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## Strengthening Opportunities and Access to Resilience (SOAR)

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Beneficiaries at the distribution site with their paper vouchers

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### I. Program Overview

The Strengthening Opportunities and Access to Resilience (SOAR) program seeks to address the mounting relief needs of conflict-affected communities in Gombe State, Nigeria, which has been particularly affected by the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram. The program builds upon the success of previous Mercy Corps programs in the region to provide urgently needed emergency support to internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities. The specific objectives of the program include: 1) Provide displaced households and host communities with resources to meet immediate needs and sustain local markets; 2) Conflict-affected and vulnerable populations have reconstituted productive assets for agricultural production; and 3) Provide vulnerable households with essential non-food items (NFIs).

## II. Quarter Executive Summary

During the quarter under review, increased levels of violence in Northeastern Nigeria caused by Boko Haram and the counter-insurgency continued to displace significant numbers of people, further contributing to disrupted livelihoods, reduced household incomes, and an increased risk of food insecurity as another land preparation and planting season will likely be missed in many parts of the region. Gombe has continued to receive a trickle of IDPs displaced from Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, particularly in urban areas such as Pantami. The Mercy Corps team also observed some movement of people from Funakaye Local Government Area (which has suffered from repeated incursions by Boko Haram) to Gombe town or other nearby locations. To address the situation of displaced and vulnerable resident households, the SOAR program has been helping to meet basic NFI needs through cash-based distributions, capacity-building activities for livestock owners, and facilitation of the establishment of village-level savings and loan (VSLA) groups.

At the time of this report, the SOAR program was largely on track to meet its objectives, despite some delays in implementation resulting from the security situation, as described in the body of the report. During this quarter, Mercy Corps made the following progress under each objective of the program:

- 1) **Provide displaced households and host communities with resources to meet immediate needs and sustain local markets:**
  - Selected beneficiaries underwent business management training;
  - 183 livelihoods cash grants were distributed;
  - Beneficiary identification for further intervention is ongoing in communities;
  - Community sensitization on microfinance and VSLAs was finalized;
  - 32 VSLA groups were formed; and
  - Training modules on finance were developed.
- 2) **Conflict-affected and vulnerable populations have reconstituted productive assets for agricultural production:**
  - Start-up kits for 26 para-veterinarians were procured; and
  - A training manual was produced for dissemination to para-veterinarians.
- 3) **Provide vulnerable households with essential non-food items:**
  - Vendors were contracted and trained on the process for voucher redemption;
  - Beneficiary registration is ongoing in communities, in order to serve the targeted number of beneficiaries;
  - Beneficiaries were sensitized on the voucher system; and
  - Cash vouchers were distributed.

During the upcoming quarter, Mercy Corps anticipates finalizing its beneficiary lists and continuing cash voucher and NFI distribution, starting up VSLA activities with the existing groups and forming eight additional groups, and continuing to distribute equipment to para-veterinarians.

## III. Security Context, Situation Overview and Operational Summary

*Security:* The security situation has been periodically tense for the last two months of the quarter, due to incidents relating to the insurgency, as well as the elections. In particular, the attack by Boko Haram insurgents on February 14<sup>th</sup> in Gombe and Dadin Kowa towns slowed down most program activities and prevented active monitoring of paper voucher transactions in some of the communities of intervention in the subsequent week. The attack was an indication of the stronger visible presence of some of the insurgency within the state. Constant raids on some of the communities in the northern part of the state also restricted Mercy Corps movement to Funakaye LGA.

In the run-up to the elections, there were also a number of security incidents. A slow-down in market activity occurred before the original election dates in February, as vendors ran down their inventories to avoid exposure to potential violence. Following the postponement of the elections to the end of March, another slow-down started in the middle of March. Ahead of the presidential election, there were several cases of clashes between groups of political thugs, which resulted in the death of two people and many injuries. Incidents relating to the insurgency also spiked around this time due to Boko Haram's warnings against participation in the election, with attacks in Nafada LGA (bordering Yobe State, affecting Wawa, Garin, Bolewa and Biri villages) on 28th March, followed by further attacks in Kashere (the location of the Federal University). Large movements of insurgents were reported across the state, especially in southern LGAs previously untouched by the insurgency.

