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**Quarterly Report
October – December 2016**

IRTOUN “Rise Again”

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)



1. Executive Summary

Since February 2014, Mercy Corps has implemented the Irtoun (“Rise Again”) program, with a goal to enhance food security and economic resilience of communities recovering from the effects of conflict in northern Mali. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Food for Peace (FFP) and Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) during its first two and a half years, the program offered an integrated package of assistance to farmers and pastoralists to facilitate the recovery of their productive livelihoods and improve their ability to withstand shocks and stresses. Following a cost modification by USAID/OFDA in September of 2016, Irtoun II extends these interventions to new geographic areas while implementing additional interventions to address the roots of conflict and the needs of conflict-affected households, as well as the particular needs of youth.

During the reporting period, the program achieved the following:

Agriculture and Food Security

- Orientation of beneficiaries to prepare for the coming gardening season;
- Validation and updating of lists of old and new beneficiaries for seed voucher distribution;
- Review and calculation of seed needs based on beneficiary location and land availability;
- Exchange with suppliers to assess existing potato seed stocks, undertake origin and quality assessments;
- Discussion with agricultural extension service providers to discuss upcoming fodder shortages;
- Met with livestock extension services to discuss strategies for engagement and monitoring of CAHWs;
- Retraining on project management and M&E tools used by program teams in the field;
- Review of fodder stocks within communities targeted under Irtoun I;
- Community meetings and sensitization activities on the harvest and stocking of fodder; and
- Market assessment of animal feed availability.

Economic Recovery and Market Systems

- Monitoring of established village savings and loan associations (VSLA);
- Monitoring of VSLA village agents; and
- Startup activities for Irtoun II.

Table: Award-Level Beneficiaries

Total beneficiaries targeted	49 200 beneficiaries (7 029 households)
Total beneficiaries reached this quarter	51 800 beneficiaries ¹ (7 400 households)
Total cumulative number of beneficiaries reached for life of program	105 406 beneficiaries ¹ (15 058 households)

<u>Sector #1</u>	Objective 1: Vulnerable households in Northern Mali recover productive agricultural livelihoods
Agriculture & Food Security	
Beneficiaries Targeted for Irtoun II Cost Modification	39 600 beneficiaries (6 600 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	51 660 beneficiaries (7 380 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached (for cost modification)	51 660 beneficiaries (7 380 households)
<u>Sector #2</u>	Objective 2: Vulnerable households increase incomes by engaging in local markets
Economic Recovery & Market Systems	

Beneficiaries Targeted for Irtoun II Cost Modification	15 600 individuals (2 600 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	140 beneficiaries (20 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	140 beneficiaries (20 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.

¹Indirect 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

Building on the success of Irtoun I, the Irtoun II cost modification seeks to scale up successful interventions carried out in Ansongo circle to Timbuktu and Gourma Rharous circles of the Timbuktu region of northern Mali. The program is designed to enhance food security, reduce the risk of conflict and build the resilience of conflict-affected households. Specifically, Irtoun II is working in the 20 communities covered by Irtoun I, continuing to support agricultural and VSLA groups, and is expanding to 45 additional multi-ethnic, marginalized communities across the three target circles to strengthen local agricultural and livestock production capacity and restore livelihoods. The program's two interconnected objectives are:

- 1) **Vulnerable households in northern Mali recover productive agricultural livelihoods.** Immediate household needs are addressed through cash-for-work (CfW) activities, as well as animal feed vouchers enabling pastoralists to acquire fodder during the animal lean season to reduce animal losses. Irtoun II also facilitates the recovery of gardening activities to enable farmers – particularly women – to expand their production and enhance links to local markets. The program addresses the needs of pastoralists for improved fodder and healthcare services for their livestock, while promoting behavior change around fodder conservation and planning. CfW projects will support the recovery of livelihoods and enhance natural resource management by helping communities rehabilitate grazing land, irrigation systems and agricultural infrastructure degraded during the conflict.
- 2) **Vulnerable households increase incomes by engaging in local markets.** Additionally, Irtoun assists micro-entrepreneurs affected by insecurity to resume their small businesses through entrepreneurship training and business support cash transfers, and supports youth to build employability skills and strengthen relationships with employers through apprenticeships. All Irtoun II 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, enhanced savings practices and opportunities to access credit to support economic growth and livelihood diversification.

Cross-cutting social cohesion and conflict resolution activities will support activities under the two objectives, enhancing the shared management of natural resources and reducing local conflict, particularly between farmers and herders. In each community targeted by the program, community management and surveillance committees will be established to promote peaceful co-existence and equitable management of community natural resources. Mercy Corps will also use cash-for-work to bring together community members from across ethnic lines to build linkages, manage community resources and support peaceful coexistence by all groups.

