Quarterly Report
July – September 2015

IRTOUN "Rise Again"

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

PROJECT SUMMARY
Award AID-OFDA-G-14-00025
Start Date: 11 February 2014
End Date: 11 February 2016
Report Date: 30 October 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 fourth quarter of FY14, the program is on track to achieve or 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 helping to facilitate a clear path for recovery.

During the reporting period, the program completed the following activities:

- Training of 15 new Community Animal Health Workers (CAHW) and refresher training of 15 existing CAHW;
- Operational Capacity Assessment of the previously trained CAHW;
- Community sensitizations on fodder cutting and conservation techniques;
- Site preparation for the upcoming vegetable gardening campaign: rehabilitation of compost pits, identification and selection of farmer organizations, needs assessment and pre-ordering of vegetable seeds;
- Capacity assessment of vegetable seed providers;
- Training of irrigation committees;
- Entrepreneurship training with 76 youth entrepreneurs and distribution of the first tranche of funding;
- Operational capacity assessment of 87 VSLA groups by an external consultant;
- Savings disbursements with 87 VSLA groups in the communes of Bara, Ansongo and Ouatagouna;
- Establishment of 17 new VSLA groups in the commune of Bourra.

Table 1. Award-Level Beneficiaries

Total beneficiaries targeted	25 060 beneficiaries (3 580 households)
Total beneficiaries reached this quarter	20 657 beneficiaries[1] (2 951 households)
Total cumulative number of beneficiaries reached	35 287 beneficiaries[1] (5 041 households)

Sector #1 **Agriculture & Food Security**	**Objective 1: Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods**
Beneficiaries Targeted	24 010 beneficiaries (3 430 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	931 beneficiaries[1] (133 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	27 139 beneficiaries[1] (3 877 households)
Sector #2 **Economic Recovery & Market Systems**	**Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks**
Beneficiaries Targeted	12 250 beneficiaries (1 750 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	19 733 beneficiaries[1] (2 819 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	19 733 beneficiaries[1] (2 819 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. Indirect beneficiaries are estimated based on average figures for household size, and beneficiary counting discount has been applied to total number of beneficiaries as mid-term evaluation found that 13% of beneficiaries participate in two program components and 3% of beneficiaries participate in three program components.

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 Circle 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) redeemable for household food and non-food needs, as well as animal feed vouchers, acknowledging the importance of livestock as a food and livelihood resource among agro-pastoralist households in the region. Through a market-based approach, Irtoun also facilitates the recovery of market gardening activities, including the most important cash crops of the region, and addresses the needs of pastoralists for improved fodder and livestock health services. VfW projects support the recovery of livelihoods by helping communities to rehabilitate lands, irrigation systems and agricultural infrastructure degraded during the conflict, while giving vulnerable households access to financial resources to support food needs during the lean season.

Additionally, Irtoun assists micro-entrepreneurs whose businesses have been negatively affected by insecurity through business training and a small cash injection 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 safety net to strengthen recovery efforts, allowing participants to benefit from improved financial management and credit opportunities for community driven economic growth.

By intervening and supporting in key areas of agricultural and economic livelihood restoration, the Irtoun program is providing essential ingredients for communities to solidify a peaceful and productive future.

3. Contextual Update

The security situation in northern Mali remained stagnant over the past quarter, punctuated by continued banditry and targeted attacks along roadways and a resurgence of inter-communal violence in Aguelhok in the region of Kidal. Repeated targeted attacks have been noted throughout the north, particularly against UN and military targets, and an uptick of targeted attacks in the central and southern regions of Mali are cause for recent concern.

Within the Gao Region, notable security events from the past quarter include:

- The return of hostilities between the Platform (pro-Bamako armed movement) and the Coordination of the Azawad Movement - CMA (rebel movement) leading to several deaths;
- Gao – Ansongo Axe: Attack against several MINUSMA convoys using Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) targeted at a distance; gunshots targeting the Ansongo ambulance resulted in civilian casualties;
- Ansongo – Ménaka Axe: intimidation (search and examination) of vehicles rented by NGOs by armed actors in Indelimane; IED attack against a MINUSMA vehicle; attack and looting of a truck hired by an international NGO to transport food;
- Gao – Gossi Axe: Several IED attacks against Malian Army convoys; attack and burning of several vehicles belonging to an INGO near N'Tillit; theft of a Government vehicle;

- Gao – Bourem Axe: IED against a civilian transport truck hired by MINUSMA; theft of an ambulance;
- Gao – Anefis Axe : Shots fired at a MINUSMA convoy by individuals on motorcycles.