*Population movements:* Despite the tenuous security situation in Gombe State as a whole, the town is still considered relatively safe and continues to receive newly displaced families running away from areas under the control of Boko Haram or being re-displaced within the state due to other activities of Boko Haram. Most of the families stay with host communities, either in vacated buildings, or temporary or rented accommodations. Many families are split up in the search for shelter, which further increases their vulnerability. The IDP camp in Gombe, previously managed by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and handed over to SEMA in December, was closed down because the facility belongs to the Nigerian police and they requested to take over their property in order to accommodate staff posted to Gombe during the election period. Approximately 300 families were forced to vacate, with modest cash handouts provided to seek alternative accommodation among host communities. Reports from SEMA and our community volunteers show that there is still high influx of IDPs within the communities and other parts of the state, although precise figures are impossible to estimate accurately. The most recent displacement tracking results from IOM's March data collection exercise indicate 33,048 individual IDPs, which is almost certainly still an underestimate, but in any case indicates an increase from previous IOM/NEMA estimates of 24,655.

*Markets:* Markets experienced price increases for imported commodities like blankets, soap, and body cream. Prices usually peak at this time of year, however, the fall of the Naira against the US dollar contributed to higher than usual increases, and this was compounded by inflation which has risen to 8.5%. The exchange rate was 185 NGN/1 USD in the beginning of the quarter and 197 NGN/1 USD at its end. There has been a noticeable and rapid price increase for locally produced food and non-food items during the quarter under review.

*Operations:* Mercy Corps has a fully operational office, with highly committed and effective program, M&E, finance and support teams. The team has been led on an interim basis by Mercy Corps' Regional Humanitarian Advisor for West Africa, supported by the national Program Coordinator, five Project Officers (two of which were recruited in January), three Program Assistants, an M&E Officer and three M&E Assistants. By the end of March, the team consisted of 19 nationals and one international staff member. All personnel and support costs are being shared between OFDA and FFP. A security officer was employed within the quarter and the cost is being shared with Save the Children.

The following fleet has supported operations (with two new vehicles arriving at the end of the reporting period and replacing the leased vehicles):

Vehicle Type/ Description	Form of engagement	Quantity	Source Country	Country of Manufacture
Ford Ranger, 2.5, 4x4*	Local Procurement	1	Nigeria	USA
Toyota Fortuner	Procured under other grant	1	Nigeria	Japan
Toyota Corolla	Temporary Lease	1	Nigeria	Japan

Peugeot	Temporary Lease	1	Nigeria	France
Toyota Fortuner, 4 x 4, 2.7	Local procurement	1	Nigeria	South Africa
Toyota Corolla. 4 door sedan. 1.8	Local procurement	1	Nigeria	South Africa

*Other:* Mercy Corps is ensuring effective coordination with SEMA, NEMA, the Ministry of Animal Husbandry and all other stakeholders through regular meetings and through sharing regular reports and status updates. A memorandum of understanding was signed in early February with SEMA. Mercy Corps has also been holding regular bilateral meetings with other agencies implementing programs or setting up offices during the last quarter, including Save the Children, Oxfam, OCHA, ICRC, Education Crisis Response and the Primary Health Care development agency.

*Staff Development:* Staff attended internal and external trainings as follows:

- Security Training [January 2015]: organised by Mercy Corps -all staff attended.
- Defensive Driving [January 2015]: organised by Mercy Corps, attended by four Drivers, the Operations Officer, and the Program Coordinator.
- Security Training of Trainers [ March 2015] :organised by Mercy Corps, attended by the Operations Officer and Program Coordinator.
- Child Protection in Emergency [ March 2015]: organised by Save the Children and attended by one M&E Assistant.
- Media Training [March 2015] : organised by Mercy Corps ,attended by the Program Coordinator, two Project Officers and one M&E Officer.
- PMD Pro project management exams – taken by two staff so far

