Externally Conducted

IMPACT EVALUATION OF Mercy Corps Niger's L.E.A.R.N.

Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger

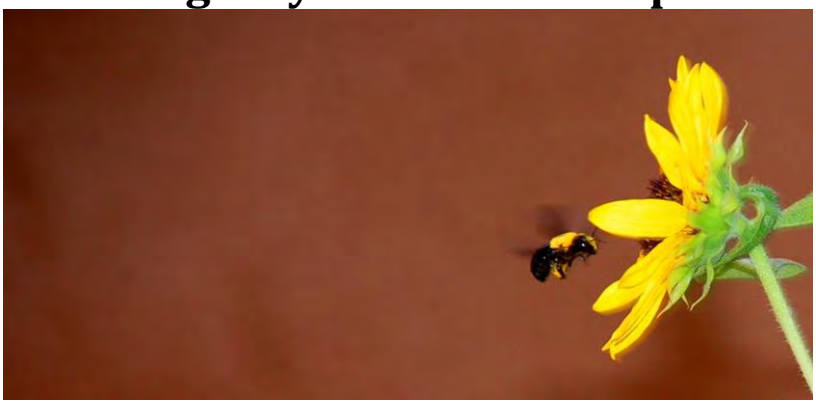


Photo: Emilie Parry, 2008 Niger

REPORT

SUBMITTED BY

Emilie Parry, *Consultant*

January 2011

(*Evaluation Conducted December 2010)*

Contents

1. Executive Summary

Mercy Corps' LEARN (Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger) emergency food distribution response in the Tillaberi region, in the department of Filingué, propelled by findings from the MC vulnerability study in June of 2010, was implemented from August through October of 2010 in three communes: Abala, Sanam, and Filingué. All items for the LEARN were locally procured in Niger or within the West African region, with the exception of USAID stickers for the bags of corn and cowpeas, and computers for the project shipped from the United States. Input and information shared from the Early Warning Committee, as well as recognition of the growing pattern of chronic food insecurity in Niger, especially in the underserved department of Filingué, informed this initiative by Mercy Corps to prepare to address the unfortunately predictable resurgence of a severe food insecurity crisis in the country, with great vulnerability across the target population to severe malnutrition, hunger-related disease and rising mortality rates.

This effort undertaken by Mercy Corps Niger along with their local implementing partner Défi, signals a need for a massive shift in approaches to funding and agency (governmental and NGO) program planning to prepare for, mitigate, prevent and respond to increasing incidents of chronic, cyclical food insecurity and the mass human displacement, malnutrition and death such emergencies wreak on already destabilized and weakened communities. The response was clearly informed by and sensitive to the agricultural, pastoral, anthropological, cultural, historical, political, environmental, geographical and economic dimensions of the Tillaberi region of Niger. LEARN was implemented transparently and appropriately, and received with great appreciation by the communities where LEARN was implemented. In fact, recognition for Mercy Corps' and Defi's work in the area was so widespread and positive, many neighboring communities where other agencies were operating requested that Mercy Corps work with them instead.

The lessons provided through this evaluation taught us that while Mercy Corps "got it right" for the most part in terms of the procurement and response itself[1], an emergency procurement and distribution response is not enough, can NOT be a "stand-alone" program if the humanitarian community wishes to effectively reduce vulnerability in populations such as these in Niger, to prevent malnutrition, disease, suffering and death on an increasingly broad scale. A "food crises package" of programs should be developed and funded (as early as February or March), either within one operating agency such as Mercy Corps, or through a coordinated effort of multiple governmental and non-governmental agencies to implement complimentary programming in each area, together. That "food crises package" of programs should include:

a) community and organizational capacity building for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Early Warning Systems (effectively networked into Government and international resource support), and emergency mitigation, preparedness and response planning;
b) Community disaster risk insurance programming;
c) **Livelihoods** support and training, including youth economic development programming and social entrepreneur support, strengthening of the market chain or "web;"
d) Micro-credit and micro-finance programming, beginning with basic micro-savings and financial or resource management training.
e) **Community health** support, especially for children age 6 or younger and pregnant or lactating women (the canaries in the coal mine, in particular, are the children).

