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FY17 Q1 Quarterly Report

October – December 2016

“Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism” – VRAI Program

2016 – 2017

I. Executive Summary :

The phenomenon of violent extremism has become a major concern in West Africa and is evolving rapidly and with increasing complexity. In addition, the affiliation and the structure of violent extremist groups in the Sahel are complicated and ever changing. The breadth and depth of interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE) are likewise expanding and evolving; however a key gap remains in the availability of concrete tools and processes to identify at-risk individuals and communities who may succumb to the lure of violent extremism.

In order to fill this gap, since September 2017, Mercy Corps has been implementing, the *Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism (VRAI)* program, funded by USAID. This program is designed to promote peace and stability in West Africa through the application and use of innovative and adaptable tools that identify community vulnerabilities and resilience capacities to inform effective CVE program interventions. It is implemented with local partners Karkara (in Niger) and the Center for Democratic Governance (CDG in Burkina Faso).

The first quarter of the program (September – December 2016), saw the completion of the following activities:

- Finalized, and USAID validated, various key program documents including:
 - ✓ A detailed program work plan and narrative;
 - ✓ A Branding and Marking plan (approval pending);
 - ✓ A Monitoring and Evaluation plan;
- Conducted a security assessment in all three regions in which VRAI will be implemented;
- Completed a rapid scan of existing studies and research on CVE;
- Held informational meetings with local and national authorities, such as the Interior Ministry, Haute Autorite pour le Consolidation de la Paix (HACP), mayors in Diffa, religious and traditional leaders;
- Held a program kick-off meeting with more than 30 stakeholders in Niger and Burkina Faso and established a program steering committee.

II. Program Overview

The threat of violent extremism in West Africa is increasing, however security, development and peacebuilding actors lack consensus on effective approaches to CVE and to target communities most at risk of engagement in violent extremism (VE). Existing VE groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in northern Mali and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) in southern Mali, are simultaneously moving into new territory, including within the borders of Niger and Burkina Faso.

The VRAI program is targeting three regions in Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as individual communes as shown in the table below:

Table 1: VRAI's Areas of Intervention

Country	Region	Commune	Status
Niger	Diffa	Diffa	<i>Shares a border with northern Niger and Chad along the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram is most active. Semi-regular attacks in Diffa by Boko Haram, large numbers of IDPs and refugees/returnees from Nigeria. Many communities are believed to be susceptible to recruitment by Boko Haram.</i>
		Mainé Soroa	
	Tillabéri	Banibangou	<i>Shares border with Mali to the north and Mali-based extremist groups are active in the region and are believed to be recruiting among potentially disaffected local populations.</i>
		Tondikuindi	
		Inatès	
	Burkina Faso	Sahel - Oudalan	Gorom Gorom

The VRAI program aims (over the 12 months of implementation) to adapt and refine a set of tools to examine the risk factors, vulnerabilities, and resilience capacities, which influence individual and community likelihood of engaging with, and accepting VE. The tool development process will engage a mix of academic, practitioners and Nigerien and Burkinabe regional and community stakeholders, including the West Africa USAID office. This wide collaboration will ensure our design is based on the most recent research and lessons learned and so the tools can be tailored to the context, while remaining replicable.

To reach the overall goal described above, the program will first develop and pilot a set of gender sensitive tools that measure the vulnerabilities of communities to VE groups. Secondly, the program will establish feedback loops and disseminate learning related to the tools and the tool development process to ensure uptake and usage by relevant actors. This will increase the knowledge of local, national and international stakeholders who will benefit from capacity building to utilize the tools in future programs and understand better about community risk factors.

III. Program activities

3.1. Program achievements during the reporting period

Description of Activities	Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description
	Achieved	Ongoing	No	
Program start-up activities				
Update and approval of the activities work plan, including workplan narrative.	X			Annual work plan approved by USAID
Elaboration and approval of the Branding and Marking plan	X			VRAI Branding and Marking plan completed, pending approval from USAID
Signature of sub-agreements with local partners		X		- Sub-award agreement signed with Karkara - Signature of the agreement with CDG early next quarter (January 2017)
Security assessment in target zones (Diffa)	X			Assessment carried out by Mercy Corps' national and regional