3. Contextual Update

Agriculture

Similar to last quarter, the food security situation during this quarter was characterized by a decrease in household revenue and an increase in the price of food commodities in local markets. The harvest this year was sub-optimal, a fact confirmed by all actors involved including the administration,

technical services, the communities and the humanitarian sector, meaning households have less cash on hand and food stocks are lower than usual. The need for both food and fodder has been on the rise within several communities. Free and controlled flooded rice crops are in different states of maturation according to the swelling and receding of the Niger River.

Because the harvest season is over, markets are more dependent on imported products. Food prices are on the rise and becoming less accessible to vulnerable households. One example is domestic rice, the staple food for Malians living in the northern part of the country. Domestic rice is currently being sold in the market at a price of 450-500 FCFA per kilo, in contrast to the same period during previous years, when the price was closer to 300-350 FCFA per kilo. As a result, poor households are experiencing reduced access to food, which will exacerbate hunger as Malians enter the lean season.

Pastoral Activities

As regards the health of animal stock in the zones of intervention, extension services continue to note the appearance of lumpy skin disease among cattle and the presence of Rift Valley sickness along the Niger border, causing unease among cattle herders. In Ansongo Circle, the vaccination of livestock against contagious bovine pleuropneumonia and the sheep and goat plague is underway by Irtoun-supported community animal health workers (CAHWs) using vaccines donated by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC).

In different areas, herds are beginning to return valley for salt cure and the animal size ranged from good to satisfactory in October. Following this, the herds returned to the large pastures in the dry zone and the size of animals has further increased. Markets are well stocked with animals and prices are relatively affordable but are more profitable for buyers than for livestock farmers.

Political Situation

At the national level, the political situation this quarter was marked by the organization of communal elections throughout the country. Unfortunately, elections were unable to take place in around 50 communes because of the security situation in the regions of Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal and Ménaka. In the three circles where the program is intervening, the elections did not take place in the communes of Tessit and Talataye (Ansongo Circle), and in Hamzakoma in the commune of Seréré (Gourma Rharous Circle). The principal reason was the opposition of armed groups to the elections in these areas.

The implementation of the Peace Accord made some notable progress with the nomination of members of the interim authorities in the regions of Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Timbuktu, and Taoudéni, and the startup of mixed patrols.

The preparations for the France-Africa summit anticipated at the beginning of January in Bamako are creating great enthusiasm among members of the varying political parties.

Security

The security situation remains troubling in the intervention zones and humanitarian actors have been asked to adapt to the evolving needs while practicing more caution in the field. This quarter was marked by renewed attacks by jihadist groups in the northern regions of Mali, the worst of which have occurred in Gao, as well as on the border areas between Mali and Niger and Mali and Burkina Faso. Everywhere, a new form of banditry is emerging, consisting of nocturnal break-ins of households and the theft of money and goods, as well as violence towards inhabitants.

4. Performance Summary

Sector #1 Agriculture & Food Security	Vulnerable households in Northern Mali recover productive agricultural livelihoods
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Beneficiaries Targeted	Irtoun II: 39 600 beneficiaries (6 600 households)	Budget:	Irtoun II: \$1 628 380	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 51 660 beneficiaries (7 380 households)	Cumulative for cost extension: 51 660 beneficiaries (7 380 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo Circle; Ansongo, Bourra, Tin Hama, Tessit, Outtagouna communes Timbuktu Region of Northern Mali, Timbuktu Circle; Bourem Inaly, Alafia and Lafia communes; Timbuktu Region of Northern Mali: Gourma Rharous Circle; Serere, Banikane, and Rharous 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	40 000	42,247	In progress
Indicator 1.1.2: Number of people benefiting from livestock activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	1 400	837	In progress
	Female: 0	1 600	588	In progress
Indicator 1.1.3: Number of veterinary interventions (e.g. treatments, vaccinations)	0	Irtoun II: 40 000	42,247	In progress
Indicator 1.1.4: Number of animals treated	0	Irtoun II: 40 000	42,247	In progress
Indicator 1.1.5: Number of hectares of pastureland rehabilitated through cash-for-work interventions	0	Irtoun II: 200 ha	0	In progress
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	720	1 210	In progress
	Female: 0	2 880	4 477	In progress
# of hectares under improved technologies or management practices as a result of USG assistance	0	Irtoun II: TBD	0	In progress
# of farmers and others who have applied	Male: 0	Irtoun II: 720	0	In progress

