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Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger (LEARN)

Final Report - June 11-December 31, 2010

Funded by USAID/ Office of Food for Peace



Ramatou, mother of four children
Distribution completed

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		page
1.0	Executive Summary	3
2.0	Program Implementation	3
3.0	Management and Organization	4
4.0	Monitoring and Evaluation	7
5.0	Coordination	11
6.0	Lessons Learned	11
7.0	Recommendations	12
8.0	Conclusions	13

Attachments

A	Distribution 3 Household List	
B	Synopsis of Commodity Inspection Results	
C	Results Monitoring Table	
D	Vulnerability Survey Report	
E	Nutrition Survey Report (French)	
F	Impact Evaluation Report	
G	Results of Monitoring Children’s Malnutrition Status	
H	Commodity Price Monitoring	
I	Commodity Tables	

LIST OF TABLES

Table I	Distribution 3 Recipients – expected, planned and served	4
Table II	Recipients, disaggregated	4
Table III	Summary of Recipients, disaggregated	4
Table IV	Logical Framework	8
Table V	Summary of LEARN SMART Survey Results	9
Table VI	Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results – Global Acute Malnutrition	9
Table VII	Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results – Severe Acute Malnutrition	9
Table VIII	Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results – Wasting	10
Table IX	Summary of GON SMART Survey Results (national)	10
Table X	Price Fluctuations in Local Markets	11

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Localized Assistance Emergency Response in Niger* (LEARN) project was implemented between June and December 2010. LEARN was designed to mitigate massive out-migration and decrease childhood malnutrition during the 2010 food crisis. Simultaneously, given the newness of the local and regional procurement (LRP) approach, the results were intended to provide lessons learned and discern best practices for both Mercy Corps and USAID/Food for Peace (FFP) in terms of future local or regional procurement of commodities.

Populations in the target communes of Filingué, Abala, and Sanam are largely agro-pastoralist. In June 2010, populations in these three communes demonstrated varying, yet high, levels of use of 'famine foods', reduced number of meals, and sale of animals and other assets. Final target beneficiaries were selected through a vulnerability survey conducted in June 2010 and validated by the Government of Niger (GON). This was complemented by a nutritional survey (using Standardized Monitoring & Assessment of Relief & Transitions (SMART) methodology) conducted in August 2010 followed by the monitoring of children's nutritional status from June through November 2010.

Throughout the project, LEARN provided three monthly food distributions (i.e., August, September and October 2010) to 16,232 extremely vulnerable households in Filingué, Abala, and Sanam communes,¹ located in the department of Filingué. The monthly food baskets were composed of 100 kg of maize, 10 kg of cowpeas, 3.4 liters of vegetable oil, and 210 grams of salt, representing 80% of an 8-person household's monthly nutritional needs. Overall, 4,846.2 MT of maize and 485.02 MT of cowpeas were procured through a national tender process. LEARN's voucher component included payment for value of 151.27 MT of vegetable oil and 10.09 MT of iodized salt, all distributed to the same target households.

LEARN was conducted simultaneously with two other USG-funded LRP projects funded by OFDA and USDA. Implementation of each project was strictly segregated in different communities.²

2.0 PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

LEARN provided three monthly distributions of household rations of maize and cowpeas, and vouchers for oil and salt to targeted households.

2.1 Identification and registration of households

Mercy Corps and its local NGO partner, Le Défi, conducted joint field surveys to identify extremely vulnerable households in the targeted communes. Beneficiaries were selected by community members in a participatory manner based on vulnerability criteria including: i) harvest levels during the 2009 season; ii) availability and levels of food stocks remaining in June 2010; iii) presence of children under five; iv) women-headed households; v) disadvantaged (handicapped or elderly) headed households; and vi) recent sale of assets. Visits to households' compounds allowed for validation of results. During the registration process, Mercy Corps and Le Défi verified each household's GON family card, which identifies all family members and recognizes the family as an entity. The presence of the family card clarified the composition of households to be served by each distribution.

2.2 Distribution of commodities to households

Mercy Corps determined that a change in volumes to be distributed (3 monthly food baskets instead of 3.5 monthly food baskets, as planned) was necessary due to i) the timing of the distributions, which were projected to end as the harvest was beginning, ii) costs of repackaging the .5 month volume, and iii) the need to harmonize methodologies with similar interventions.

The list of registered households per targeted community evolved slightly with each distribution, given some corrections to names, inadvertent duplications, and additions once a previously-registered household presented a completed, numbered Family Card. The list of households served at Distribution 3 per targeted community is attached (see Attachment A - Distribution 3 Household List).