Description of Activities	Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description	
	Achieved	Ongoing	No		
& Tillaberi in Niger and the Sahel region in Burkina)				security advisors (final report available)	
Recruitment of a research consultant		X		After a call for applications, several potential candidates were retained. Interviews will take place in early 2017, and Mercy Corps will select a consultant by mid-January.	
Program kick off meeting	X			The kick off meeting was held in December 2016, in the presence of the USAID Representative in Niger and several key government figures.	
Baseline assessment			X	Planned to be done in Quarter 1, the baseline has been rescheduled for the first half of January 2017, mainly based on the availability of key stakeholders.	
Objective 1: Develop and pilot a set of gender sensitive tools that measure the vulnerabilities of communities to VE groups					
A1.1	Conduct a rapid scan of existing CVE approaches, frameworks and methodologies	X			A desk review of existing CVE approaches, frameworks and methodologies has been done and a report has been issued. This report will be shared with USAID early next quarter (January 2017).
A1.2	Engage key state, traditional, and civil society stakeholders in consultations and finalize the Village Selection Tool (VST)		X		Based on the desk review, a set of VE risk factors has been produced and shared with and reviewed by stakeholders during the first steering committee meeting of the project. The village selection tool (VST) will be validated with local stakeholders early next quarter (January 2017) in Diffa.
A1.3	Use the VST tool to rank vulnerable villages in selected regions			X	For the Diffa region, this selection is planned for January 2017, following stakeholders' validation of the village selection tool.
A1.4	Work with local partners to adapt the tools			X	This work is planned during the second quarter throughout the process of development, testing and refinement of tools.
A1.5	Validate the VST with selected communities			X	To be carried out in Diffa in February-March 2017.
A1.6	Hold presentations with key stakeholders to adjust tools			X	This work is planned during the second quarter following the initial test of the tool.
A1.7	Revise tools based on community input and conduct two more iterations			X	This work is planned during the second half of the program.
Objective 2: Establish feedback loops and disseminate learning related to the tools and the tool development process to ensure uptake and usage by relevant actors					
A2.1	Establish participatory feedback mechanisms within communities			X	To be carried out following an initial test of the tool.
A2.2	Distill gender dynamics and develop recommendations for gender sensitive application of the tools.			X	This work will be done during the month of February just after the development of tools.
A2.3	Establish two national learning exchanges fora to share experiences, challenges and insight on VRAI's approach.			X	Learning exchanges will take place in the last quarter of the project.
A2.4	Organize two training sessions for national and regional USAID staff, government and civil society actors, and community leaders			X	Training sessions will take place in the last quarter of the project.

3.2. Program activities narrative

Program start-up activities

In Quarter 1, the program took the necessary steps for an efficient start-up of activities, including putting in place the VRAI team (bring on board the Program Manager), signing a sub-agreement with its Niger-based partner, meeting with relevant national and local stakeholders in Niger and Burkina Faso, conducting a security assessment, and holding a kick-off workshop. Mercy Corps followed internal management standards for all activities, taking into account the logistical, financial, and administrative aspects of implementation. Specific activities included:

- Development of key program documents: According to its agreement with USAID, the VRAI team produced several documents, including the following:
 - ✓ **Update of the Annual work plan:** The initial work plan submitted at the proposal stage was updated with a comprehensive narrative. It was approved by USAID before to start-up of activities;
 - ✓ **The Branding Strategy and Marking plan (BS&MP):** The main objective of this document is to create a blueprint for the regular acknowledgement of USAID as the project funding source and to show program identity. The final version submitted by Mercy Corps is in the process of being approved by USAID. It takes into account the “sensitivity” of violent extremism at local level, in order to minimize the risks of threats to the team, communities, USAID and the partners who are part of implementation;
 - ✓ **The Monitoring and Evaluation Plan:** This Activities Monitoring and Evaluation Plan (AMEP), including a narrative, aims to provide a description of how Mercy Corps and its implementing partners will monitor and evaluate the activities of the VRAI program. VRAI has defined output, outcome, and impact indicators to monitor performance using feedback loops and participatory evaluative methods to engage all stakeholders. This AMEP has been approved by USAID;
 - ✓ **The security assessment in the project area:** This rapid assessment was carried out in November 1-3, 2016 by Mercy Corps Niger team, supported by our Regional Security Advisor and our local partners Karkara and CDG. The assessment reflects an in-depth analysis of the security situation at the time of reporting, while the Niger Security Management Team will carry out periodical risk assessments to re-evaluate the changing security environment and accordingly adjust Mercy Corps’ posture and prevention and mitigation of security risks. Particularly in Diffa, the overall risk has generally decreased, but nonetheless remains elevated along the immediate border with Nigeria.
 - ✓ **Recruitment of a research consultant:** Mercy Corps issued a call for applications for a local research consultant to assist the program in the development of context-approach research tools and the conduct of data collection in its three target regions. It received several compelling proposals and has short-listed a handful of candidates. Candidates will be interviewed in early January and a consultant selected by the middle of the month.

Informational meetings with local and national authorities

- ***At the Niger national level:*** VRAI undertook several meetings with key government institutions to introduce the project and its objectives in an effort to gain official approval and support. Following these meetings, both national-level institutions are currently members of the project's steering committee:
 - VRAI's Program Manager met with the Secretary General of the HACP on November 15, 2016 and on December 21, 2016; the program manager (PM) and Mercy Corps' Country Director met with the HACP's President;
 - The PM met also with the Director of the General Directorate of Religious and Customary Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior on November 17, 2016;
 - In addition, an official information letter on the VRAI project was sent to the State Minister of the Interior, Decentralization, Public Security and Religious and Customary Affairs of Niger on November 16, 2016. A meeting is expected early next quarter;
- ***At the regional level:*** Following national level meetings, VRAI's PM was in Diffa from November 21-25, 2016 to present the project to relevant local and regional authorities (including mayors, traditional and religious leaders, others NGOs, military counterparts etc.). All stakeholders were supportive of the aims of the project and committed to participating actively in and supporting the project's implementation to the greatest extent possible.