improved technologies or management practices as a result of USG assistance	Female: 0	Irtoun II: 2 880	0	In progress
# of individuals who have received project supported short-term agricultural sector productivity or food security training (including through agricultural extension services)	Male: 0	Irtoun II: 720	968	In progress
	Female: 0	Irtoun II: 2 880	3 582	In progress
Sector #2 Economic Recovery & Market Systems	Objective 2: Vulnerable households increase incomes by engaging in local markets			
Beneficiaries Targeted	Irtoun II: 15 600 beneficiaries (2 600 households)	Budget:	Irtoun II: \$ 571 621	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 140 beneficiaries (20 households)	Cumulative for cost extension: 140 beneficiaries (20 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo Circle; Ansongo, Bourra, Tin Hama, Tessit, Outtagouna communes Timbuktu Region of Northern Mali, Timbuktu Circle; Bourem Inaly, Alafia and Lafia communes; Timbuktu Region of Northern Mali: Gourma Rharous Circle; Serere, Banikane, and Rharous 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	Irtoun II: 120	0	March 2017
	Female: 0	Irtoun II: 180	0	March 2017
Indicator 2.1.2: Percent of beneficiaries reporting their livelihoods restored within three to six months after receiving support	N/A	80%	N/A	September 2017
Indicator 2.1.3: Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	\$0	Irtoun II: \$75 000	0	May 2017
Sub-Sector 2.2: New Livelihoods Development				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.2.1: Number of people assisted through new livelihoods activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	Irtoun II: 120	0	June 2017
	Female: 0	Irtoun II: 180	0	June 2017
Indicator 2.2.2: Number	0	Irtoun II: 75	0	June 2017

of new MSEs started				
Indicator 2.2.3: Percent of people, by sex, continuing in their new livelihoods by program completion	Male: N/A	Irtoun II: 60 %	N/A	June 2017
	Female: N/A	Irtoun II: 60 %	N/A	June 2017
Indicator 2.1.3: Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	\$0	Irtoun II: \$54 000	0	June 2017
Sub-Sector 2.2 : Microfinance				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.3.1: 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	Irtoun II: 600	TBD	December 2016
	Female: 0	Irtoun II: 1 400	TBD	December 2016
Indicator 2.3.2: Percentage of financial services accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	Irtoun II: 95%	N/A	June 2017

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 1,800 vulnerable households.

Through Irtoun II, unconditional commodity vouchers redeemable for animal fodder will help mitigate livestock losses for vulnerable agro-pastoralists and pastoralists in Ansongo, Gourma-Rharous and Timbuktu by providing a quick injection of support during the animal lean season. The preparatory activities for distribution of these vouchers is planned for next quarter and distribution will take place from April-May of 2017. The distribution period corresponds with the lean season during which pastoralists and agro-pastoralists would otherwise be likely to sell their productive assets to meet immediate needs.

This quarter, the team continued to monitor the activities of committees previously organized through Irtoun I to manage a community-level collective savings fund to be used to respond to fodder shortages during the lean season. In previous quarters in Ansongo, 14 committees out of 15 opened accounts that are now being used to loan money to community members in need of fodder. After an initial round of loans and repayments, the fund grew since last quarter, as demonstrated in the table below. The fund will be continuously replenished as community members pay back their individual loans. These activities support communities who initially received fodder vouchers and are aimed at

ensuring sustainability and developing a community-managed solution to reduce reliance on external assistance.

Table 1: Situation of community savings for fodder shortage relief, Ansongo

# Communes	# Villages	Initial funding mobilized (FCFA)	Amount of funds Sept-July 2016 (FCFA)	Amount of funds Oct – Dec 2016 (FCFA)
4	14	4 757 000	2 185 000 (in bank) 2 572 000 (loaned to members)	3 041 000 (in bank) 1 716 000 (loaned to members)

1.1.2 Capacity building of herders to improve livestock management and fodder harvesting practices

To complement emergency fodder access activities, under activity 1.1.2 Mercy Corps is planning trainings in targeted communities to improve livestock management practices through techniques that are adapted to the changing climate and increased pressures on natural resources. In addition, the team will work with eight local small-scale animal fodder producers to enhance local fodder availability, and continues to encourage the production and storage of fodder in communities assisted through Irtoun I. This quarter, Mercy Corps carried out initial site identification for the trainings in the newly targeted areas and continued monitoring and sensitizations at former Irtoun I sites in order to identify continued support needs and link them to Irtoun II activities as necessary.