¹ While 16,232 households were reached during the last distribution, fewer households were served during distributions 1 and 2 due to their lack of family cards.

² *Response through Local Procurement and Distribution* (RESPOND), funded by USAID/OFDA; and *Localized Immediate Drought Response* (LIDR), funded by USDA. While these projects were also located in Filingué Department, there was no overlapping of project interventions in the same communities.

Table I: Distribution recipients – expected and served

Distribution	individuals	households
expected result	130 000	16,250
Served Distribution 1	124,109	15,808
Served Distribution 2	126,768	16,091
Served Distribution 3	127,782	16,232

LEARN provided standard monthly food baskets to every registered family with a valid Family Card and distributed a total of 5,492.58 metric tons of commodities. This included:

- 4,846.20 MT maize
- 485.02 MT cowpeas
- 151.27 MT oil
- 10.09 MT salt

Cowpeas were packaged by the commodity vendor into 10 kg bags, 4 liter jugs were provided to recipients to contain the 3.4 liters of oil (and marked at the 3.4 l level), and salt was pre-packaged and re-weighed at distribution sites. Distribution sites were marked with banners including the USAID logo and the type of commodities and volumes to be received to ensure all beneficiaries were aware of the ration amounts and could verify them as they received their goods.

Recipients of LEARN’s distributions reflect the following demographic categories:

Table II: Recipients, disaggregated

commune	# w/children 0-5 yrs				# w/children 5-18 yrs				persons aged 18 years +				Total Reached
	f	%	M	%	f	%	m	%	f	%	M	%	
Filingué	7 097	15.70%	6 751	14.90%	7 343	16.20%	9 078	20.10%	8 029	17.80%	6 911	15.30%	45 209
Abala	5 786	16.40%	4 979	14.10%	5 611	16.10%	6 875	19.70%	6 506	18.50%	5 370	15.30%	35 127
Sanam	7 877	16.60%	7 030	14.80%	7 071	14.90%	9 133	19.20%	9 146	19.30%	7 189	15.20%	47 446
Total	20 760	16.20%	18 760	14.70%	20 025	15.70%	25 086	19.70%	23 681	18.50%	19 470	15.20%	127 782

Table III: Summary of Recipients, disaggregated

category	population	f	m
Total	127 782	64 466	63 316
0-5	39 520	20 760	18 760
5-18	45 111	20 025	25 086
18+	43 151	23 681	19 470

Note: Of all households served, 86.20% include children under 5 years old.

2.3 Distribution Methodology

Mercy Corps identified communities centrally located and easily accessible to target populations, and coordinated the distribution days with market days to increase transportation options for returning to villages with monthly rations. Each distribution center – convened once a month – regrouped distributions for one to seven communities, with a maximum of 500 households served at once. Care was taken to regroup communities in traditional ‘clusters’, and avoid regrouping communities in conflict (rare, but real enough in some cases to block distributions). Le Défi and Mercy Corps worked closely with community leaders and GON extension services at each distribution session, which resulted in correcting errors (households registered twice, for example), maintenance of order and security, and general transparency. Mercy Corps logistics team members monitored quality of warehouse and distribution management.

3.0 MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

LEARN’s implementation relied on functional logistics and administrative processes. This section reviews the general and specifically LRP-related results which contributed to successful implementation.

3.1 Staff recruitment

Mercy Corps recruited field staff by early July 2010; an M&E officer and assistant were on-board in early August 2010. While the M&E Officer left the project in October, subsequent monitoring and evaluation work was done by Mercy Corps' M&E unit.

3.2 Signature of protocol and management of sub-grant with local NGO partner, Le Défi

A sub-grant protocol with Le Défi was signed on 11 June 2010. Le Défi recruited staff and participated in the end-June vulnerability survey, managed the household identification phase, and secured warehouses for commodities. Le Défi was also responsible for contracting transporters for moving commodities from the warehouses to the distribution centers. Before project inception, Mercy Corps trained Le Défi in warehouse and distribution management, and provided the related management documents for use and reporting. The partnership was designed in such a way that duties were segregated between the two partners. Mercy Corps assumed the monitoring and quality control aspects, thereby mitigating risks of losses or thefts.

Le Défi's knowledge of the intervention area was instrumental in successfully determining the location of distribution centers. In addition, the use of Family Cards was suggested by Le Défi based on their previous experience of food aid management. Overall, Le Défi's management of commodities - from warehousing to distribution - was satisfactory. However, Le Défi demonstrated serious short-comings in their own procedures and management of the sub-grant. In particular, both narrative and financial reports were either not provided on time or not at all. This led to over-spending on their agreed upon budget. Due to the emergency context, there was limited time to build Le Défi's capacity.

