	44	In progress

Indicator 2.1.2: Percent of beneficiaries reporting their livelihoods restored within three to six months after receiving support	N/A	80%	N/A	
Indicator 2.1.3: Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	\$0	\$15,000	\$6,867	In progress
Sub-Sector 2.2 : Microfinance				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.2.1: Number of people, disaggregated by sex, or MSEs newly receiving financial services or continuing to receive financial services due to USAID/OFDA support systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households	Male: 0	600	804	In progress
	Female: 0	1,000	1,513	In progress
Indicator 2.2.2: Percentage of financial services accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	75%	N/A	

Please note: Total beneficiary numbers are a count of direct and indirect beneficiaries (household members) that also benefit from activities undertaken by direct beneficiaries.

¹ Indirect beneficiaries are estimated due to unknown figures for household sizes.

² The Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) measurement tool will be used for this indicator.

Sector Summary:

Sector #1: Agriculture & Food Security:

1.1 Livestock

1.1.1 Animal fodder vouchers for 1,000 vulnerable households

Nothing to report this quarter.

1.1.2 Capacity building of herders to improve fodder harvesting and storage

Activities were achieved this quarter according to the following points:

- **Follow-up and awareness-raising with local livestock herders concerning the establishment of fodder reserves for the next lean season:** These activities occurred in four communes, where field agents visited various villages to monitor Irtoun beneficiaries' implementation of the practices learned during training and awareness-raising sessions. Through direct exchanges in the field, Mercy Corps agents responded to remaining beneficiary knowledge gaps around fodder storage and reinforced messaging about appropriate harvesting and storage techniques. Beneficiaries participated in demonstrations on layering and drying straw, as well as on correctly packing and storing the straw to allow for sufficient airflow to keep stored fodder dry. During the visits, the agents remarked that the communities were actively taking into account the given recommendations, and have started to stock leftovers of their harvest (rice straw, millet

and sorghum stems, etc.) and *bourgou* to face the coming lean season which is likely to be difficult given the lack of sufficient pasture.



Photo 1: Drying, transporting and stocking straw

- **Update on the pastoral situation in Ansongo circle:** Interviews conducted with community members (herders and agro-pastoralists) and technical services in the communes of Bara, Ansongo, Ouattagouna, and Bourra, have clarified:
 - The pastoral situation is very worrying in view of the poor forage production recorded during the agricultural campaign of 2014 – 2015.
 - The current state of arid and grassy pastures is poor in all communes.
 - The physical condition of livestock is currently at an average but will degrade over time, which will decrease their market value.
 - The health situation is stable. There are small outbreaks of pasteurellosis and contagious pleuropneumonia.
 - Animals are currently concentrated in the valley at the *bourgou* pastures and in the commune of Tinahama, with specifically high concentrations in Souknagader, Tindalewatene, Intilit, Tindagorene, Ogirindé and Fitolé.
 - The current forage reserves in the valley may not be sufficient beyond the month of April. There will likely be a substantial food crisis for people as well as livestock, which will require emergency assistance to prevent malnutrition of vulnerable groups (children, lactating women, etc.), as well as livestock during the period of April to the harvest season.

1.1.3 Training and refresher training for 30 Community Animal Health Workers

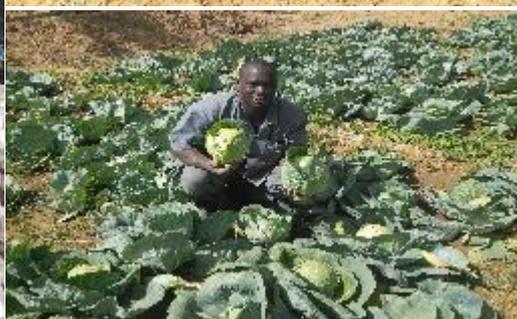
Nothing to report this quarter.

1.2 Improving Agricultural Production

1.2.1 Voucher for Agricultural inputs for 1,200 farmers

The 2015 agricultural campaign was carried out in all project-supported villages of the four communes. 50 gardening groups and 10 individual producers were supported. The average yield of potatoes in the zone increased from 25 tons per hectare last year to 33 tons per hectare due to the campaign based on yield measurements conducted in collaboration with local technical services. In total, roughly 16 hectares of Mercy Corps-supported fields were used for potato production and 30 hectares for other crops (cabbage, onion, tomato, etc.). The selling price of potatoes on the market varied between 200 and 350 FCFA (versus 500 FCFA during the previous year), which improved access for poorer households in the circle of Ansongo.