With the ever-increasing and problematic havoc Climate Change is wreaking on agricultural, agro-pastoral and pastoralist communities' capacity to plan and depend on regular seasons and weather patterns (rainy seasons, planting seasons, harvest seasons), it is crucial to support and facilitate capacities within populations and governments for coping with and preparing for these difficult and changing conditions. In order to break out of an exacerbated cycle of weakening communities and undermining their capacity with each round of chronic food crises, resources must be directed towards strengthening the economic opportunities, systems and capacities of people, so they may stabilize and eventually develop enough stores and insurance to buffer against and prepare for extreme and harsh circumstances in the future.

[1] There are always areas for improvements, and some of those areas, while minor, are explored in the Findings section below.

2. Background

2.1 Niger

The West African country of Niger spans an area of 1,267,000 km2 with administrative subdivisions in 8 regions. A Sahelian country subject to unpredictable and erratic Climate patterns, these conditions have intensified in recent years due to the increasing impacts Climate Change on rainy and harvest seasons, water accessibility, and the resource stress created by ensuing displacement of peoples. Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world, with infant and maternal mortality rates among the highest in all of Africa. The majority of people living in Niger consistently face such challenges as moderate-to-severe food insecurity, disease, illiteracy, weak institutional support and limited means to participate in government. Niger is one of the world's most sparsely populated countries, yet it has one of the highest birth rates in the world, with limited capacity to feed its increasing population.

Below is a statistical profile of Niger:

Population:	11.1 million
Urban Population:	21%
Major Ethnic and Linguistic Groups:	Hausa - 56% Djerma - 22% Fula - 9% Tuareg - 8% Beri Beri - 4%
Religions:	Muslim - 80% Christian, traditional beliefs - 20%
Population Growth Rate:	2.71%
Life Expectancy:	42.2 years
Infant Mortality:	124 per 1,000 live births
Under Five Mortality:	265 per 1,000 live births
Maternal Mortality Rate:	590 per 100,000 live births
GNP Per Capita:	$170
Percentage of Literate Adult Males:	26%
Percentage of Literate Adult Females:	10%
Percentage Population With Access To Safe Drinking Water:	59%

2.1.1. Country situation

10 lowest HDIs

Rank	Country	HDI New 2010 estimates for 2010
	Low human development	
1	Zimbabwe	0.140
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo	0.239
3	Niger	0.261
4	Burundi	0.282
5	Mozambique	0.284
6	Guinea-Bissau	0.289
7	Chad	0.295
8	Liberia	0.300
9	Burkina Faso	0.305
10	Mali	0.309

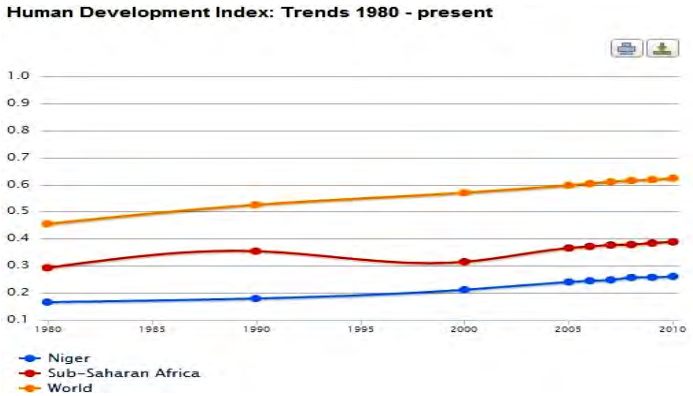
Within the Human Development Index (HDI) rankings[2], Niger regularly falls between 1 and 3 (the lowest ranking country on the HDI at 1, to the 3rd lowest) at 0.261, or No. 167 of 169, just shy of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe as the lowest ranked countries on the Human Development Index.

Human Development Index — Rank 167

Year	Niger	Sub-Saharan Africa	World
1980	0.166	0.293	0.455
1985	..	0.306	0.486
1990	0.180	0.354	0.526
1995	..	0.358	0.554
2000	0.212	0.315	0.570
2001	..	0.319	0.575
2002	..	0.323	0.581
2003	..	0.326	0.587
2004	..	0.332	0.594
2005	0.241	0.366	0.598
2006	0.245	0.372	0.604
2007	0.249	0.377	0.611
2008	0.257	0.379	0.615
2009	0.258	0.384	0.619
2010	0.261	0.389	0.624

Human Development Index

Gross National Income per capita (GNI) is $675.40 USD per annum (2008), with 66% of the population living below $1.25 USD per day.