3.3 Procurement of equipment, visibility materials, and transport and inspection services

Major non-commodity procurement included:

- Transportation of maize and cowpeas from Niamey to field warehouses was negotiated with a commodity vendor.
- Transportation of maize and cowpeas from field warehouses to distribution centers was negotiated with local transporters separately for each distribution, taking into account the reliability, vehicle fleet, cost proposal, and road conditions (access to certain areas is difficult during the rainy season).
- Inspection services were contracted in late July.

3.4 Procurement of Commodities

The tender for maize and cowpeas procurement was published in June 2010 and remained open for two weeks, the minimum period required for a fully-competitive tender. Forty-four vendors presented offers. Quality (source market), price, availability of commodity, length of validity of offer, and previous successful procurements were considered in the final vendor choice.

An issue of concern to INGOs is the lack of clarity by the GON regarding application of public regulations to non-GON entities. In the public system, it is stipulated that open tenders with amounts above 35 million Fcfa (i.e. over \$70,000) must be open for a minimum of one-month. There was considerable discussion about this stipulation, but it remained unclear if this is applicable to INGOs. This regulation would have inhibited the project start-up. After consultation with Mercy Corps' lawyer and WFP (often issuing large tenders), Mercy Corps opted for a two-week open tender.

3.5 Selection of Oil and Salt Vendors for Voucher Component

In June 2010, Mercy Corps team members visited LEARN's anticipated distribution center locations to introduce the project's voucher component and the vendor selection process. Interested local vendors were invited to present their per liter and per gram prices in writing (forms provided) and to commit to maintaining these prices throughout the three-month period. In the event that no trader in the town expressed interest,³ this was officially noted, so that a vendor selected from another location would be welcomed. Mercy Corps convened a selection committee to analyze the offers submitted: one supplier was selected to honor oil and salt vouchers at the distribution centers.

³ In June, there was a shortage of vegetable oil throughout Niger due to taxes applied from Cotonou port to the Niger border, which contributed to small vendors' reluctance to commit to meeting the large volume anticipated for this project.

3.6 Commodity Inspections

Commodity sampling was conducted once delivery of maize and cowpeas was completed at field warehouses. Results were provided within 2-3 days of sampling. No anomalies were identified by the inspectors. Sampling of vendors' stocks of oil and salt was also conducted at their own storage sites (as these vendors delivered directly to distribution centers) and no physical anomalies were identified, although recommendations were made regarding packaging, labeling, and organization of stocks. (See Attachment B, Synopsis of Commodity Inspection Results.)

3.7 Cost Effectiveness

Total project expenditures reached 100% of budget, for a unit cost per beneficiary of \$.31 per daily ration. (See Attachment C, Results Monitoring Table, which provides further details regarding volumes, unit costs, and per beneficiary cost.)

Project costs were impacted by several programmatic decisions: *(The details concerning these strategic changes are presented in Section 5. Lessons Learned)*

- Oil & salt voucher redemption – Distances between beneficiary communities and oil and salt vendors' sites cost beneficiaries' time and resources and represented a real burden. As such, vendors were invited to be present directly at the distribution centers for redemption of vouchers. This subsequently increased their sales price to offset their own transport costs;
- Provision of 4-liter jugs: A 4-liter jug was issued with each first distribution of oil to ensure clean and secure transport to beneficiaries' residences; and
- Repackaging of cowpeas by vendor into 10kg bags prior to delivery – To avoid repackaging cowpeas after delivery and risk losses and damages, this expense was negotiated in advance with the vendor.

Some savings were incurred through the vendors' procurement of cowpeas from the GON cereals board. The GON had purchased much of the local cowpea production the previous year (and reportedly sold quantities to WFP for emergency response activities in Chad). Storage conditions were favorable, and prices reasonable.

3.8 Timelines

The commodity procurement and distribution timeline, from date of the signature of the award (11 June 2010) through distribution to recipients, is as follows:

Activity	Timing
Award to procurement	31 days (contract for maize and cowpeas signed on 12 July 2010)
Award to distribution	57 days (1 st distribution took place on 7 August 2010)
1 st Distribution	7-12 August 2010
2 nd Distribution	13-17 September 2010 (37 days after 1 st distribution)
3 rd Distribution	18-23 October 2010 (35 days after 2 nd distribution)

Given that the food baskets were intended to cover 80% of nutritional needs for 30 days, the timing of the distributions was critical to beneficiaries' food security.