In Ansongo, the month of August saw the beginning of the rainy season. With the onset of the first heavy rains, the population was full of hope for a successful harvest season. However, by the second half of the month of August, the rains had only partially satisfied the needs within the targeted areas, as the rains were limited and poorly distributed across the Circle. The month of September saw relatively heavier rains, though still concentrated in some areas and lighter in other areas. As a result, many producers had to manually pump water into their fields (in the case of rice fields), and there was some concern for rain fed crops (millet, sorghum) in areas experiencing poor rainfall. The total rainfall registered in Ansongo was 250 mm in the first 21 days of rains, compared to 230 mm in 22 days last year, so the rainy season is off to a promising start.

The pastures are relatively well supplied for the beginning of the rainy season, and animals are beginning to put on weight. Herds seem to be in good health, and there have been no notable epidemics or disease outbreaks. The herds have migrated to the rainy season pastures, where water and green grass are available, and others are beginning to move toward more salty grounds. The price of livestock is acceptable for herders at this time, but is quite expensive for the consumer given the increase in demand for animals for the Tabaski holiday period.

Prices are stable for the primary cereals consumed in the region and local markets are well stocked. The river has risen to an acceptable level, allowing good navigation, which facilitates trade between villages that are otherwise isolated.

In August, Mercy Corps was the co-organizer of the International Humanitarian Day in Ansongo together with AMI (International Medical Aid). Informational messages were disseminated on the local radio station Lafia to educate communities about the activities undertaken by humanitarian organizations working in northern Mali. Humanitarian activities undertaken during the quarter include the distribution of food rations by ICRC in Ansongo during the month of August, and distributions in the communes of Bourra, Ansongo and Bara by ACF during the month of September. All INGO partners working in Ansongo Cercle coordinate closely to avoid duplication and ensure that the population's priority needs are being met.

In terms of local political processes, the Prefect for Ansongo Cercle left his post, and preparations are ongoing for communal and regional elections which are scheduled for October 25th, 2015.

4. Performance Summary

Sector #1 **Agriculture & Food Security**	Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods			
Beneficiaries Targeted	24 010 beneficiaries (3 430 households)	Budget:		**$ 1 375 056**
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 931 beneficiaries[1] (133 households)	Cumulative: 27 139 beneficiaries[1] (3 877 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	3 600	November 2015
Indicator 1.1.2: Number of people benefiting from livestock activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	490	1 570	September 2015
	Female: 0	510	334	September 2015
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	In progress
Indicator 1.2.2. Number of people benefiting from seed systems/agricultural input activities, by sex	Male: 0	240	315	December 2015
	Female: 0	960	885	December 2015
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: 19 733 beneficiaries[1] (2 819 households)	Cumulative: 19 733 beneficiaries[1] (2 819 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	59	In progress
	Female: 0	90	91	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	845	In progress
	Female: 0	1 000	1 824	In progress
Indicator 2.2.2: Percentage of financial services accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	75%	100%	In progress

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 has been used for this indicator.

Sector Summary:

Sector #1: Agriculture & Food Security:

1.1 Livestock

1.1.1 Animal fodder vouchers for 800 vulnerable households.

Nothing to report this quarter.

1.1.2 Capacity building of herders to improve fodder harvesting and storage

Community information campaigns were held this quarter in the villages of Bara, Tabango and Monzonga, reaching 104 individuals, including 40 women. The objective of these information sessions was to share best practices for harvesting and stocking fodder, community management of pastures and improved herd management. Messages emphasized the importance for agro-pastoralists to plan ahead for their animals needs during the lean season, especially given that this year, herders experienced significant losses due to the fodder crisis, which could have been prevented if herders had correctly followed the recommendations for fodder production and storage. The table below summarizes the number of people reached during community information campaigns.

Village	# participants		Total
	Men	Women	
Bara	19	2	21
Monzonga	19	27	46

Photo 1: Community meeting in Tabango, Mercy Corps

Tabango	26	11	37
Total	64	40	104

1.1.3 Training for 30 Community Animal Health Workers

1.1.3.1. Operational capacity assessment for CAHWs in the field

Before undertaking the second training cycle for Community Animal Health Workers (CAHW), Mercy Corps teams conducted an operational assessment of existing CAHW who were trained during the first year of Irtoun. The assessment sought to understand how many of the trained CAHWs are currently operational, the results they have attained, and the difficulties and gaps they have

experienced in order to inform future interventions. This rapid assessment was conducted within all of the four communes targeted by Irtoun.

a) Based on the evaluation, the principal observations are:

- The 12 of the first 15 CAHWs are operational and covering all four of the targeted communes. 3 of the trained CAHWs have not engaged in providing veterinary services in their community, but have been able to treat their own animals using the skills that they learned.
- In Ansongo, Bara and Bourra communes, the government appointed veterinarian uses the CAHWs during vaccination campaigns to mobilize community members and conduct vaccinations within the communities.
- In Ouatagouna commune, there is more involvement of the CAHWs across all activities, which are overseen by the government appointed veterinarian (vaccination and other primary treatment activities). This strategy has resulted in increases in outreach capacity and a much higher number of animals that have been treated.
- The majority of CAHWs own their own livestock, and 3 CAHWs accompanied their shepherds to the pastures at the beginning of the rainy season, where they encountered nomadic communities. They were able to treat the animals that they found in the pastures, which was considered a very effective strategy.
- Outside of their engagement alongside the government appointed veterinarian to support vaccination campaigns, the CAHWs are primarily engaged in deworming, antibiotic treatments, diagnosis of vitamin deficiencies, and even helping with difficult births for the animals in their communities.
- CAHWs primarily access their veterinary supplies from their government appointed veterinarians. This is working relatively well in Outagouna, but is a source of significant problems in the other three communes, as discussed further below.

b) Number of animals supported by CAHW: In total, the 15 CAHWs interviewed covered 21 sites (villages, quartiers, etc) and participated in primary care and vaccination campaigns over the last year (from July 2014 to July 2015).

Number of Animals Reached by the CAHWs Interviewed (source CAHW):

Commune	**Number of CAHWs present**	**Number of Animals Treated**					**Total**
		Cattle	**Sheep/Goats**	**Camels**	**Horses**	**Poultry**	
Ouatagouna	3	39 055	30 088	19	71	0	69233
Bara	2	354	695	0	4	10	1063
Bourra	7	837	620	0	22	135	1614
Ansongo	3	1 335	2 005	0	23	16	3379
Total	**15**	**41 581**	**33 407**	**19**	**121**	**161**	**75289**

c) Revenue received by the CAHWs interviewed:

The following table summarizes the amount of revenue earned by the 15 CAHWs over the last 12 months.

Communes	**Number of CAHWs**	**Revenue earned/commune (CFA)**

Ouatagouna	3	1 616 920
Bara	2	64 650
Bourra	7	326 700
Ansongo	3	234 000
Total	16	2 242 270

The evaluation noted that the CAHWs are able to earn an income proportional to the efforts that they exert in their communities, and those that are the most 'entrepreneurial' are able to generate significantly more revenue. The CAHWs that have managed to work closely with the government appointed veterinarian to conduct outreach and diagnosis on his behalf (especially vaccinations) have been able to generate the most business. The 3 CAHWs in Outagouna, who work closely with the government appointed veterinarian in that commune, represent almost 72% of the total revenue earned by the 15 CAHWs.

One issue that was often cited is that the CAHWs depend on the government appointed veterinarians for their supply of veterinary products. The government appointed veterinarians provide them with veterinary supplies on credit, which the CAHWs reimburse after they are paid for the treatments they provide. In Ouatagouna, the government appointed veterinarian is well organized and entrepreneurial, and so this system works relatively well; but the CAHWs in other areas cited difficulties with accessing supplies from the government appointed veterinarian and problems with stock management. For example, the government appointed veterinarian in Ansongo claimed to not have sufficient financial resources to provide supplies to the CAHWs on credit, which limited access to treatments and prevented successful outreach by the CAHWs. Finding solutions to address this break in the supply chain is important both to support the livelihoods of the CAHWs and to ensure sufficient access to veterinary treatment within the targeted communes. Mercy Corps will be working on this in the next quarter with the CAHWs and the government appointed veterinarians to identify the most feasible solution.

d) Difficulties encountered by the CAHWs:

- The CAHWs lack transportation to allow them to access outlying areas. This is particularly pertinent during the rainy season, when animals are disbursed to remote pasture areas.
- Insecurity across the target area has rendered certain areas inaccessible.
- The CAHWs are poorly integrated in the activities of the government appointed veterinarian, and in most cases (Bourra, Bara, Ansongo) receive little monitoring/coordination from the government appointed veterinarian. This problem was particularly raised by the CAHWs in Ansongo.
- The target population has limited awareness of the presence and activities of the CAHWs.
- CAHWs noted insufficient access and availability of veterinary products.
- CAHWs cited their limited knowledge and experience with providing veterinary services (diagnosis, treatment, birthing, etc.) and their desire for more in-depth training.
- Communities have the tendency to self-prescribe and treat their animals without reaching out to available veterinary services, resulting in reduced demand for services.

e) Recommendations:

The assessment concluded the following recommendations which will allow the CAHWs to be more operational and to realize greater impact on animal health in the target areas.