[2] http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NER.html

NIGER—the Currency of Relevant Dynamics

Recent Political History

A coup d'état occurred in Niger on 18 February 2010. Armed soldiers attacked the presidential palace in Niamey and captured President Mamadou Tandja, who was chairing a government meeting at the time. Later that day, the rebels announced on television the formation of a ruling junta, the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSRD), headed by chef d'escadron Salou Djibo.[3] The coup is largely viewed as a stabilizing development for the country.

Economy and Agriculture (Agro-pastoralists/pastoralists)

Agriculture remains principal activity of 80% of the population, with varying estimates around 15% pastoralists/agro-pastoralists, but with the increasing unpredictabiilty of the rainy seasons due to Climate Change (the dry and ~~h~~hungry" seasons have been extending, rains that one came with such regularity to plan for 9 harvests now never come, or arrive late and bring floods, such as in the 2009 flood emergencies), the agricultural sector has been deeply destabilized and undercut. Global price fluctuations of staple imported crops in recent years, particularly in 2008, have contributed to the destabilization of food security in the country, access and ability to purchase basic food stuffs on the market, and debt status of households. More often than not in recent years, traditional agricultral activities have become insufficient to provide for basic household food security needs.

Food Insecurity in Niger

Niger has been coping with chronically recurring and intensifying food crises, causally related to the uneven and increasingly unpredictible distribution of rainfall, as well as rudimentary agricultural practices, lack of basic farming tools, and severe fluctuations on the global market of staple food items (tied to dependency on global markets created by monopsonistic marketing boards and globalized multinational staple monocropping). It is a crucial challenge for Niger, intergovernmental bodies, and the humanitarian community at large, to break out of this self-exacerbating cycle of severe food insecurity and mass malnutrition through a collective approach of emergency response, disaster mitigation and prevention programming, livelihoods and sustainable development policy and programming.

Mercy Corps took an initial step towards shifting out of this cycle by correctly recognizing the warning signs, predicting and preparing an emergency food distributions response for the most vulnerable populations in the department of Filingue.

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Nigerien_coup_d'%C3%A9tat
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8526072.stm

2.1.2 Tillaberi Region, Department of Filingué Background

Tillaberi, Department of Filingue, Communes of Filingue, Abala, and Sanam:

Background on geographical area for the LEARN distributions and evaluation:

Filingué Department:

The focus of the LEARN emergency food distributions was conducted in an otherwise excluded and ignored region of Tillaberi, specifically in the department of Filingué, in the communes of Filingue, Abala and Sanam, which boasts the 2nd highest population among the six departments of Tillaberi. While levels of malnutrition, vulnerability and food insecurity in this area are as high if not higher than along the southern and southeastern borders of Niger (where resources have been heavily committed to addressing food insecurity), the Department of Filingue has not been included in national designations or commitments for emergency food distributions or other mitigation and preparedness programming, simply because the data was not available. Mercy Corps conducted a vulnerability survey in the departement of Filingue, Tillaberi region, and the findings then enabled governmental recognition and designation of NGO resources, and thereby the LEARN distributions response conducted in the late summer and autumn of 2010.

According to Niger's National Institute of Statistics, population projections for 2010 (based on Census of Population and Housing [RGP / H] of 2001), are estimated around 537,715 inhabitants, including 268,454 men and 269,261 women. Children under 5 years of age in the region represent about 21% of the population, according to reports from a Tillabéri National Nutrition Study, 2010.