The first distribution, initially anticipated to take place in July 2010, was delayed slightly due to the implementation of the vulnerability survey, subsequent identification of extremely vulnerable households, and the data entry, which generated the distribution lists for each community. During July, considerable coordination with other humanitarian actors also contributed to the definition of communities where LEARN would or would not work.

4.0 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

4.1 Program Monitoring Tools

This section describes the monitoring activities conducted during the life of the project. Indications of LEARN's programmatic impact is presented in *Section 4.2 Project Impact*.

4.1.1 Database Development and Management

Mercy Corps developed a database for management of all information related to:

- Registered households in each targeted community, and family composition of each household (# of children 0-5 years; # of children 5-18 years; # of person over 18 years)
- Commodities planned for each household, community and distribution center, in tons and units, per distribution
- Households served, per distribution
- Tracking of commodities left for absent households

This database captures all changes in distribution lists, was used to prepare distribution plans, compare planned and real distribution data, and provide reporting information, including household size and ages of family members.

4.1.2 Vulnerability Survey

After the award, in June 2010 and given the lack of data available for Sanam and Abala communes, Mercy Corps was advised by the government to conduct a Filingué department-specific vulnerability survey. This survey was conducted from 28 June through 4 July 2010 in collaboration with the region- and department-level extension services. Multiple criteria were used to identify the most vulnerable communities to be targeted, including:

- More than 50% harvest deficit in 2009
- Limited food stocks
- General level of indebtedness
- Unusual recourse to 'famine foods'
- Reduced number of meals
- Sale of cattle of reproductive age in order to purchase food
- Sale of other productive assets to purchase food
- Limited interventions by other relief actors

Survey results confirmed prioritization of communities in Filingué, Abala and Sanam communes (see Attachment D, Vulnerability Survey). Populations in these communes are largely agro-pastoralist; many pastoralist communities are located in the northern areas during the lean months. Throughout these communes there was a general lack of household food stocks and high indebtedness in June 2010, and populations demonstrated various, but high, levels of use of 'famine foods', reduced number of meals, and sale of animals and other assets.

4.1.3 Nutrition Baseline and Monitoring

A SMART nutritional survey was conducted from August 15-30, 2010 and led by a local consultant. Six teams visited 78 neighborhoods and 1,163 households, and 1,614 children were weighed and measured. Prior approval for this survey methodology and expertise was obtained from the Ministry of Health and survey results were presented to the regional and department-level health officials. (See Attachment E, Nutrition Survey Report.)

In parallel, community-based monitoring of the nutritional status of children 6 through 36 months old was conducted from June through November by Mercy Corps supported community health teams (CHTs). These teams have been involved in therapeutic feeding, growth and illness monitoring since 2005 under Mercy Corps and the health district's stewardship. Findings from analysis of CHTs' work, presented below, cannot be considered 'official' since they have not been validated by the public health authorities, but they do indicate trends in nutritional statistics.

4.1.4 Final Evaluation

A final evaluation was conducted in mid-December 2010 in LEARN communities. An external evaluator led this survey, and was tasked with addressing the following issues:

- Intended and unintended impacts of the distributions on households (beneficiary households and non-beneficiary households)
- Impacts on local markets (traders, transporters, warehouse managers)
- Quality of services
- Effectiveness of coordination with other actors

4.1.4 Commodity Price Monitoring

Commodity prices were collected by Mercy Corps in rural markets in the intervention zone and in Niamey. These prices were monitored weekly for potential fluctuations.

To ensure proper data collection and analysis, two Mercy Corps team members attended training in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, conducted by CRS in coordination with Cornell University.

4.2 Results of Monitoring/Evaluation - Project Impact

The Logical Framework is informed below by actual achievements. (Also refer to Attachment C, Results Monitoring Table.)

Table IV: Logical Framework

Goal: Enhanced food security in Filingué Department through local resources			
Objective: Increase immediate household food supplies for 16,250 food insecure households			
Key Result: Reduced wasting among children under five years old			
Key Indicators:	Baseline	Target	Achieved
% children aged 0-59 months moderately to severely underweight ⁴	16%/2.8%	9%/1.5%	16.3%/3.1% ⁵
# vulnerable households receiving food aid rations and vouchers during food deficit periods	0	16,250	16,232
# commodity tons distributed	0	5,528.25	5,492.58

Mercy Corps' intention in providing food distributions in Filingué department was to i) provide quality food packages for three months of the lean season to extremely vulnerable populations; ii) mitigate a potential crisis and increased malnutrition among children and pregnant and lactating women; and iii) promote families' agriculture production and reduce the sale of their labor to others. Food distributions avoided destabilizing local markets by identifying extremely vulnerable households unable to purchase food items, and by distributing commodities which – while accepted and familiar – are not the favored diet and are less marketable. Several monitoring activities were conducted to provide the information necessary to assess the impact of LEARN's activities and processes.