#### IV. Project Performance

##### SECTOR 1 Economic Recovery & Market Systems

OBJECTIVE 1.1: Vulnerable IDPs and host families re-establish livelihoods activities			
INDICATORS	TARGET	PROGRESS (Q3)	COMPLETION
# of people assisted through livelihood restoration activities, disaggregated by sex	3,000	183	6.2%
Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sectors activities	\$150,000	\$18,666	1.2%
# of people disaggregated by sex, or MSEs newly receiving financial services or continuing to receive financial services due to SOAR support	Individuals: 400 VSLA: 40	0	0%
Main activities planned for Quarter 3	Progress during reporting period		

<p><i>Livelihoods restoration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Beneficiary registration for all the communities</li> <li>➤ Capacity assessment and validation of beneficiaries</li> <li>➤ Final beneficiary list selection for remaining communities</li> <li>➤ Training of beneficiaries and community volunteers on business management</li> <li>➤ Transfer of grants - including possible piloting of electronic voucher modality for NFIs</li> <li>➤ Effective post distribution monitoring to ascertain the level of livelihood transfer utilization</li> </ul>	<p><i>Livelihoods restoration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Final beneficiary list selection completed for pilot communities</li> <li>➤ 183 beneficiaries trained on business management by MC staff</li> <li>➤ Transfer disbursement in pilot communities completed</li> <li>➤ Monitoring result shows that beneficiaries have started utilizing the money and some enjoys high patronage especially for the food vendors within Federal Low Cost</li> <li>➤ Beneficiary selection is ongoing for five communities</li> </ul>
<p><i>Microfinance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Sensitization and mobilization of remaining eight VSLAs</li> <li>➤ Training of village agents</li> <li>➤ Activation of savings groups with initial deposit taking</li> <li>➤ First loans circulating in VSLAs</li> </ul>	<p><i>Microfinance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Community sensitizations completed</li> <li>➤ List compilation for saving groups completed</li> <li>➤ Training methods defined</li> <li>➤ 32 VSLA groups already formed, ready to receive training in April</li> </ul>

***Livelihoods restoration***

The final list of livelihood cash grant beneficiaries was completed for Federal Low Cost and Kuri (urban and rural communities), which were chosen for the pilot. A capacity assessment of beneficiaries was conducted to ascertain their skills competence for the identified livelihood activities in both communities of intervention.

Disbursement of livelihoods grants was conducted by one of the local banks for beneficiaries within Federal Low Cost. Money was directly transferred to beneficiaries in Kuri to avoid the bank charges and the extra cost of bank transfers in a remote, rural area.

A total of 183 beneficiaries (122 female and 66 male) were supported with cash transfers for livelihood restoration. Beneficiaries received amounts in the range of 8,500N (51USD)-22,500N (136USD), based on the chosen activity and the cost of the start-up kit. Activities supported during the pilot phase included: grinding mills, photocopying, hairdressing, and sale of firewood, grains, sacks, sugar cane, street food, fish, plastics and cold drinks.

With support from Mercy Corps, beneficiaries were sensitized on business development and entrepreneurship to improve their capacity to manage their business. Strategies on business start-up and management were clearly highlighted so as to ensure effective utilization of cash transfers. Mercy Corps expects that a number of livelihoods beneficiaries will be supported through their introduction to the village savings and loan groups (VSLAs) which will help them cultivate a savings culture using the proceeds of their business.

Reports from a monitoring activity indicated that most of the beneficiaries are utilizing the money effectively. Some of the beneficiaries have started their chosen business and are enjoying good patronage from community members, especially for those selling food in Gombe’s Federal Low Cost

area. All livelihoods grant recipients in this area so far are IDPs, whereas in Kuri community in Yamaltu Deba, 72% are IDPs and 27% are from the host community.

Registration of beneficiaries has been conducted in Deba, Nassarawo, Pantami, Malam Inna and Kagarawal communities, and the final beneficiaries' selection is ongoing for immediate disbursement in the next quarter

### **Microfinance (VSLA)**

Mobilization and sensitization on the importance of VSLAs has been conducted across all the communities of intervention. A beneficiary distribution list was created, and the names of all beneficiaries that have indicated interest were compiled for all the communities for immediate training in the next quarter. Approximately half of all members so far are host community and half are IDPs. The training modality has been defined with all the materials ready.