Climatic disturbances in recent years have resulted in decreased agricultural production in the Sahel in general and Niger in particular, caused by poor distribution of rainfall recorded last year. The cyclical food crises have had severe, adverse effects on the nutritional status of children. Compounded by the undermining and weakening effects of extremely poor crop yields in 2009 and soaring global market prices in 2008, the vulnerability for foods security assessment findings in 2009 and 2010 enable the region of Tillabéri to be classified as "Vulnerable Areas" by the Government of Niger (GON) with the most vulnerable communities and severe conditions found in the departments of Filingué,Ouallam and Tillaberi. With this evidence, Mercy Corps petitioned the GON to allow the NGO to act to address the imminet food security crisis of 2010, along with mitigating actions to reduce vulnerable in the months and years to follow. Mercy Corps focused its programming on the most vulnerble populations, including children 5 years and younger, and pregnant and lactating women, as the health and nutrition of children 0-5 years are most affected by this crisis food, and child malnutrition and mortalitity is often the first significator of a disaster already in process.

The department of Filingué is located in the north-eastern region of Tillaberi, the largest department in terms of area with 26,217 km2. Filingué borders to the Republic of Mali to the north, the Tahoua region in the northeast, the departments of Doutchi, Loga in the region of Dosso in the southeast, and the department of Ouallam in the southwest. The Department is divided into two regions: Balleyara and Abala, and four townships:Tagazar, Tondikandia, Imanan Kourfey and the Fulani groups in Abala.

With the advent of Governmental decentralization, seven (7) municipalities were created, with an Filingue as a city center, as well as six rural communes: Sanam, Abala, Kourfey, Center, Imanan, and Tondikandia Tagazar. The department of Filingue serves as a crossroads for all ethnic groups in Niger, but the main ethnic groups that make up the population of the Department are the Hausa (Kourfeyawa) occupying the northern area, and the Djerma, the Tuareg, and the Fulani occupying the southern area in the cantons of Tondikandia, Imanan and Tagazar.

Rainfall, Climate and Vegetation in the department Filingué is known for a **northern pastoralist area that encompasses more than half of its area**. This part of Niger experiences very low precipitation (at most 150 to 250 mm per year) and registers with the highest temperatures (above 50 ° C or 122° F) of all the arid regions during the "warm season" but can get as low as 10 ° C (50° F) during the "cold season." [Yes, everything is relative.]

The southern Sahelian area of the department of Filingue is know for its agricultural excellence, with average annual rainfall of 450 mm and temperatures ranging from 20 ° C (68°F) to 40 ° C (105° F) throughout the year. The topography of department has three components: a canopy consisting of trees such as acacia albida, Acacia radiana, and Balanites aegyptiaca; a shrub layer primarily composed of Combretaceae; grasslands with annual and perennial species.

Economic Situation

The economy is largely agriculture- and livestock-based. Recently in the north, some groups known mainly for their pastoralist activities have been integrating agro-pastoralist activities in order to supplement their household and income needs. These changes have not been without consequences in terms of impacting productivity of the land, market prices, and social relations between farmers and nomadic herders.

The agricultural sector employs about 80 to 90% of the population (on their own farms, contracting out their labor, and in transport, trade and markets) in the cultivation of millet, sorghum and cowpea in rainy areas, with some vegetables grown where conditions are favorable. It should be noted that there are several constant watering holes (which increase and decrease according to the rains) and permanent plantings that create the potential for somewhat consistent agricultural practices.
In terms of livestock, the Department of Filingué is a considered an area "par excellence," with cattle and lifestock markets in Abala, Filingué, Ballayara known nationally and internationally. Livestock traded, kept, herded, eaten and otherwise put to work include cattle, sheep, goats, camels, horses and donkeys. As mentioned above, the northern area of the department is largely pastoralized, used for grazing area. In these agropastoralist areas, people are limited to fallow topsoil, unsuitable for agriculture, and so few spaces can be cultivated. Animal husbandry is the key source of savings for the population and provides a substantial amount of household income, despite the impacts of climatic vagaries experienced these past few years.

Road Network

The road network is fairly poor and minimal in the department of Filingue, consisting of one main axis road (the RN25) which crosses 128 km from the southern area of the department to the north. Many of the "roads" leading to various villages off the main road are not roads at all, but points in the topographical memory of drivers, mules, camels and their nomads, at which to turn off the main road and traverse through the grassland or desert in a general trajectory toward an intended village.

