



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Economic Recovery from Ebola for Liberia (EREL) Program
Funded by USAID/ Food For Peace (FFP)
Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Quarter 4 Report
July 1 – September 30, 2015

Project Summary:

Award Number:

AID-FFP-G-15-0006

Start Date: January 7, 2015

End Date: January 6, 2016

Report Date: October 31, 2015

Total Award: \$8,970,000

I. Program Overview

The Economic Recovery from Ebola for Liberia (EREL) Program is designed to assist 30,000 households (150,000 individuals) who have been economically affected by the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak in Liberia. The EREL Program targets three of the most affected counties – Lofa, Montserrado and Margibi, which represent the counties through which Ebola first entered Liberia, and the counties that have suffered some of the most recent and recurrent outbreaks. The program is assisting vulnerable populations in these counties to fill minimum food basket gaps, maintain normal agricultural production, protect vulnerable households' assets from depletion through sales and minimize the negative impacts on child nutrition. The project consists of two components: 1) direct cash transfers to the most vulnerable households; and 2) agricultural input vouchers targeting vulnerable households that contain smallholder farmers.

II. Quarter Executive Summary

A. Overall Summary

The project has made significant progress against the milestones set for the third quarter of implementation, Fiscal Year 2015, Quarter 4. During this quarter a total of 18,414 households (90,229 beneficiaries) received two or more cash transfers in the amount of \$42 under Objective 1, while 4,126 farming households received agricultural inputs through participation in agricultural inputs trade fairs held in various districts of EREL's three target counties under Objective 2. Local partners have also continued working with community leaders to identify households that meet EREL's criteria. During the quarter, an additional 5,877 households have been provisionally identified, who will receive cash transfers during 2016 if Mercy Corps' requested cost modification is approved. Given an extension of the program and successful verification that these households meet vulnerability criteria, EREL will have identified 81 percent of the beneficiaries to be reached during this program – 24,291 households, or 118,054 individual beneficiaries.

During the quarter, the team conducted post-distribution monitoring and collected information to gain an understanding of how households are diversifying their diets in the three counties. The post distribution findings indicate that cash transfers have provided tremendous help to improve both the food situation amongst households and have enabled households to access services such as health and education. Market surveys conducted during the quarter indicated that there were changes in the prices of some commodities. However, the changes were attributed to fluctuation in the exchange rate between the United States Dollars (USD) and Liberian Dollar (LRD), which also influences the cost of local transportation and hence, prices of commodities. There is no indication that the injection of cash into the local economy has resulted in any market disturbances. We will continue to monitor the situation.

This quarter, EREL also hosted a visit from four FFP staff, three from Washington DC and one from the Liberia mission. The team conducted site visits to assess EREL project performance to date and gather information on the evolving operational environment and state of food security in Liberia. Findings included a recommendation for greater capacity building and mentoring of local implementing partners and feedback to strengthen EREL's market monitoring. FFP noted that there was no evidence that EREL cash distribution was having a negative impact on food availability or prices, that the program strategy was well aligned with Government of Liberia and USAID priorities and that cash transfers were being used by beneficiaries to purchase food and recover their livelihoods. Overall, they stated "the TDY team

is satisfied with the performance to date of the EREL project.”¹ Mercy Corps found this visit helpful and has acted upon FFP recommendations.

B. Security Context, Situation Overview and Operational Summary

After a short outbreak of Ebola in June and July, the country was declared Ebola-free once more on September 3, 2015. In the region, Guinea and Sierra Leone have experienced a decrease in EVD cases. While a low level of transmissions continues in Guinea, Sierra Leone is due to be declared Ebola-free November 8th.if no new cases arise.

During the quarter under review, no security issues of concern occurred in the three EREL operational counties. Additionally, there were no major security concerns reported in the rest of the country that would affect the operations of the EREL project.

III. Operations

Mercy Corps continues to fully operate its country office in Monrovia and the EREL team field office in Voinjama, the capital of Lofa County. The EREL Monrovia-based team oversees operations in Montserrado and Margibi Counties.

IV. Coordination

A. National-level coordination

Mercy Corps continues its active participation in various coordination meetings around cash transfer programming and food security. These include the UN’s Early Recovery Cluster, the Cash Transfer Technical Working Group, and the Food Security Cluster, as well as the coordination meetings for emergency and developmental food security grantees hosted by USAID.

The key outcomes of coordination meetings during the quarter include sharing experience and learning from projects implemented throughout the country to improve programming; sharing information on program achievements; and agreements on harmonization and standardization of approaches to ensure effectiveness and avoid duplication of activities in same communities by agencies. During this quarter, the Food Security Cluster shared the result of the Liberia Food Security Assessment, to which Mercy Corps contributed, which explored how the Ebola outbreak negatively impacted food security for the most vulnerable households. The Cash Transfer Working Group offered the opportunity for presentations on new approaches for money transfer, data gathering and other means of using technology to achieve better results.