Furthermore, the procurement of all VSLA start-up kits has been completed, with all operational items fully prepared as sets for each group. Thirty-two out of the expected 40 groups have been formed already; training will commence in the second half of April.

## **SECTOR 2: Agriculture and Food Security**

<b>OBJECTIVE 2.1: Beneficiaries have access to knowledge about herd management, animal health and nutrition</b>			
<b>INDICATORS</b>	<b>TARGET</b>	<b>PROGRESS Q3</b>	<b>COMPLETION</b>
<b># of people trained on fodder storage and animal nutrition</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>OBJECTIVE 2.2 Veterinary service providers available to vulnerable households</b>			
<b># of para-vets trained</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>130%</b>
<b># of para-vets equipped</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Main activities planned for Quarter 3</b>	<b>Progress during reporting period</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Procurement of startup kits</li> <li>➤ Distribution of startup kit</li> <li>➤ Development of mechanism for reporting to the Ministry of Animal Husbandry on the services and trainings provided to the community by the para-veterinarians</li> <li>➤ Training of para-veterinarians begins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Procurement of all startup kits completed</li> <li>➤ Training manual produced to address all gaps identified in last quarter's assessment</li> <li>➤ Coordination and planning meetings with Department of Animal Health Services representatives to agree on timing, content and location of trainings</li> </ul>		

All the start-up kits needed to equip the 26 para-veterinarians trained by Mercy Corps have been procured, despite a delay in the delivery of some of the imported equipment. This delay has also affected the date fixed for the launch and distribution of the start-up kits to the para-veterinarians. However, the distribution of start-up kits has been planned for the first part of the next quarter. Mercy Corps will be tracking the number of people trained on fodder storage and the number of livestock owners receiving some kind of services from the trained para-veterinarians. All the para-veterinarians trained were host community members because no IDPs were identified as para-veterinarians across all communities of intervention.

In addition, Mercy Corps conducted an assessment of the Department of Animal Health Services staff and other stakeholders, in order to identify gaps in their capacity to sustain the impact of the program in the long term. This was done because reports from the initial baseline showed that there are a lot

of existing structures and capacities which need to be strengthened within these groups. Discussion is ongoing with all stakeholders on how Mercy Corps can best support the local structures and organizations. A training manual was prepared by the gap assessment consultants to address weaknesses identified.

### SECTOR 3 Logistics, Support, and Relief Commodities

<b>OBJECTIVE 3.1: Beneficiaries have access to essential hygiene items and household items</b>			
<b>INDICATORS</b>	<b>TARGET</b>	<b>PROGRESS Q3</b>	<b>COMPLETION</b>
# of hygiene kits distributed	5,000	1339	N/A
# of new arrival kits distributed	620	210	N/A
Cost of hygiene kit/beneficiary	\$35	\$32	N/A
Cost of new arrival kit/beneficiary	\$219	\$194	N/A
Total # of households receiving hygiene kits	5,000	2894	58%
Total # of households receiving new arrival kits	620	491	79%
<b>Main activities planned for Quarter 3</b>	<b>Progress during reporting period</b>		
<p><i>Relief Commodities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Contracting of additional vendors for the provision of hygiene and arrival kits, as well as commodities, for beneficiaries</li> <li>➤ Finalization of beneficiary registration</li> <li>➤ Generation of eligible beneficiary list for voucher distribution completed</li> <li>➤ Sensitization of new beneficiaries about voucher process</li> <li>➤ Continuation of voucher distribution</li> </ul>	<p><i>Relief Commodities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Mobilization of voucher vendors within communities of intervention completed with contracts created</li> <li>➤ Beneficiary registration is ongoing</li> <li>➤ Sensitization of new beneficiaries on voucher system completed</li> <li>➤ Cash vouchers distributed within seven communities in Gombe LGA completed for both new arrival and hygiene kits, with the following results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ New arrival kits were distributed to 210 households with a total of 2,599 individuals benefiting</li> <li>▪ Hygiene kits were distributed to 1339 household with a total of 13,390 individuals benefiting</li> <li>▪ IDP to host community ratio: 91% vs. 9%</li> <li>▪ Average absentee rate: 21%</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		