Health Care Infrastructure

The department of Filingué has developed several health facilities in recent years; prior to this, there really were very few options nearby for most villagers. These new healthcare facilities are well frequented by people within the broader environs. The department of Filingué now has a district hospital with a maternity ward, a functional laboratory and a therapeutic feeding center, and more than 50 operating clinics or nutritional health centers distributed throughout the department.

Danger and travel restrictions

While relatively safe, there are some safety concerns and travel restrictions in certain areas of Niger, including Abala and Sanam where 2/3 of this evaluation took place; both are designated "Zone Rouge" or Red Zones. On May 11, 2010, the US Department of State warned of "the risks of travel to Niger and recommends against all travel to the north of the country due to kidnapping threats against Westerners. Al-Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a terrorist group, continues its attempts to kidnap Westerners, including U.S. citizens in Niger, and has been successful in kidnapping Europeans in the region. On April 20, a French citizen was kidnapped by

a group affiliated with AQIM in a location west of Agadez. In November 2009, heavily armed individuals attempted to kidnap U.S. embassy officials in Tahoua. Due to these ongoing security threats, Embassy Niamey continues to restrict the travel of U.S. government employees and official visitors in areas north of Niamey, and warned U.S. citizens to exercise extreme caution and remain vigilant ."

These travel restrictions did impact the evaluation, in that the head evaluator, a US citizen, was unable to travel with the surveyors into the Abala and Sanam regions, thus utilized Filingué as a base of operations for surveyor trainings, debriefings, improvements on the survey and interviews, for safety checks, and of course jointly conducted interviews with the teams in the ~~-~~safe zone" of the department of Filingué.

Existing Development Partners/agencies in the Department of Filingue:
Department Filingué is supported by several development partners through the international and local NGOs:
> Mercy Corps (international)—with USAID/FPP
> Timidria (local)
> DEFI (local)
> Oxfam (international)
> SAEDEV (state agents and local NGO combined) through FAO
These organizations work through the GON (Government of Niger) in their efforts.
Local government actors, and an Early Warning Committee to address food crises and food insecurity vulnerabilty, made up of local NGO actors, local government, international NGO representatives, and regional leaders and chieftains, has been in existence in the department of Filingue for over 10 years.

Food Insecurity and the LEARN response in the Department of Filingue
The Mercy Corps narrative report for Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger (LEARN) provided an excellent summary of the food security situation and strategy for Mercy Corps in Niger this past May 2010:

~~1~~**. Justification for Emergency Food Security Program Use.**
The Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger (LEARN) program focuse[d] on getting urgently needed food to food insecure households in all seven communes of Filingué Department. Mercy Corps' strategy to meet immediate food needs [wa]s to distribute locally purchased maize and cowpeas, supplemented with vouchers for use in local markets to purchase cooking oil and iodized salt.

This strategy was developed from findings of Mercy Corps' [May/June **baseline] assessment**, which found that markets in the targeted area [we]re functioning but that poor harvests resulted in very low availability of staples and unprecedentedly high prices. Finding that staple foods originating in other countries of West Africa [we]re available for purchase from Nigerien traders in Niamey, Maradi and other markets, Mercy Corps purchase[d] maize and cowpeas to provide the foundation of nutrition rations for vulnerable households. At the same time, the assessment found that markets for cooking oil and iodized salt [we]re better supplied, if often inaccessible, [so Mercy Corps distributed] market **vouchers** for these commodities.

The timeliness of this strategy [was] also important... [Mercy Corps initially hoped for funding to be awarded in May so that] Title II commodities could be called forward in June 2010 with an expected in-country arrival in October/November. On this schedule, they would still have arrive[d] too late to meet needs during the hungry season, as they were **expected to peak between May and September 2010.** Further, their arrival at harvest time would have weaken[ed] crop prices and further erode[d] agricultural livelihoods already weakened by the current crisis. In comparison, an LRP agreement at the end of May could have enable[d] tenders for commodity purchase to be made during the second week of June, procurement in the last week, and possession by the beginning of July. Dispatches to field sites can begin during the second week of July, in time for distributions to begin by mid-July. Voucher distributions will take place at the

same time as food distributions, to form a complete food basket, increase the operation's efficiency, and limit the disruption to communities.