Mercy Corps' November 2015 market assessment identified *bourgou* as a forage variety with high potential, due to its climate adaptability, local availability and high yields. The variety can be grown in more than 80% of the sites along the Niger River in the targeted circles. Over the course of this quarter, 37 sites in the targeted circles (8 villages in Timbuktu, 11 in Gourma Rharous and 18 in Ansongo) were selected for livestock management activities; altogether there is a potential in these communities of 308 hectares of land for *bourgou* cultivation. The team met with communities to negotiate access to land for the youth groups who will receive training next quarter. Eight youth groups will benefit from support next quarter. Through consultations with the communities and technical services, Mercy Corps identified selection criteria for the groups including: groups who have not previously benefitted from similar assistance, access to a communally held cultivation site of at least 10 hectares, and motivated and engaged group members.



Silo in Bazi Haoussa, Ansongo Commune (Photo : Mercy Corps)

In Ansongo, site visits were made to households to monitor uptake of the stock and fodder preservation practices to which beneficiaries were sensitized during previous quarters. The team observed the status of silos and drying areas. Silos were well-kept and regularly renovated by owners according to the guidelines they were taught during training conducted by Mercy Corps.

Over the course of the trimester, the teams carried out 36 informational sessions reaching 246 people, including 29 women (fodder management is typically a male occupation but Mercy Corps is seeking to engage women in order for them to better support stock management), on best practices related to

fodder harvest and storage. The table below indicates the number of participants per commune. The sessions took place on site, in rice fields and at rice threshing sites, at the same time as other program activities such as voucher distributions. Agro-pastoralists learned about using rice straw and aquatic grasses from rice paddies to feed their animals, as well as conservation practices to help the feed retain its nutritional value.

Table 2: Participants in fodder harvest and storage awareness-raising sessions

Communes (Ansongo Circle)	Number of sessions	Number of beneficiaries reached	
		Men	Women
Ansongo	8	57	2
Bara	2	12	0
Ouatagouna	12	69	7
Bourra	14	79	20
Total	36	217	29

1.1.3 Training and refresher training for 82 Community Animal Health Workers (CAHWs)

Under Irtoun I, Mercy Corps trained 30 Community Animal Health Workers to meet gaps in animal health services and supplement the work of the government veterinarians in the region. Under Irtoun II, these CAHWs will receive continued support and refresher training and Mercy Corps will train 40 new CAHWs. We will then link all CAHWs to financial services to enable the direct purchase of veterinary supplies.



Vaccination park of Tinkoumni, Ansongo (Photo: Mercy Corps)

This quarter, Mercy Corps continued to work with the 22 CAHWs who are actively operating in the region to provide continued capacity building as well as expanded services to the region. Each CAHW received 2-3 visits of Mercy Corps field staff, who provided continued capacity building and monitored the use of the stock and business management and vaccination reporting tools introduced to CAHWs during initial trainings. The team also accompanied 13 of the CAHWs as they made visits to 15 villages. Two CAHWs also completed supplementary training through local technical schools in Gao during this quarter.

Since the expansion into Irtoun II activities, 4,276 animals have received treatment from the CAHW for diseases including Distomatosis (a parasite), Blackleg, vitamin deficiency, and Pasteurellosis. In Ansongo this quarter, veterinarians used the services of 12 of the CAHWs for a vaccination campaign in the vaccination park in Tinkoumni, built in 2012 by Mercy Corps as a part of its EESA program funded by the Gates Foundation. Approximately 17,000 heads of livestock were vaccinated by Irtoun-supported veterinarians and CAHWs with vaccines donated by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. The vaccines used by the campaign were stored in refrigerators powered by solar panels donated by Mercy Corps as a part of Irtoun I. Currently, the veterinarians have 30,000 doses of Ovipest (to guard against sheep and goat plague), and 30,000 doses of T1 (which guards against contagious bovine pleuropneumonia). From October to November, the CAHW earned a total revenue of 487,675 FCFA for 13 CAHWs (December data will be reported in the next quarter).



Community meeting, Timbuktu (Photo: Mercy Corps)

Next quarter will include the implementation of trainings and refresher courses for all 82 CAHWs as a part of Irtoun II, which is in keeping with initial planning and complements activities planned by the veterinarians.

1.1.4 Rehabilitation of pasturelands – Cash-for-Work

To help communities in Gao and Timbuktu rebuild a supply of natural fodder over the long-term, Mercy Corps will support the rehabilitation of pastureland through construction of half-moons and zai, indigenous techniques that reduce erosion and improve soil quality for agricultural and pastureland use, in addition to improving water catchment areas. This activity is scheduled for April-May, prior to the start of the rainy season.

a. Improving Agricultural Production

1.2.1 Voucher for Agricultural inputs for 3,600 farmers

Through distribution of agricultural input vouchers to agricultural groups in target communities, Irtoun II plans to help farmers diversify their production, extending a successful activity from Irtoun I to new populations. This quarter, vouchers were distributed to 5,687 producers, including 1,100 in Timbuktu, 1,104 in Gourma Rharous, and 3,483 in Ansongo.