Recommendation	Responsible Parties
-Conduct community outreach and education campaigns to promote awareness and acceptance of the role and responsibilities of the CAHWs	Government appointed veterinarians and CAHWs, with support from Mercy Corps
- Provide CAHWs with transportation solutions and with basic veterinary supply kits (syringe, pliers, scissors, etc.)	Mercy Corps, Government appointed veterinarians
- Build the knowledge and capacity of CAHWs through continued training opportunities	Mercy Corps
- Ensure that veterinary supplies are available to the CAHWs in the different villages and sites targeted by the action	Government appointed veterinarians
- Increase the involvement of the CAHWs in the activities of the government appointed veterinarians, notably in vaccination campaigns	Government appointed veterinarians
- Establish a monthly coordination structure between the government appointed veterinarians, the CAHWs, and state Veterinary Services to ensure good monitoring and support to CAHWs	Government appointed veterinarians, Veterinary Services and Mercy Corps

1.1.3.2. Training of 30 CAHWs (final training cycle):

During this quarter, the final round of trainings were held with the 30 CAHWs. The training was carried out in two phases:

- Training of 15 new CAHWs on basic principles of animal health
- Refresher training with the 15 CAHWs who were trained during the first year of the program, in order to reinforce their skills and allow them discuss the challenges they have encountered over the the last year with veterinary specialists from the zone.

1.2 Improving Agricultural Production

1.2.1 Voucher for Agricultural inputs for 1,200 farmers

Photo 2: CAHW training session in Ansongo

1.2.1.1. Identification and selection of new farming groups:

Four of the 50 groups that received support from Irtoun last year have decided not to undertake vegetable production during the upcoming agricultural campaign. The four groups include:

- Fafadobe from Bazi Haoussa in Ansongo Commune, which decided to change their activities to focus more on Income Generating Activities such as petty commerce rather than vegetable gardening. They were using their field to grow both eucalyptus and vegetables, and as a result, they had a serious problem accessing sufficient water on their parcel.
- Gahambani from Gouthine in Bara commune, who were unable to identify a suitable site for vegetable gardening for this year's campaign. The parcel that they have is not enclosed, and is therefore extremely vulnerable to destruction by wandering animals, and there is a serious problem of irrigation at their site.
- The group in Tassiga decided that they were unable to undertake gardening activities due to the old age of their members, and the fact that their children did not have time to help with tending the fields and fetching water.
- A group in Gassi were unable to find sufficient water to undertake gardening on a large scale, and opted not to continue with the activities.

After several discussions with these groups that did not produce any tangible solutions, the Irtoun team undertook field visits to Ouatagouna and Bourra Communes to identify new groups to replace these four associations during the upcoming gardening campaign.

1.2.1.2. Capacity assessment of vegetable seed providers:

To prepare for the 2015 vegetable season, a series of meetings were held with agricultural input suppliers in Ansongo commune. Of the seven venders who responded to the Expression of Interest, five confirmed their ability to provide agricultural inputs to meet the needs identified by the targeted gardening groups. Additional follow-up calls were made to potato seed wholesalers in Bamako to confirm that they will be able to import sufficient supplies to meet the demand of targeted groups. This market-based process was still new for the majority of vendors, but some suppliers are starting to understand the commercial opportunities that are available in the target area, and specifically requested assistance from the Mercy Corps agents to get a better understanding of the seed requirements of the targeted groups well ahead of the vegetable season, to allow them to move forward with placing their orders.

1.2.2 Training and support to 50 agricultural/gardening groups

During this quarter, trainings focused on compost production with the new groups as well as refresher trainings with old groups on the same topic. Additionally, in order to enrich the compost, the project decided to install manure pits alongside the compost pits to enable access to organic manure to fertilize the young plants. Program staff provided training to all of the groups on this technique, and provided guidance and monitoring to support the groups to prepare their fields to take advantage of this technique.

1.2.3. Rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure – Food Vouchers for Work

Nothing to report this quarter.

1.2.4. Revitalize 20 irrigation management committees

Within each commune, irrigation management committees were established within each of the 23 gardening groups that have access to a motorized pump belonging to the association. These committees are made up of a president, an administrator, a treasurer, a pump operator, and possibly a storekeeper. During the quarter, the committee members began a 4-month training cycle on irrigation management for their gardens.