B. County-level coordination

Mercy Corps and the EREL implementing partners participated in a number of coordination meetings at the county level. In Margibi County, the team attends the social mobilization and the special tasks meetings. Both meetings address coordination amongst partners in relation to development and humanitarian interventions in the county. In Lofa County, the team attends the technical meeting, the partners/coordination meeting, the agriculture sector meeting, and the livelihoods and food security meeting. The discussions include deliberations on key achievements, coordination/operational challenges, and ways to remove challenges and improve coordination. Key coordination meetings are also attended in Montserrado, both by Mercy Corps and its implementing partner.

¹ Trip Report, FFP Ebola EFSP Site Monitoring, Liberia – Mercy Corps; August 9-19, 2015.

V. Program Activities

Objective 1: Most affected populations in Montserrado, Margibi and Lofa have access to enough food.

Indicator 1.1: # of recipients of cash transfers

The Economic Recovery from Ebola for Liberia (EREL) project is transferring cash in two phases. Phase I cash transfer targets about 18,000 households with three tranches of \$42 each, while Phase II (which will occur if Mercy Corps’ cash modification request is granted) will provide those same households with a second cycle of payments and extend cash transfer to another 12,000 households during the 2016 lean season. Phase I cash transfers were first piloted in May 2015 and have been fully implemented since June 2015. The project initially planned to achieve the two phases in 2015. The planned project benchmark was constrained by a number of factors (mentioned in previous reports) and the EREL program made an official request to FFP for the extension of cash transfers until 2016. As part of the request, Mercy Corps estimated it would support a total of 17,000 households with three months of tranches by the end of 2015. However, during the quarter, the project included an additional 1,414 due to the level of food insecurity in the target areas. During the quarter a total of 18,414 households (90,229 beneficiaries) directly received cash through the EREL project. Female heads of household constituted nearly three quarters (72%) of recipient households while males heads of households were 28%. Amongst the 18,414 households, 1,426 of them completed the third tranche/cycle of distribution while the remaining 16,988 household have received two out of the three tranches..

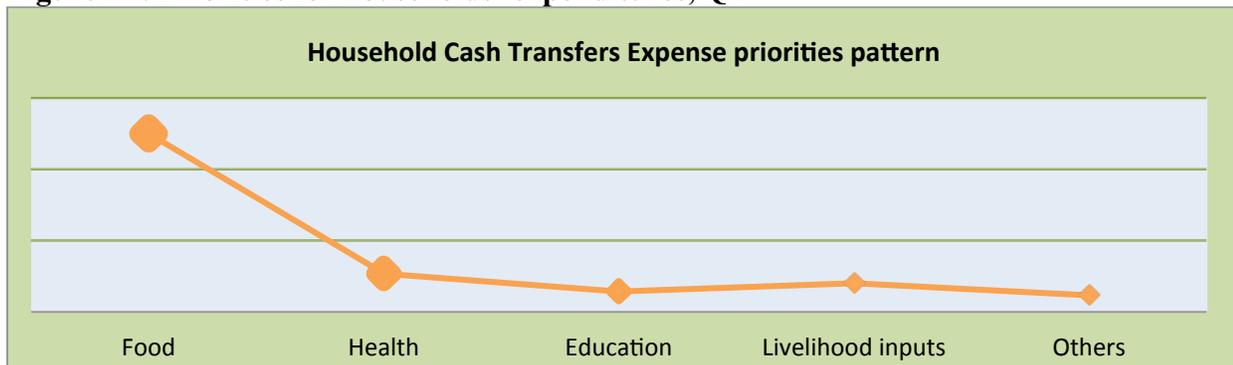
Indicator 1.2: Total value of cash transfers

The EREL Program has disbursed a total amount of 1,606, 668 USD.

Indicator 1.3: Usage of cash transfers

The EREL Program conducted Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM) amongst cash recipients to understand how they are using the assistance received. The findings revealed that 63% of the cash received by beneficiaries was spent on food. The level of expenditure on food is an indication that households are maximizing cash transfers to increase their food access and at the same making future investments. The result further revealed that expenditure on health constituted more than a tenth (13.6%) of the cash transferred to households. Respondent households stated they invested a tenth (10%) of their cash transfers in small businesses and purchase of agricultural inputs. Additionally, recipient households spent 7% of the cash they received on children’s education. The remainder 13.4% of the cash has been spent on debt payments , etc.

Figure IX: Priorities for households’ expenditures, Q4



The PDM findings revealed that a majority of households rely on agriculture for livelihoods. More than two-thirds of (67%) from the three counties stated agriculture as the main source of income; 4% of households combine agriculture and petty trade to access income; 2.7 % of HH are engaged in agriculture and contract labor to access income; 1.5% engaged in agriculture and wild food collection (wild nuts, fruits, roots, tubers, etc.);7% of households said they are engaged only in petty trade as source of income; while 8% said they are engaged only in contract labor; and the remainder 9.8% said that their incomes come from other sources including begging, remittances, etc.

Indicator 1.4: Prevalence of Moderate or Severe Hunger/Household Dietary Diversity Score

Findings of a follow-up Household Dietary Diversity survey showed a progression in the diversification of diets amongst households. The survey showed a decrease in the number of households with low dietary diversity (7%) compared to 23% during the baseline period. The survey also revealed that the number of households consuming more than six food groups has increased from 24% to 65%; while the remaining 28% consumed foods from more than 7 groups.