Site Identification and Setup

At the beginning of the quarter, the main activities focused on garden site identification, which was carried out with the support of government technical services and community leaders. Site selection criteria included the proximity of the site to beneficiaries and to a source of water and whether it was protected by fencing (live fencing or wire fencing), among others. The sites chosen have been used in the past for gardening activities, mostly by women's groups, but were left fallow during the crisis. Since the crisis, these groups had tried to start up their activities once more but struggled to do so because they lost many of their resources during the period of conflict. During each visit, Mercy Corps team members met with the community and surveyed the status of the sites, and then classified each group based on a set of vulnerability criteria such as previous assistance received and the number of female heads of households. The particular challenges of each group were noted, ranging from lack of agricultural inputs to a low level of technical knowledge and difficulty marketing products.

Meetings with technical services personnel during the site identification phase helped the team to think through aspects of the project such as which improved varieties should be sold during the voucher fair and how to ensure the quality of seeds. The technical services are providing a certification of the quality of the quality of seeds sold during the agricultural fairs. Mercy Corps also shared its beneficiary list with the technical services to avoid redundancies in the assistance provided by Irtoun II and other actors.



Voucher distribution in Ansongo (Photo: Mercy Corps)



Distribution of seeds to Hondoubomo group (Photo: MC)

Selection and Briefing of Suppliers

In total, 13 suppliers participated in the voucher fairs (6 in Ansongo and 7 in Timbuktu). The primary varieties sold at these fairs included potato, cabbage, onion, carrot, lettuce and eggplant seeds. To participate, suppliers had to respond to a call for

services advertised through local radio and posters in Commune sites, and Mercy Corps undertook a review of their applications, taking into account the advice and guidance of local technical services. After the printing of vouchers, the suppliers underwent an orientation on the content of their contracts and how to process vouchers to make a sale and receive payment from Mercy Corps.

Distribution of Vouchers and Seeds

Distribution of seed vouchers to beneficiaries was a participatory process that involved local leaders, technical services, Mercy Corps, and the gardening groups themselves. The distribution was made according to the identified needs of each group, and vouchers were distributed to association presidents in the presence of group members. The list of suppliers was read publicly in front of the beneficiaries and they were free to choose goods from their vendor of choice.

Given the character of the groups, many of them work in a dispersed fashion and the order of seeds is done in an individual manner that drives up the costs of seeds and makes it unprofitable for the communities. Irtoun's strategy encourages them to make group purchases to better negotiate prices, and save money together in preparation for the next season.

For the groups assisted through Irtoun I, this will be the last support for at least 70% of the groups. They have been able to build their savings sufficiently to cover 30-40% of their needs to enable them to purchase seeds thanks to the profits they have earned through the sale of crops during the previous campaign. This year following the sale of their harvest, funds will be set aside to ensure that they are able to purchase seeds for next year's gardening cycle. During this distribution, the needs of new groups are covered 100% as a subsidy for the purchase of seeds.

Table 3: Geography, number of vouchers distributed, and beneficiaries of seed vouchers

Circle	Number of communes	Number of villages	Number of groups	Number of vouchers	# Number of group members		
					Male	Female	Total
Ansongo	5	20	80	1 800	680	2 803	3 483
Tombouctou	3	9	24	622	287	813	1 100
Gourma	3	9	26	621	243	861	1 104
Rharous							
Total	11	38	130	3 043	1 210	4 477	5 687



Potato planting by Alklib and Berey Naafa groups, Tessit, Gao (Photo: Mercy Corps)

Monitoring of Planting and Crops

The potatoes pre-germinated during the course of transportation, so there was a sense of urgency to transplant them as soon as they were received during voucher fairs. Mercy Corps' agricultural teams assisted the groups with the planting, in order to ensure that it was done according to the proper techniques. They also supported the installation and monitoring of nurseries and the transplanting of other varieties. Upkeep such as irrigation and weeding has begun and continues at all sites. The initial growth of the potatoes was satisfactory, and they are currently at various stages of sprouting,

flowering, and tuber initiation. For the other plantings, they have sprouted and the transfer from the nurseries has commenced.