2. **Emergency Food Assistance Needs as of May 2010, department of Filingue**
Irregular rains during Niger's 2009 growing season resulted in a harvest amounting to less than a quarter of annual food requirements. FEWSNET estimates that cereal production is at its lowest point in 20 years. After facing four poor harvests in the last five years, households had few remaining resources to meet current food needs until the harvest in October 2010 (which also proved to be a very poor harvest). In the most vulnerable regions of the country, food stocks had run out as of May 2010, and already impoverished by the successive years of failed harvests, households were resorting to –desperation" coping mechanisms, such as selling off productive assets, credit at usurious rates and severely cutting back on food consumption, that are detrimental to long-term well-being. The hunger season, which normally lasts between June and October each year, was already fully evident by March 2010. Figures that month from the Government of Niger (GoN) estimated that more than 7.8 million people, out of a total population of 15 million, are currently in need of immediate assistance to avoid catastrophe. The US Ambassador declared the situation a disaster on January 14, 2010, to facilitate the flow of urgent humanitarian aid.

Following a coup in February 2010, the GoN examined the situation in Filingué Department and found it to be facing a situation as dire as those areas already known to be in crisis. According to these revised estimates, 401,000 people in Filingué were, as of May 2010, currently vulnerable to or already experiencing moderate or severe malnutrition, a figure which comprises 75 percent of the department's entire population. To confirm the situation in Filingué, Mercy Corps fielded a rapid assessment in March 2010, looking at conditions in 15 market towns through much of the department. Without exception, communities reported that poor local harvests were contributing to increased food insecurity, in many cases described as more severe than experienced after the 2004 drought. Key informants indicated that many areas of central and northern Filingué Department were in May and June 2010 experiencing cereal deficits amounting to 80 percent of consumption requirements. As a result, many households and even entire communities were resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including reduced meals (few households were able to consume more than a single meal a day; in some cases, Mercy Corps found that women were eating only a single meal every other day) and sale of productive assets, especially livestock, whose poor condition and over-supply were fetching very low prices. This pattern had already led to increasing malnutrition according to health district data collected in April 2010, that found that 16 percent of children are moderately malnourished and almost 5 percent severely malnourished, for a total of 21 percent combined. This is in comparison to the normal rate of 12 percent combined moderate and severe malnutrition. Given the severity of current conditions and the time remaining before harvest in May 2010 (October harvest), this figure was expected to climb.

What little cash households were able to acquire from the 2009 harvest was used to repay debts for food purchased during last year's hunger season and to meet urgent household needs. As noted, these resources were already running out in March 2010. There is little to no opportunity for employment in Filingué Department. Even if there were, many staple foods were (and are) simply not available in adequate supply to meet needs, and at May-June market prices the 1,000 CFA ($2) daily rate for unskilled labor was insufficient to buy other critical food items, such as pulses, cooking oil, or vegetables. Shortages in Filingué markets have led to a general lack of availability for many critical staples. Vulnerable households are beginning to find it impossible to purchase a complete food basket, as low availability and high demand propel prices beyond their reach. Food of sufficient quality and quantity was necessary to sustain the vulnerable populations of Filingué until the October 2010 harvest, not only for survival but also to give residents the energy needed to complete the demanding work of preparing fields, sowing, maintaining and harvesting crops.

2.1.3 Mercy Corps in Niger[4]

Mercy Corps' experience in Niger began with a response to the 2005 food crisis, when with emergency nutrition and feeding programs for 60,000 malnourished children and mothers in 130 villages. Since then, Mercy Corps Niger has helped strengthen health care in Niger's rural areas, reaching more than 370,000 people in 547 villages. Over the past 5 years, programs in rural and urban communities promoting health and nutrition, food security, economic development, good governance and youth employment have continued to develop.

Improving Nutrition and Community Health
Between 2005 and 2008, Mercy Corps – in partnership with public health staff in Filingué and Loga Departments and in Niamey's peri-urban communities – provided logistical and technical support to ensure therapeutic treatment for 60,000 malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women. Mercy Corps expanded its nutrition intervention into a comprehensive community-based health program to address the more systemic causes of malnutrition and to focus efforts on prevention. Mercy Corps has been improving maternal and child health by supporting community networks for the early detection of malnutrition and childhood illness, while also strengthening the capacities of local health workers, community volunteers and local government entities, reaching more than 370,000 people in 547 villages.