4.2.1 Impact on Nutritional Status of Children under 5 years old

LEARN's SMART nutrition survey, conducted in August 2010, determined the nutritional baseline of children between six and 59 months old in Filingué, Abala, and Sanam communes. Survey analysis indicates that, in August 2010, children in Filingué and Abala communes were experiencing an emergency situation (over 15% global acute malnutrition).

⁴ Baseline cited in September Quarterly Report mistakenly noted chronic malnutrition rates; corrected here.

⁵ This indicator addresses rates of global and severe acute malnutrition. The initial data released by the GON regarding its November 2010 SMART survey for Tillabéri region informs the 'achieved' column.

Table V: Summary of LEARN's SMART Survey Results - August 2010

commune	global acute malnutrition	severe acute malnutrition	global chronic malnutrition	severe chronic malnutrition	moderate wasting	severe wasting
Filingué	18.6%	4.1%	32.3%	8.1%	29.4%	10%
Abala	16.0%	2.3%	30.3%	8.6%	30%	9.2%
Sanam	13.0%	1.3%	39.2%	11.0%	33.3%	9.8%
consolidated	16%	2.8%	33.8%	9.2%	30.7%	9.7%

Surveys demonstrate that boys are considerably more often underweight and wasted than girls, and that younger children (6-24 months) are more frequently underweight than older children (reflecting that the nutritional status of breast-feeding mothers was also of concern).

Mercy Corps collected data gathered by functional community-based health teams (CHTs) in Abala, Kourfa, Sanam, and Sabon Yayi (4 communities participating in LEARN distributions) for children 6 through 36 months old, from June through November 2010.⁶ Review of this data indicates some improvements in children's health status in October and November. (See Attachment G, Results of Monitoring Nutrition Status, for more detail.)

Table VI: Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results - Global Acute Malnutrition

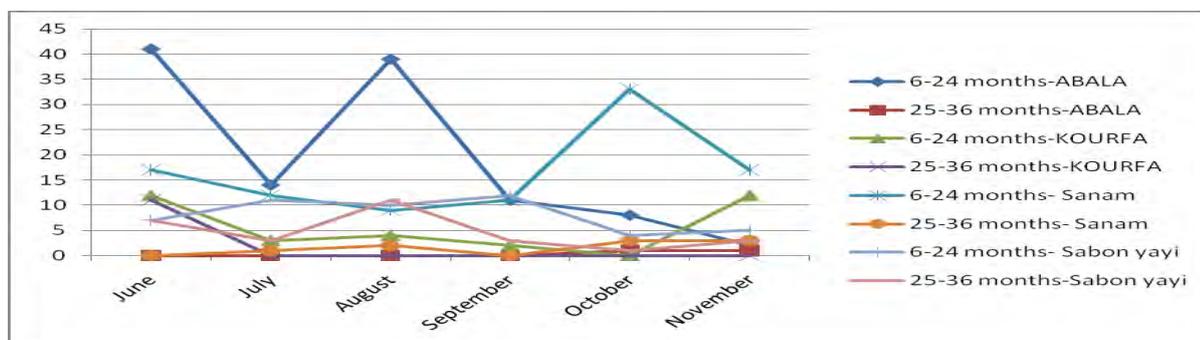
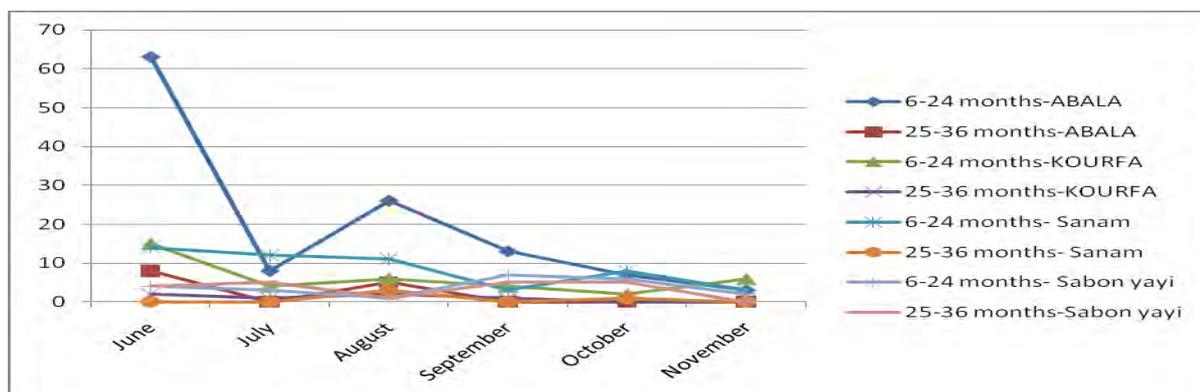