1.2.2 Training and support to 126 agricultural/gardening groups

Over the course of this quarter, the Irtoun team continued to mentor the groups who received assistance under Irtoun I, and began practical trainings for the new groups onsite, bringing the total number of groups having received training through Irtoun I and II to 130 (agricultural groups membership registries are still being finalized, and total beneficiary numbers disaggregated by sex, age and status of the displaced will be reported next quarter). Mentoring and training is meant to cover the entire agricultural season, from land preparation to harvest, transformation, and commercialization. Topics often requested by beneficiaries were prioritized, including the management of garden production and the preparation of compost using the byproducts of the harvest and other local products. The teams noted during the exchanges that at the new sites that although the women shared the larger plot, they tended to work individually. The women explained that, “We grow our plots in the traditional manner. The government technical services come from time to time but they don’t have the time to stay with us and monitor operations. So each woman works according to her own individual knowledge.” With the support of the extension agents from Mercy Corps, new practices were acquired which will improve the productivity of the sites, and the services will be able to more effectively provide counsel during their visits.



Preparing the land, Tierega Kounsoum (Photo: MC)

Of note, this quarter six Irtoun staff traveled to Niger to take part in a training on Mercy Corps’ Design for Resilient Agriculture approach. This approach is aimed at helping development practitioners and their beneficiaries to understand local landscapes and design farming systems that more effectively use or work with resources from these particular environments. Resilient agricultural systems benefit from improved soil fertility and more efficient use of scarce water resources, and can increase smallholder capacity to withstand ongoing environmental shocks and stresses. Upon their return from Niger, staff members worked with gardening associations to apply techniques learned to garden plots, including those related to conservation of water humidity in the soil. Next quarter, more of these techniques will be applied during cash for work activities, for example to minimize erosion and runoff around trees.

1.2.3. Rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure – Cash for Work

Nothing to report this quarter.

Sector #2: Economic Recovery & Market Systems

2.1. New Livelihoods Development

2.1.1 Apprenticeships for 300 vulnerable youth

To support the integration of youth into the professional sector, Irtoun II will support 300 youth from the target communities to take part in apprenticeships lasting three months. These apprenticeships will assist young graduates to develop new ways to support themselves and become active in the labor market. Mercy Corps has developed an integrated strategy that is based on the participation of a range of actors involved in the areas of job creation and professional training.



Meeting with CRMA members in Timbuktu (Photo : Mercy Corps)

This quarter, the teams completed a series of visits to the

State technical services to gain a deeper understanding of the national employment policy and the different programs that already exist to assist young people with their insertion in the labor market in Gao and Timbuktu. The private sector was also implicated through meetings with the *Coordinations Régionales des Maitres Artisans* (CRMA), a professional association that has members in a wide range of trades including metal working, moto repair, and artisanal work, among others. Our initial meetings with CRMA revealed that there is not currently a high demand in this sector; CRMA members have difficulty finding work themselves. Mercy Corps also met with individual private enterprises, cooperatives, professional schools and nonprofit organizations. These important meetings served as the basis of a situation analysis in the two regions, and also helped identify the main stakeholders who will be able to work with Mercy Corps during the implementation.

Stakeholder Mapping for Youth Livelihoods Component Implementation	
Program Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mercy Corps • OFDA • Selection committee (representing beneficiaries)
Beneficiaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurs (male and female) • Young unemployed graduates • In-school and out-of-school youth • Local businessmen • <i>Maitres Artisans (Corps de métiers)</i> - regional artisans association
Technical Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Direction of Professional and Vocational Training (<i>Direction Régionale de la Formation Professionnelle et l'emploi - DRFPE</i>) • National Employment Agency (<i>Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi APEJ Agence Pour l'emploi des Jeunes - ANPE</i>) • Fund for the Support of Professional Training and Apprenticeship (<i>Fonds d'Appui à la Formation Professionnelle et Apprentissage - FAFPA</i>) • Regional Coordination of Master Artisans (<i>Coordination Régionale des Maitres Artisans - CRMA</i>)
Other Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government administration • Mayor's office • Host structures (public and private)
Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mercy Corps personnel • Community leaders • Focal points
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local media (community radio) • Technical partners
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mercy Corps • NGOs (with similar programming) • Technical services • Regional Coordination of Master Artisans (<i>Coordination Régionale des Maitres Artisans - CRMA</i>)

In each area targeted by Irtoun II, the team made initial contact with local actors, including the commune authorities and youth leaders to introduce the program and learn more about the local job landscape. This process was followed by the identification of public and private services, the creation of beneficiary selection committees, informational sessions and sensitization of local youth about the activities to be carried out. From the situation analysis, a few potential host structures were identified, including the health centers, public and private schools, the mayors' offices, and the local government administration. In the private sector, local shops and other enterprises indicated an interest in serving as hosts.