The trainings will take place over the first two weeks of each month between September to December 2015 (4 days per month with each group) and cover 4 principal themes:

- Module 1: Role of the irrigation committee members (establish a list of roles and responsibilities) and the importance of water management for vegetable gardening.
- Module 2: Installation of irrigation equipment and infrastructure (irrigation system, motorized pump, drainage system).
- Module 3: Assessing and managing water needs during the vegetable gardening campaign (organizing a water tower, managing stocks of fuel, oil, filters and other materials).

Module 4: Sustainable management of irrigation equipment and infrastructure and utilization of monitoring forms (maintenance, monitoring, repairs)

The table below summarizes the number of training participants by commune and by sex:

Commune	Number of irrigation committees	Number of participants		
		Men	Women	Total
Ansongo	07	17	13	30
Bara	06	07	13	20

Bourra	06	13	17	30
Ouatagouna	04	00	16	16
Total	**23**	**37**	**59**	**96**

Sector #2: Economic Recovery & Market Systems

2.1. Support to 150 micro-entrepreneurs

76 young entrepreneurs were selected for the second cycle of training, based on a competitive application process in each of the four target communes. Shortlisted entrepreneurs received visits to their homes or their place of work to get a better understanding of the businesses that they are currently managing and to verify the accuracy of the information included in their applications.

These young entrepreneurs are between the ages of 18 - 35, and are divided between the four communes as follows: Bara (14), Ansongo (25), Bourra (17) and Ouatagouna (20). Their activities include small commerce, animal fattening, vegetable gardening, service provision (motorcycle repair, sale of fuel) and an iron worker. A detailed list of supported youth businesses is included in Annex 1.

After confirmation of the projects, the 76 recipients participated in Mercy Corps' 8-module entrepreneurship skills training, which includes modules on basic management and accounting, understanding your market, and distinguishing your product. At the end of the training, beneficiaries received the first cash disbursement (50% of the total amount, or 50 000 FCFA). After one month of operations, the youth will be evaluated on their management skills, based on the trainings they received, and their use of the first tranche before receiving their second disbursement of funds.

2.2. Establish/Strengthen 80 Village Savings and Loans Associations

2.2.1. Establishment of 13 new VSLA groups in the commune of Bourra:

In addition to the 87 VSLA groups previously established under Irtoun, 13 new VSLA groups were established in the villages of Tassiga, Youni, Gassi, Tonditihio, et Kounssoum (Herba). All of the 13 new VSLA groups received a VSLA kit.

The following table shows the distribution of VSLA groups and their total accrued savings during the last quarter (July to September 2015).

Commune	Village	# VSLA	# members	Total Credit Funds	Total solidarity funds	Total Funds Mobilized
Bourra	Tassiga	04	113	**July :** 340 150	70 600	410 750
	Youni	02	52			
	Gassi	02	53	**Aug :** 407 750	70 600	478 350
	Tonditihio	02	44			
	Kounssoum	03	90	**Sept :** 456 600	64 800	521 400
Total		13	352			

2.2.2. Capacity Assessment of Existing VSLAs and Refresher Training for Village Agents on the VSLA Methodology

An external consultant was hired during the month of August to work with the Mercy Corps VSLA team to 1.) identify weaknesses or challenges with existing VSLA groups and work together to identify solutions; 2.) provide refresher training to Mercy Corps VSLA agents; and 3.) provide ongoing training to Village Agents to support their self-sufficiency and build their capacity. The consultations and trainings provided an opportunity for the VLSA team to reflect critically on the progress and

impact of the program, to learn from one another, and to develop solutions to challenges that they are facing.

In Bourra commune, the identification of 5 new village agents is underway. Of the 20 VAs previously trained under the program, 16 are operational in the three communes and have established a total of 53 additional new VSLA groups on a fee-for-service model. In order to encourage and support their work, each VA will be provided with VSLA kits (three kits per VA) during the next quarter to enable them to establish an operating fund to continue providing VSLA training services to additional groups after the end of the program.

The geographic distribution of Village Agents per commune and the number of VSLAs they have established is summarized below:

Photo 6: VSLA meeting in Youni

Commune	# Villages	# VA	# operational VA	# VSLAs planned	# VSLA operational
Bara	3	4	4	16	10
Ansongo	4	8	6	32	23
Bourra	5	5	0	TBD	0
Ouatagouna	3	8	6	32	20

5. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Nothing to report this quarter.

6. Monitoring & Evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation activities undertaken during the quarter included regular monitoring visits and evaluation of the trainings conducted with youth entrepreneurs and irrigation committees.

7. Coordination

Inter-INGO coordination at the regional level is good, although the organization of meetings needs improvement. Mercy Corps continues to participate at regional coordination meetings in Gao (OCHA), at the Interagency Coordination Group (IACG) in Gao, as well as the food security cluster.