#### ***Relief Commodities***

*Vendors:* A total of ten (10) vendors were mobilized within Gombe and Y/Deba communities so as to reduce the high rate of beneficiaries going to the main market for voucher redemption. The increase in the number of vendors has also reduced the cost of transportation to the market for beneficiaries and has provided more options for beneficiaries to carry out voucher exchange. Contracts have been entered into with all the ten vendors and the renewal of contract was completed for the six old vendors. Generally, the presence of vendors in the communities of intervention has reduced the security threat for beneficiaries and staff that embarked on transaction monitoring because the main market has become a major target for suicide bombers.

*Community sensitization on the voucher system:* The new beneficiaries were adequately trained on the voucher system and processes. Their basic rights for voucher exchange and market transaction were clearly highlighted so that they get adequate worth for the cash voucher in exchange for communities.

This training has enabled beneficiaries to have a perfect understanding of the voucher system and market transactions, thereby reducing opportunities for exploitation by vendors.

*NFI voucher distribution:* Vouchers were distributed for both new arrival and hygiene kits within the seven communities of intervention in Gombe LGA. A total of 1,339 households received vouchers for hygiene kits, for an approximate total of 13,390 individuals (assuming an observed average household size of 10, with 6,754 female and 6,636 males benefiting). 210 households were given the new arrival voucher, with a total of 2,599 individuals benefitting (1,305 female and 1,294). A large number of the beneficiaries have redeemed their voucher, though the process was still ongoing at the time this report was written.

The table below illustrates the voucher redemption summary for the quarter in view:

Voucher Type	Voucher Amount (NGN)	# of Benef served	Total Amount Distributed (NGN)	Total Amount Redeemed (NGN)	Balance (still in circulation) (NGN)	Balance (USD)	# of benef
Hygiene Items	5,800	1339	7,766200	7,427000	339,200	\$1722	29**
New Arrival	35,000	210	7,350000	7,210000	140,000	\$711	6**

\*\* Total number of beneficiaries that have not redeemed vouchers

## V. Monitoring and Evaluation

M&E activities for the quarter under review were mainly related to the registration of beneficiaries, beneficiary list validation, consolidation of database master list and post-distribution monitoring.

*Beneficiary registration:* Mercy Corps continues with the registration of beneficiaries through its community volunteer network in order to meet the target of 5,000 households for the project. Registration was conducted across the eleven communities of intervention and a total of 2,491 households were registered. The registration was conducted base on criteria defined for both IDPs and vulnerable community members. A total of 2,240 households were eligible for intervention using criteria already defined from the beginning, which was described in the previous in the report.

*Beneficiary lists validation:* As a standard, Mercy Corps carries out list verification of between 20% and 50% of registered beneficiaries so as to ascertain the accuracy of all information provided in the registration list. Based on the outcome of the validation, a final beneficiary list is generated for distribution. The final distribution list is shared with targeted community leaders and IDP representatives for feedback and to ensure accountability before voucher distribution.

*Consolidation of database master list:* The database master list was consolidated for the first and second phase of registered beneficiaries. This was done to enable proper record keeping and more efficient reporting. The distribution record was also updated to the main database so as to ascertain the number of individuals which have been assisted from the beginning to date.

*Training, distribution and post-distribution monitoring:* Systems and structures have been put in place to ensure adequate monitoring of beneficiary training on the voucher system in distribution sites, voucher distribution, and transaction and household post distribution monitoring. This is done to ensure the quality of service provision and the effective utilization of the interventions provided. The table below illustrates the number of monitoring activities conducted in the quarter under review.