After the mapping of different services and host structures, the teams put in place a selection committee in each targeted commune (17 committees in Timbuktu and 4 in Ansongo). These committees are composed of every social class and representatives of the community, including the chief, traditional authorities, youth, elected officials and two women's representatives. Mercy Corps then launched a call for candidates to young unemployed graduates, through community radios, local leaders, and partner services, as well as youth representatives. The call asked specifically for young Malians aged 18-25 years with a diploma or a training certificate recognized by the state, who live in the targeted zones. They should also be willing to take part in a mentoring program and devote 3 months to the internship. In total, the team received 466 applicants (269 in Ansongo, 81 in Timbuktu and 116 in Gourma Rharous).

Mercy Corps has solicited the support of the leaders of each host organization to work with the youth. In each village, an informational session was held with the representatives of the host structures, who are participating actively in each phase of recruitment.

In each locality, the teams also carried out a rapid mapping of the needs in terms of potential job openings, in order to validate site selection. In the coming quarter, a more detailed participatory youth labor market assessment will be carried out.



Tire repair workshop, Rharous

2.2: Livelihoods Restoration

2.2.1 Livelihoods support to 300 people

Recognizing that many inhabitants of our target region are still suffering from depleted assets and disrupted livelihoods, Mercy Corps designed its livelihood support activities to assist those who lost their businesses in order to re-start it once more.

During the quarter the Mercy Corps team undertook a scoping process to better understand the livelihood opportunities that exist in the new target circles. From the missions carried out, it was found that likely income generating activities and sources of employment included: artisanry, dress-making, shoe-making, carpentry, welding, photography, tire repair, and other types of service provision. Many of these occupations are currently impacted by the security situation.

Within each circle, Mercy Corps identified a certain number of communes as detailed in the table below. In each commune, there were almost twice as many candidates as spaces available after the call for applications was announced.

Table 4: Sites for livelihood activities, candidates and available spaces

Circle	Number of communes	Number of candidates	Available spaces
Ansongo	5	182	100
Tombouctou	4	200	100
Gourma Rharous	3	195	100
Total	12	577	300

The limits on available spaces were set according to the potential of each site for livelihood activities, with Mercy Corps targeting more communes in some circles than others. The Mercy Corps teams established the selection criteria based on our assessments and proposal;

Individual selection criteria for beneficiaries of livelihoods support:

- Aged 18-60 years
- Currently engaged in an entrepreneurial activity
- Previously engaged in a livelihood activity impacted by the conflict
- Willing to engage in a process of training and mentoring
- Available throughout the program
- Willing to sign a contract with Mercy Corps

these criteria were validated by the committees put in place at each site.

This quarter, Mercy Corps collected data from beneficiaries who had received funding for micro-projects through Irtoun I. This collection was carried out to understand the level of evolution of the micro-entrepreneurs in their respective activities, in particular:

- What level are they at after having received assistance and how are they evolving?



Young entrepreneur in Bentia at his metal workshop (Photo: Mercy Corps)

- Are they using the management tools they learned about during the trainings?
- What success have they had?
- What are the main challenges they are confronting and how are they addressing them?

The collection of data was carried out at the micro-entrepreneurs' work sites, followed by a collective meeting in each village with the goal of discussing opportunities, sharing experiences and discussing daily challenges, as well as proposing solutions.

The findings of the evaluation noted that the micro-entrepreneurs are working in very different activities. Their area of concentration varies principally by zones. For example in Bourra, the entrepreneurs practice much more gardening and trade goats and sheep, while in other areas, they practice small-scale commerce, supply services such as hairstyling, the sale of gas, and moto repair. During the training on simplified management of income generating activities, the entrepreneurs had received training on the use of a number of basic management tools including keeping a ledger, use of receipts, inventory of stocks, and how to manage credit. The study found that in general these tools