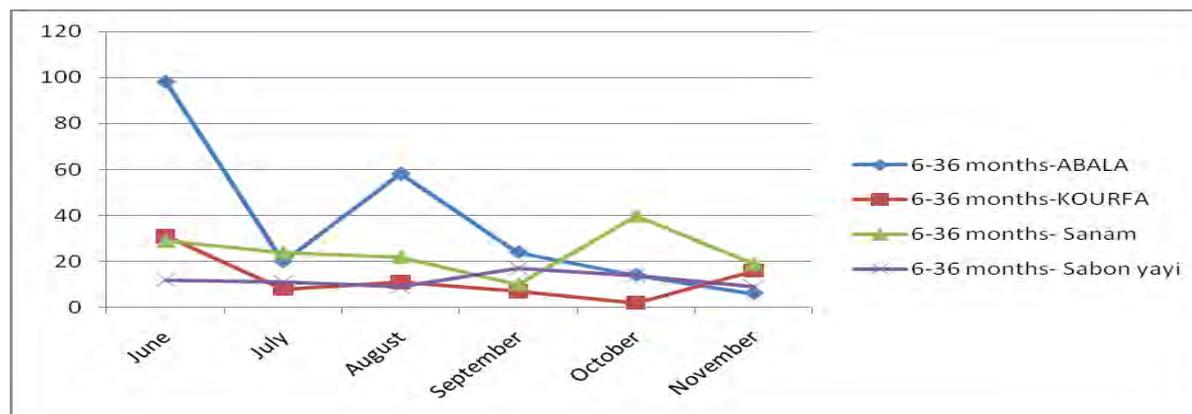
Table VII: Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results - Severe Acute Malnutrition



In general, this information reflects that global and severe acute malnutrition diminished during this period for both age groups. This information also suggests that lactation, in quantity and/or quality, improved for mothers who received food distributions as reduced rates of malnutrition among young children are noted from August through October, the distribution period (and prior to harvests).

⁶ Data collected refers to children presented at CHT weighing sessions, which do not always capture all children in the age group.

Table VIII: Summary of Nutrition Monitoring Results -Wasting



This monitoring information indicates that less children were diagnosed with wasting from August through October, the period of food distributions, although there was a marked increase in October in one of the four communities.

The GON's November survey results (see below) indicate little change from those of the June survey. Initial reactions support the hypothesis that a larger crisis was averted, but that interventions - food, cash or other - did not provide substantial impact for vulnerable populations to meet the recovery phase (i.e., overcome a seriously nutritional status) unassisted.

Table IX: Summary of GON SMART Survey Results (national)

National	global acute malnutrition	severe acute malnutrition	global chronic malnutrition	severe chronic malnutrition	moderate wasting	severe wasting
June	16.7%	3.2%	48.1%	20.2%	48.1%	20.6%
November	15.5%	3.2%	16.9%	19.4%		

While it is difficult to claim that LEARN food distributions alone mitigated a sharp decline in children's nutritional status from August through October, it is safe to say that commodities distributed were not sold, but consumed - and breastfeeding mothers were better able to nourish their younger children. Moreover, it is likely that the combined efforts of several actors mitigated a bad situation from getting worse. Aside from LEARN activities, other food security actions were present in the department of Filingué. In particular in the communes of Filingué, Abala, and Sanam these included the concurrent:

- Blanket feeding conducted by WFP/SAEDEV which reached some LEARN households;
- Implementation of identical LRP food distributions in neighboring communities, thereby dramatically reducing the dependence of other families on LEARN-targeted households.

4.2.2 Impact Evaluation

The impact evaluation highlighted the following positive impacts:

- Food baskets were well-received;
- Identification of households and targeting was appropriate and perceived as fair; and
- Distribution procedures were transparent and well carried out.