	Monitoring Activity	# of monitoring interventions	% of total benef served in Q3
	Voucher training Monitoring	198	15%
2	Distribution Monitoring	28	N/A
3	Transaction Monitoring	16	N/A

4	Post-Distribution Monitoring	114	12%
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*Community feedback mechanism:* Community feedback and complaints are received through the hot line. This system has enabled Mercy Corps to track and categorize complaints, which are forwarded to the individual staff members concerned with each complaint. A total of 23 phone calls with relevant complaints (not including routine questions about project operations and positive feedback) were recorded and subsequently addressed, either on the spot or via visits to the people involved. In addition to this, a call was received from Funakaye LGA to find out when Mercy Corps will be coming to provide assistance to the registered IDPs and vulnerable host community members.

Of the total of 23 complaints, eight were relating to perceived overcharging by vendors. In such cases, the following steps are being taken:

- a. The case is referred to the staff in charge of vendors for evaluation.
- b. The monitoring team in the market visits the vendor in question for evaluation.
- c. A final decision is made based on the outcome of the evaluation, which can result in suspension or annulment of the contract in severe cases; however, Mercy Corps has not had any severe cases of exploitation from a single vendor so far.

*Monitoring Outcomes:* (based on the household post-distribution monitoring surveys)

- Families supported by Mercy Corps have not received any form of assistance from any other organization;
- Some families are still in need of mattresses and kitchen utensils because they were not eligible for the new arrival kits. Twenty-three out of the 114 households monitored following NFI voucher distribution indicated mattresses and kitchen utensils as being among their unmet needs;
- Consistently reported needs of all beneficiaries include water, shelter, education, health and income generating activities; and
- There is not much difference between the unmet needs reported beneficiaries during monitoring in Gombe and Y/Deba. Across all communities of intervention in Gombe, LGA, water was a top priority (probably because it is currently the dry season). Those in Deba were more concerned with income-generating activities, shelter and education as their top priorities. A large dam in Dadin Kowa makes water distribution easier in this area.

## VI. Challenges

Mercy Corps encountered the following challenges in the last quarter:

- The security situation affected most of the activities planned for the month of February as outlined in the report earlier. To address the challenges of security around the elections and due to Boko Haram, Mercy Corps staff operated from home for a time. Upon return to the office, an emphasis was placed on using the organization's full capacity to get the program's activities back on track;
- A delay in the procurement of startup kits for para-veterinarians occurred because they are mostly imported. The goods have since been received;
- There was a high turnout of IDPs in distribution sites due to an influx of new arrivals, which slowed down cash voucher distribution. Mercy Corps Nigeria is revisiting its distribution mechanism in order to identify possible options to avoid the turnout of non-registered IDPs; and
- Vendors in Y/Deba LGA communities originally lacked the capacity to provide the requested goods, which prevented NFIs voucher distribution during the last quarter. However, as their trust in Mercy Corps has grown and they began to see profits from their participation, they were able to build up their stocks and secure commodities for beneficiaries.

## VII. Plans for next quarter

Sector	Main activities
<b>Sector 1:</b> Economic Recovery & Market Systems	<i>Livelihoods Recovery</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Transfers disbursement scale-up</li> <li>➤ Cash transfer use monitoring</li> </ul> <i>VSLAs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Start-up of intervention activities with existing 32 groups and formation of remaining eight groups in targeted communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Sector 2:</b> Agriculture and Food Security	<i>Livestock</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Distribution of equipment to private para-vets</li> <li>➤ Completion of institutional assessment and follow-up of recommendations</li> <li>➤ Cooperation on monitoring of para vets activities, with the Department of Animal Husbandry</li> </ul>
<b>Sector 3:</b> Logistics, support and relief items	<i>Relief Items</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Completion of beneficiary registration</li> <li>➤ Continuation of voucher distributions for hygiene and new arrival items</li> </ul>
<b>M&amp;E</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Maintaining of monitoring systems and tools</li> <li>➤ Consolidation of beneficiary master database</li> <li>➤ Continue registration of beneficiaries</li> <li>➤ Piloting of online data collection via tablets</li> </ul>

## VIII. Annexes

ANNEX 1: Quarter in photos