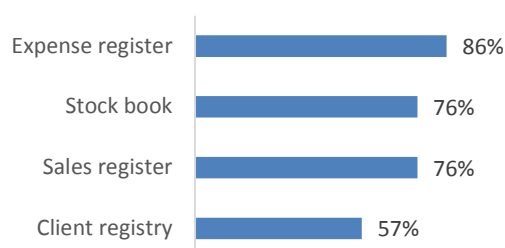


*Biba, micro-entrepreneur of Labbézanga
(Photo : Mercy Corps)*

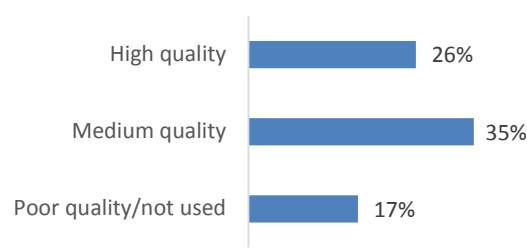
are being used. Small challenges were often noted among certain entrepreneurs, but through coaching from Mercy Corps staff, they are overcoming these challenges. A few of the interviews revealed a high uptake of the tools along with correct usage by those who had previously neglected them. The largest challenges related to literacy and to the lack of motivation of some of the entrepreneurs to make all of the calculations on a daily basis. Often, these challenges could be surmounted by the entrepreneur seeking the assistance of a family member; others made use of Mercy Corps' support.

Currently, more than 50% of the entrepreneurs are using the management tools, and more than 30% have been able to demonstrate the collection of high quality data using the tools.

Management tool use



Quality of use of tools



2.3: Micro-finance

2.3.1 Establish/Strengthen 100 Village Savings and Loan Associations

As with many of the other activities, the VSLA teams carried out prospecting meetings in order to identify existing opportunities in the three circles targeted by Irtoun II. It was found that in almost all of the sites, women were informally organized into groups with a system of savings and credit shared among the members. Sometimes payments into the group fund are made weekly, other times monthly. That the women are already saving in this fashion is an advantage for the teams, who will be able to restructure these groups to formalize them based on VSLA best practices for group savings and credit management. Broadly speaking, the women had not received training on VSLA management before.

In the three circles, out of the 50 sites sampled, 19 have potential for the creation of 80 VSLA groups in Timbuktu and 11 sites have a potential for 35 VSLA in Ansongo. The criteria for site selection

included the number of existing groups, accessibility, opportunities for implementation of activities in other sectors.

A few challenges are relevant to note here:

1. Predisposition for the non-application of interest on the loans at certain sites because of social and religious concerns. Mercy Corps will address this problem in relevant communities by further exploring social and religious dynamics around interest, and find workarounds such as additional group savings envelopes to hold interest and benefit the group as a whole.
2. The size of the groups (35-60 members) in some cases, where conformity with VSLA principles recommends fewer members, but there is a desire not to divide the groups as this could be badly perceived by certain members. Mercy Corps is still negotiating with the groups and will try to reduce size to ease the management of the groups.
3. Limited accessibility to some sites due to the rise in water level during certain periods and to security. Mercy Corps will continue to follow security protocols and plan activities ahead of time in order to account for potential delays.

During the quarter, Mercy Corps also carried out meetings with traditional chiefs and administrative authorities to introduce VSLA activities. These meetings were carried out in 30 sites (11 in Ansongo, 8 in Timbuktu and 11 in Gourma Rharous). During these meetings, authorities were supportive of the initiative, particularly given the absence of a formal system of microfinance in the region. Following the meetings with the authorities, the team met with the community at large to explain the VSLA methodology, which was well received, and beneficiaries had many questions to better understand what to expect.



Sensitization about VSLA methodology, Bourem Inaly

After these introductions, Mercy Corps held meetings with 115 groups and 60 prospective village agents (VA). These meetings offered an opportunity to give more details about the startup and management of VSLAs. Among the potential VAs (49 in Timbuktu and 20 in Ansongo) proposed by the communities, 60 were chosen (40 in Timbuktu and 20 in Ansongo) according to an evaluation of their capacities. The VAs in Ansongo have already been trained and are operational on the ground.

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

The major M&E activity during this quarter included the implementation of baseline studies in the three circles of intervention for Irtoun II, with the report (in French) in annex. In addition, the team conducted:

- Monitoring of voucher distribution and redemption for seeds purchase from suppliers
- Creation of VSLA diagnostic and identification tools
- Creation of VA evaluation tools for VSLA activities

6. Coordination

This quarter, each team had numerous formal and informal meetings to coordinate activities in the field. Staff from the offices in Gao and Timbuktu participated in meetings held by the *Groupe Inter Agence de Coordination* (GIAC), as well as with the protection and food security sub-clusters. The Mercy Corps sub-office in Ansongo hosted a meeting of humanitarian actors with the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations – Sahel on the 11th of October, who wished to become more informed about the work of humanitarian actors in the region. On November 30, Mercy Corps organized a first meeting of a nonprofit coordination group in order to create a system of humanitarian focal points designated by the OCHA office in Gao. These different meetings were the main form of exchange and knowledge sharing among the different structures intervening in Timbuktu and Gao.