Photo 2: Harvest of potatoes (Bentia and Ansongo) and cabbage heads in Ansongo



Data collected on potato harvests as of the 25th of March are summarized in the following table:

Exploited surface area (ha)	Average yield (T/ha)		Quantities (T) calculated according to sample squares			
	Ansongo Standard (previous years)	2014-2015	Harvested	Consumed	Sold	Conserved and/or Processed
16	25	33.5	319	116	69	134

1.2.2 Training and support to 50 agricultural/gardening groups

From September 2014 to February 2015, throughout the production period, Mercy Corps’ agricultural advisors closely monitored gardening activities, including planting, harvesting, weeding, trimming, watering and application of organic manure to plots, in collaboration with local government technical

services, to ensure that groups understood and applied technical best practices. One irrigation technique introduced was mixed irrigation (using a motorized pump as well as hand-held watering cans or sprinklers) in order to avoid soil compaction and to promote the formation of large potato bulbs. Particular emphasis was placed on mounding techniques, an activity that is conducted just before the formation of potato tubers. Following demonstrations by Mercy Corps field agents, farming groups directly undertook these practices in their own fields.

To better monitor the outcomes of improved potato harvests by measuring gross margin, at the beginning of the harvest, Mercy Corps staff worked with producers to develop sample squares within their potato fields in order to measure yields. Sample plots of one square meter were selected at three levels. The first sample was in an area of the garden deemed to have good production, the second at an average location, and a third in a place considered poor production. Progress was monitored during the plants' development. Once the three squares were harvested, the average production was calculated and used to estimate the total yield of the garden for this crop, and was later compared to the actual yield of the garden. Gross margin figures will be reported during the next quarterly report.



Photo 3: Maintenance of potato fields, Bourra Commune

1.2.3. Rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure – Food Vouchers for Work

Nothing to report this quarter.

1.2.4. Revitalize 20 irrigation management committees

Nothing to report this quarter.

Sector #2: Economic Recovery & Market Systems

2.1. Support to 150 micro-entrepreneurs

During this quarter, the entrepreneurship support officer continued to support the 74 youth start-up businesses funded during previous quarters across the four communes and monitored the progress of their businesses. The team conducted regular follow-up visits to understand the evolution of the businesses, provided ongoing support, and reinforced key skills taught during the business skills training. Data was regularly collected on each beneficiary to understand progress of each of the small businesses and to identify any businesses in need of extra support.

Regular monitoring visits confirmed that 73 or the 74 youth who benefitted from start-up grants have successfully started their businesses, and 70 were regularly visited during monitoring visits. One grant recipient was displaced to Bamako and abandoned his small business.



Photo 4: Hawa Almeimoune, a young entrepreneur selling agricultural goods, Ansongo Commune



Photo 4 : Assaguid Ag Mohamed, a young entrepreneur repairing shoes, Ouattagouna Commune



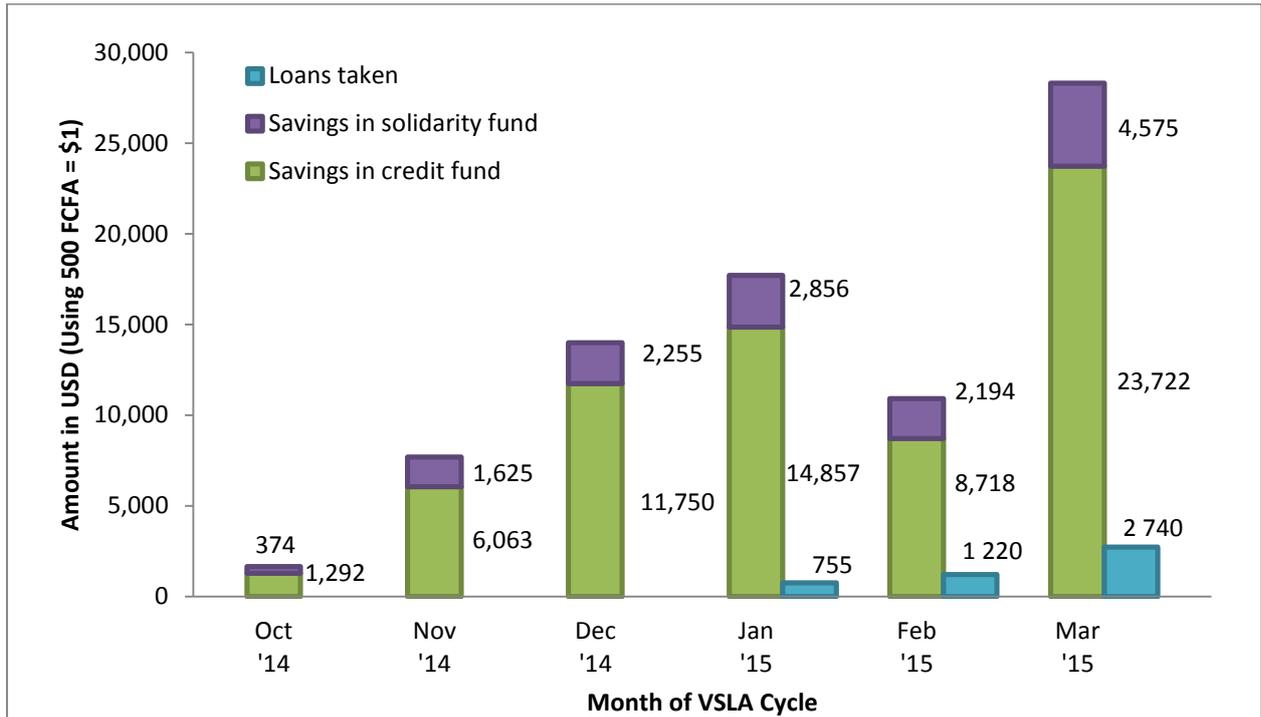
Photo 4: Fadilatou Abdoulaye Daga, a young entrepreneur making bread, Ansongo Commune