The report also presented areas where LEARN activities could have better met the needs of the most vulnerable populations:

- Earlier start-up would have prevented populations reaching a level of destitution and hunger that required displacement, as was the case in 2010;
- Registration mechanism which could allow households not identified during the first assessment to be registered later if their level of vulnerability meets criteria.

Recommendations include:

- Providing food baskets in two phases (early in year to avoid sale of harvest, and another later during the lean season); and
- Accompanying distributions with longer-term livelihoods activities to increase impact.

(See complete report in Attachment F, Impact Evaluation report.)

4.2.3 Impact on Markets' Commodity Prices

As noted above, commodity prices were collected weekly in rural markets in the intervention zone and in Niamey, and monitored for fluctuations. A summary of the fluctuations in prices noted during the project period is presented in the following table:

Table X: Price Fluctuations on Local Markets

Maize	Prices remained stable except for a slight increase in late-August in rural markets, which stabilized within 3 weeks.
Cowpeas	Prices remained generally stable through September except for a slight increase at the end-August in rural markets due to extreme rarity and in anticipation of local harvest. In September/October, prices fell radically due to the harvest either imminent or underway.
Oil	Prices rose in Niamey in June and July, and in Sanam in August, due to taxes applied to imports in transit through Bénin. The tax issue was settled and the rhythm of imports and prices stabilized in August-September.
Salt (iodized)	Prices remained stable.

See Attachment H, Commodity Price Monitoring, for complete data on weekly price monitoring throughout the project period.

5.0 COORDINATION

Mercy Corps attended WFP's weekly food distribution meetings since the project's inception in June 2010 to coordinate and define where LEARN activities would be located. This enabled Mercy Corps to re-define its geographic coverage and benefit from some of the lessons learned from other partners (especially improving on the transparency of registration methodology). This group was disbanded in July when WFP and the GON determined that blanket feeding would be conducted instead of targeted food distributions. Mercy Corps met with another WFP department to avoid duplication of the blanket feeding's provision of 'protection rations'. Mercy Corps is a member of WFP's logistics working group, and was able to ensure that available information on transportation and tendering norms was used, and WFP references sought for large commodity vendors.

Mercy Corps also met with Qatar Charity, Oxfam, Timidria and Africare, all involved to some degree in cash transfer, food distributions or other food security initiatives in Filingué. Le Défi and Mercy Corps continued these coordination activities with Filingué- and Abala-based staff and officials, particularly with GON department-level *Prevention et Gestion des Crises Alimentaires* (PGCA) committee, led by the Préfet, and with WFP, SAEDEV and Timidria representatives.

Meetings with regional PGCA officials, including the Governor, were conducted in Tillabéry in July and September to i) introduce the project, and ii) present the vulnerability and nutrition surveys' results. Monthly supervisions were conducted by regional and department-level PGCA members, which included substantial review of progress and recommendations for improvement.

6.0 LESSONS LEARNED

6.1 Voucher component

Given the number and relative isolation of the distribution centers, it was difficult to find local vendors able to meet the needs of all beneficiaries (+/- 500 households) at each distribution center. As a result, larger vendors were identified in secondary towns to provide for the necessary volume of oil and salt at each distribution point. However, traveling to these secondary towns was too far and expensive for the beneficiaries. As such, the LEARN strategy was adjusted to enable recipients to redeem vouchers directly at distribution centers. The extra cost related to transport of oil and salt to the distribution point was covered by the project.

This approach unfortunately distorted the original intention of the voucher component (competition among local vendors) as contracts with single vendors were agreed upon and signed before hand. It was however a trade-off that Mercy Corps accepted to allow recipients to obtain their full monthly commodity basket at one time and avoid travel costs to vendors' stores. Prices were monitored throughout this period and no significant changes were registered.

Future voucher activities of this type may have a two-pronged approach: a set of vendors for a 'true' voucher activity for populations residing in urban centers, where vendors interested in competing for business may really exist, and a 'pre-selected' vendor approach in rural areas where there are no vendors able to meet demand.

6.2 Suitability of Standardized Monthly Rations

GON standards for humanitarian response consider the average family size at 7 persons, and requires that each distribution be adapted to the beneficiary family size (involving partial rations to households with less than seven members, and larger volumes to larger households). Mercy Corps did not, however, conform to this requirement, and provided standard rations to every beneficiary household, thereby reducing the risk of loss, delays, and extra costs inherent to re-packaging. It is to note however that GON rations are limited to 100kg of cereals/family while Mercy Corps provided a mixed food basket - equivalent to 80% need, partially mitigating the need to increase the ration.

Future distributions could be designed to take into account the cost and time of re-packaging monthly rations into smaller sizes to accommodate family size without compromising the integrity of the stocks at warehouses, distribution points, and households.