Number of Meals per day

Number of meals consumed by households formed an integral part of the Post Distribution Monitoring. According to an economic impact assessment conducted by Mercy Corps in October 2014 in Lofa, Monrovia and Nimba, vulnerable households were reducing the amount of food consumed at each meal (mentioned by over 90% of households interviewed), purchasing lower quality or less expensive food, and eating fewer meals (mentioned by 90% and 85% respectively). An understanding of the number of meals consumed typically by household is of interest to the EREL program, because they are also determinants of the level of food security at household level. Two sets of data on number of meals were collected each category of beneficiaries- one set for children and another set for adults.

The findings revealed that 19.7% of children and 21.7% of adults eat one meal daily and more than Two-thirds of children (68%) and of adults (69%) consume two meals per day, while 10.6% of children and 8.3% of adults eat three meals daily. Few households mentioned they consume four meals per day.

Contribution of Cash Transfers to Households' Wellbeing

In relations to the contribution of cash transfers to households' wellbeing, the PDM findings showed that households were appreciative of the cash transfers and stated that they are having immediate impact in their lives. Households stated that the cash received has improved access to food; while 8% stated that the cash transfers have created access to both food and health. By enabling households to buy sufficient food, cash transfers have also freed up other resources to enable children to go to school.

Objective 2: Most affected farmers in Montserrado, Margibi and Lofa are able to maintain their production with improved inputs

Indicator 2.1: # of recipients of input vouchers

Indicator 2.2: Total value of input vouchers

Indicator 2.3: % of vouchers redeemed

During the quarter under review, several agricultural input trade fairs were conducted in the three counties. A total of 4,126 households participated in agricultural input trade fairs in Montserrado, Margibi, and Lofa counties. Each farming household received four vouchers valued at \$10 USD each. Female heads of household constituted 63% of the agricultural input beneficiaries. The highest number

of agricultural input beneficiaries during the quarter was from Lofa County, where 3,228 households (1,992 female heads of household and 1,236 male heads of households) received vouchers and exchanged them for agricultural inputs. A total of 580 households (377 female heads of household and 203 male heads of households) from Margibi County and 318 households (230 female heads of household and 88 male heads of household) in Montserrado County received vouchers. The total number of vouchers distributed during Quarter 4 was 16,504, valued at \$165,040. USD. All vouchers (100%) were distributed by EREL and received by beneficiaries were redeemed by vendors in exchange for agricultural inputs including machetes (cutlasses), axes, seed rice, vegetable seeds, shovels and watering cans. A total of 200 groups of farmers were organized to select lead farmers to participate in Training of Trainers sessions. The lead farmers receive training on production, harvest and post-harvest technologies for various crops including cereal, vegetables, and root crops. The lead farmers will replicate the training to members of their groups.

III. Challenges and Lessons Learned

The following are the main challenges encountered during Quarter 4:

1. **Weather:** The period under review was the peak of the rainy season in Liberia. Heavy rainfalls exacerbated the conditions of the already bad roads and bridges in the project locations. The team often took longer to get to distribution points than normal. To avoid reaching the distribution center late, the team often went a day prior to the distribution date and in most cases was challenged by floods, which also impeded transport vehicle.
2. **Delayed or postponed payments:** During the quarter, cash distributions were often delayed in the three counties because Ecobank did not disburse cash on time to Mercy Corps Finance team for packaging and subsequent distribution to beneficiaries. This often delayed distribution by 2-3 weeks. While Mercy Corps began directly distributing cash to beneficiaries in August 2015, the money must still be obtained from Ecobank. Ecobank also routinely provides small bills, which take a long time to package (up to one week). To counter the delay or postponement of distribution, the team resolved to submit cash request to Ecobank three to four weeks prior to the distribution period. However, the situation has not significantly change in spite of the early submission of cash request.
3. **Distribution currency:** The shift in delivering the Liberian Dollar (LRD) to beneficiaries instead of USD was a good decision so as to minimize losses incur by beneficiaries when exchanging from USD to Liberian Dollar. However, the transition required additional resources (time, personnel, security, etc.). To maximize time and resources, additional staff were hired, assigned to counting, packaging, and distribution of cash.

VI. Conclusion

Despite the weather and road challenges, project activities were successfully implemented during the quarter. The project successfully distributed cash to 18,414 beneficiary households. Additionally, cash transfers are assisting households to recover from the shocks of EVD by enabling them to access food and other basic services such as health. Small holder farmers who received agricultural inputs informed EREL field staff that the inputs have helped them restart agricultural activities. Some of the farmers have begun harvesting their crops.

Plans for Next Quarter, include: Conclusion of Phase I distribution/transfers; conclusion of Phase I agricultural input fairs; iinal Post-distribution monitoring for Phase I; market monitoring on key commodities; participation in coordination meetings.

- Final Household Dietary Diversity (HDD) and Household Hunger Scale (HHS) data collection for Phase I