The same process of information is planned for the Tillaberi region of Niger and Sahel region of Burkina Faso during the next quarter, before beginning activities there in Quarter 3.



VRAI PM with religious leaders at Mainé Soroa, Diffa



VRAI PM with the Mayor of Mainé Soroa commune, Diffa

National kick off meeting and steering committee

An official national kick-off workshop for the program took place in Niamey on December 15, 2016. It was co-chaired by the Secretary General of the HACP, the Representative of the Minister of the Interior, the Representative of USAID in Niger, and Mercy Corps' Country Director. More than 30 key stakeholders attended this workshop, including representatives and

program staff from the project's local partners (Karkara and CDG), representatives of the Universities of Niamey and Diffa, representatives of the Islamic Council of Niger, other NGOs active in preventing violent extremism (CARE, Equal Access, etc.) in Niger, and mayors of the six communes targeted by the project (Diffa, Maine-Soroa, Banibangou, Inatès, Tondikuindi and Gorom Gorom).

Following the kick off workshop, which took up the first half of the day, a first meeting of the project steering committee took place. The committee includes representatives from the stakeholders listed above and decided to meet on a semi-annual basis (twice more over the course of the project). The committee will contribute to the validation of tools after the test in Diffa and provide essential feedback for a final validation near the close of the project.



Co-chairs of the kick off meeting, with USAID Niger's representative on the left



View of participants during the kick off meeting

Rapid scan of existing CVE approaches, frameworks and methodologies

Mercy Corps conducted a rapid scan/document review of key CVE documents, including three CVE specific literature reviews, as well as research on participation in violence, to pull out common drivers that can lead to support for violent extremist groups and/or individuals leaving their community to join violent extremist organizations (VEOs). The rapid scan also examined factors (resilience capacities) that prevent individuals from supporting these groups or engaging in violence in spite of the presence of VEOs in and around their communities. It is shared in Annex 1 to this report (and has been shared with USAID West Africa/AOR).

Engage key state, traditional, and civil society stakeholders in consultations and finalize the Village Selection Tool (VST)

Based on the desk review, a set of risk factors to violent extremism (adapted to the context of Niger and Burkina Faso) has been produced and shared with the steering committee and other key stakeholders and then discussed over the course of the first meeting of the committee. Once all input has been gathered, a semi-final version of the Village Selection Tool (VST) will be refined with the input of local stakeholders in Diffa, and the tool will be used with those same stakeholders to select an initial group of 10 villages in which to test the tool in Quarter 2.

Participation to different workshops

The VRAI PM attended two important workshops on violent extremism during the reporting period:

- An international workshop on “The Internet and Violent Radicalization” from October 30 to November 02, 2016 in Montreal, Québec. This conference was organized by UNESCO and the Government of Québec; and
- A conference on “radicalization and violent extremism” for Sahel G5 countries that took place in Niamey on December 8-10, 2016.

These workshops were opportunities to share Mercy Corps’ experiences with CVE, specifically through the VRAI project, as well as to learn about other CVE projects and initiatives in the region and world.

IV. Challenges

The main challenges encountered by the program during this reporting period included:

- Slight delay in signing the agreements with the local partners due to negotiations;
- Difficulties to access and discuss with specific groups such as former combatants who are in prison: The program is taking action with the national authorities to reach key informants in prisons;
- The security situation limited the movement of staff, particularly in Diffa. The program team is monitoring this closely with the Armed Forces to reach the toughest areas.

V. Next steps

For the next quarter, the program will consolidate project start-up activities and ensure that other activities are completed on time in conformity with the annual work plan. The following activities will be implemented in Q2 (see table below, giving the details of activities planned from January to March 2017):

Activities	Period			Where	Lead
	January	February	March		
Objective 1: Develop and pilot a set of gender sensitive tools that measure the vulnerabilities of communities to VE groups					
Result 1.1: A set of adaptable and gender sensitive tools are developed and used					
Recruitment of a research consultant	X			Niamey	MC
VRAI staff and enumerator training on research tools and methodology	X			Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant
Refinement of Village Selection Tool with stakeholders in Diffa	X			Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant
VST Exercise with stakeholders in Diffa to select villages	X			Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant

Validation workshop for selected villages with stakeholders in Diffa	X			Diffa	MC and Karkara
Interviews with ex-combatants and their families	X	X		Diffa	MC and Karkara
VRAI staff and enumerators trained on Do No Harm (DNH) analysis	X			Diffa	MC and Karkara
DNH analysis in the 10 selected villages		X		Diffa	MC and Karkara
Elaboration of gender sensitive tools for data collection, including population sampling for surveys	X			Niamey	Mercy, Karkara, consultant
Tools pre-test in a control village		X		Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant
Data collection and analysis		X	X	Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant
Preliminary results validated at regional (Diffa) and national level with steering committee			X	Diffa	MC, Karkara, consultant, steering committee
Objective 2: Establish feedback loops and disseminate learning related to the tools and the tool development process to ensure uptake and usage by relevant actors					
Establishment of complaints and feedback committees at village level			X		MC and Karkara