6.3 Distribution Locations - distances and transport requirements

Mercy Corps adopted the GON guidance, which locates distributions at centralized distribution centers, at most 10 kilometers away from recipient household's home, which contrasted with Mercy Corps' initially proposed distributions at health centers. Mercy Corps adjusted the project strategy to locate distribution centers in villages with large markets, thereby facilitating transport opportunities for recipients.

Despite Mercy Corps' efforts to locate distribution centers as close as possible to beneficiaries' home, travel to distribution centers and the weight of the ration prevented women from collecting their rations, thus contrasting with Mercy Corps initial expectation that women would be the primary recipients.

The difficult terrain in Abala and Sanam communes and, to some degree Filingué commune - especially during the rainy season - necessitated using 2-ton pick-up trucks to haul small quantities of commodities to distribution centers, and use these transporters several times before all deliveries were completed. This required timely availability during intense periods of use. In view of these conditions, in the future, it is recommended to deliver commodities directly to the villages that are difficult to access instead of distribution centers, with a distribution team following the transport instead of pre-positioning the distribution teams at the distribution center with the risk of having them wait for commodities' arrival.

6.4 Partnering

Partnering with local NGO Le Défi was intended to build the capacity for local emergency response in Filingué Department, capacity that was sorely missing during the previous humanitarian crisis in 2005. In addition, partnering with Le Défi allowed Mercy Corps the distance necessary to monitor closely all field-based activities to avoid theft.

However, Mercy Corps recognizes that capacity-building of a local partner in an emergency context is not the best environment to progress quickly and ensure compliance. While Le Défi was able to conduct the field activities relatively successfully, its application of procedures and management of the budget were lacking, leading to an over-expenditure of their budget.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Important issues to address for future local commodity procurement and food distributions include:

7.1 Clarify the application of GON tender regulations for INGOs

Mercy Corps should obtain guidance and support from the US Embassy to address this issue with the GON. In a continued vacuum of clarification, tenders for future large procurements should be issued well in advance of initial distribution timetable to allow for a one-month window.

7.2 Review strategy of serving standard food packages to all households

Serving households in fractions of monthly packages to suit family size is possible – at a cost of repacking prior to delivery (and not once received, to reduce risk of theft). The repackaging cost must be budgeted as such.

7.3 Review voucher methodology

A double methodology should be used – one for urban areas and another for very rural areas. This would promote competition among vendors in towns, keeping prices low, and allow for rural populations to be served appropriately.

7.4 Develop exit strategies

While food distributions save lives and have a direct impact on immediate household food security, it is critical for development partners to develop an exit strategies corresponding to vulnerability levels in each target area. These strategies should be included since project's inception to ensure that target beneficiaries with continued forecasts of poor harvests (such as in Abala) be provided with alternative income-generating activities, and that those with better harvest prospects be strengthened and monitored over at least one, if not two agricultural seasons.

7.5 Assess partner capacity and lead capacity-building plan

For this type of quick start-up project, program, management, and finance capacities must be thoroughly assessed prior to implementation, and a plan to accompany and monitor weaknesses should be built into the prime awardee's responsibilities. This likely requires the contribution of all departments – program, logistics and finance.

Without a capacity-building plan, or sub-grant to an already highly experienced humanitarian local NGO (of which there are very few), the structure of the implementation team should be reviewed. This is especially true when funding from multiple sources is acquired and the sole local partner may not have the capacity to work on all at once.

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

Mercy Corps recognizes that LEARN's LRP experience created internal capacity for future LRP programming within Mercy Corps Niger. Lessons learned will be shared with other Mercy Corps offices for application in future LRP activities elsewhere.

Mercy Corps notes with satisfaction the quality of the commodities and the services of the selected vendors. Mercy Corps invested considerable expertise in the success of this component – through external logistics assistance.

The impacts of LEARN activities among vulnerable households appear to have delayed out-migration, improved ability of families to till their own fields, and temporary reduced malnutrition among children. However, impacts on malnutrition rates are difficult to evaluate given the short period of intervention. For significant impact on children malnutrition, a longer and more targeted intervention and monitoring is required. Given mediocre and delayed 2010 harvests for some communities, a difficult situation continues for populations in Filingué, and children's malnutrition rates have already inevitably increased.

Long-term recovery activities – including strengthening community health teams and health delivery services, improving agriculture production, livestock assets, and savings mechanisms, and reinforcing early warning circuits – are needed to meet the continuous and chronic food security challenge in Niger.