2.2. Establish/Strengthen 80 Village Savings and Loans Associations

A total of 87 VSLA groups have been established in nine villages, and groups are currently in month six of the nine-month VSLA cycle. Final training modules are currently being covered by the groups. During the month of March, the total savings accumulated by the 87 VSLA groups amounted to 14,148,450 FCFA (or approximately \$28,300 USD). The table below presents statistics collected during monitoring visits between January and March.

Site Month	Ouattagouna (30 VSLA)		Ansongo (25 VSLA)		Bara (32 VSLA)		All communes (87 VSLA)	
	January	March	January	March	January	March	January	March
Total credit funds	4 334 000	6,301,750	1,701,700	3,007,350	1,392,950	2,552,025	7,428,650	11,861,125
Total solidarity funds	758,100	1,135,250	438,200	804,700	231,825	347,375	1,428,125	2,287,325
Grand total	5,092,100	7,437,000	2,139,900	3,812,050	1,624,775	2,899,400	8,856,775	14,148,450
Number of men	369	369	131	131	304	304	804	804
Number of women	350	350	584	583	580	580	1,514	1,513
Total members	719	719	715	714	884	884	2,318	2,317

As a whole, 279 loans have been taken out since the beginning of the VSLA groups, equaling 1,370 000 FCFA (or \$2,740 USD, an average of slightly less than \$10 per loan). The overall follow-up of VSLA groups since their installation (with February registering as a low month as data points were missing for certain VSLA groups) is as follows:



One challenge noted during the reporting period is that the Mercy Corps VSLA Assistants had trouble meeting with certain groups because VSLA participants began practicing income-generating activities during the day and therefore chose to hold meetings in the evenings, when field agents are unable to travel due to security constraints.

During the next quarter, Irtoun will undertake the training of Village VSLA Agents who will operate as private VSLA service providers within their communities. Village Agents will be selected by willingness and availability of the candidate, membership of the community, recommendations from other village members as having high moral character, basic literacy, and performance during VSLA Agent training. Once trained, these Village Agents will take over the close daily monitoring of the VSLAs, and will be supported to start up additional VSLAs within their communities on a fee for service basis.



Photo 5: Training for VSLAs, Commune of Bara

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation activities during this quarter included:

- Market monitoring, ensuring no drastic changes in market prices due to voucher distributions
- Monitoring of 87 VSLAs;
- Monitoring of harvest activities by agricultural groups;
- Field needs and feasibility assessment of HAP¹-compliant accountability and complaint mechanisms; and
- Preparation of mid-term evaluation (planned for April 2015 to coincide with timing of the baseline study to ensure comparable seasonal factors).

6. Coordination

Mercy Corps continues to participate in regional coordination meetings in Gao (OCHA) and in sub-cluster food security meetings. The INGO members of the Interagency Coordination Group (ICG) of Gao were updated in March and Mercy Corps became a member with four other INGOs. Meetings were held with INGOs NRC, DRC, ACF, SNV and APROMORS, intervening in the same sectors as Mercy Corps' activities in order to improve coordination of actions in the field.

¹ Humanitarian Accountability Partnership