Fostering Economic Development
Complementing efforts to improve community health, Mercy Corps also works to strengthen livelihoods in the communities where MC works by providing vocational training for women and youth, sub-grants for community-based health and nutrition-related activities, and promoting savings and credit among women. These activities are helping communities bring to fruition such locally managed projects as repairing wells, making improvements to health center infrastructure and community gardening.

Poultry and Milk: Nutritious Food and a Business Opportunity
In 40 rural villages Mercy Corps introduced household poultry production, training in veterinary services and marketing techniques. The project aims to increase access to food while boosting households' ability to weather future emergencies. It provides families with a source of protein as well as much-needed secondary income.

To support the urban populations most affected by the rise in global food prices in 2008, Mercy Corps helped revitalize milk production by strengthening the management of Niamey's principal dairy. This program makes fresh milk more available to women entrepreneurs from one of Niamey's poorest neighborhoods, with the goal to increase household income of vulnerable families and to improve the general public's access to milk.

Job Training and Life Skills for Youth
In 2007, Mercy Corps spearheaded a focus on opportunities for vulnerable youth in Niger. We are offering vocational and life skills training and micro-credit opportunities to 300 youth in the Agadez region. Mercy Corps extended these activities to an additional 2,000 youth in the Agadez and Tahoua regions. This program increased the number and capacity of local entrepreneurs and skilled technicians, to earn more income to support their families.

Promoting Good Governance
Mercy Corps is working in partnership with Niger's communes (local-level administrative districts) to promote the participation of municipal officials in the design, implementation and monitoring of development activities. Mercy Corps also promotes youth involvement in civic affairs and helps youth connect with the needs of the commune. We're involving youth in such activities as sanitation, HIV/AIDS and anti-tobacco/drug awareness campaigns.

[4] This section is pulled from Mercy Corps statements in documents and on the Mercy Corps website about Mercy Corps' work in Niger since commencement in 2005.

2009 Floods: Mercy Corps has also responded to the floods of 2009 where at least 32,000 houses destroyed in almost 50 villages, killing livestock and wrecking croplands. The flooding is affected six out of Niger's eight regions, and thousands were displaced.

It is in this context that NGO Mercy Corps has been operating, to work to address the needs vast populations in Niger facing chronic food insecurity and malnutrition.[5]

2.2 Background: The Evaluation

This evaluation is an integral piece of the design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the LEARN, or the Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger, project. The evaluation of an emergency response distribution, particularly in circumstances of chronic food insecurity that create conditions for a somewhat –predictable" emergency, is extremely important not only for improving future emergency responses and recovery programming and funding, but also contributes to a new body of emergency evaluations, learning, and improvements in the field of Disaster Risk Management, Early Warning Systems, emergency prevention, preparedness, and recovery work. The evaluator benefits from the unique situation wherein, essentially, a baseline study has been conducted, as the original vulnerability study and identification of targeted beneficiary households serves to provide essential baseline information. While SMART methodology was utilized in gathering baseline nutritional data for the response, and this evaluation was influenced and informed by SMART methodology, it is not, in fact, a SMART nutritional evaluation of the impact of the LEARN distribution response. The SMART component of the evaluation is being conducted separately, and will prove of great complimentary value to this evaluation, which employed a mix of both quantitative and qualitative data gathering tools, but emphasized qualitative data over quantitative.

The consultant responsible for the external evaluation of Mercy Corps Niger's LEARN emergency distribution response is Emilie Parry, who possesses extensive experience in evaluating international disaster response, recovery and development projects across several countries and regions (details about the evaluator's credentials and experience are provided in Appendix 7.1.)

Outgoing Deputy Director/former Country Director Christy Collins of the Mercy Corps Niger team , and Mercy Corps Portland desk officer for West Africa, Laura Miller, provided most of the documents reviewed by the evaluator, and, under the facilitating auspices of Mercy Corps Niger Country Director Paul Armour and Deputy Director Sandrine Chetail, coordinated with the evaluator logistics for the site visits (helping primarily with introductions and transportation), along with the Mercy Corps staff in Niamey and Filingué offices, the Monitoring and Evaluation team in the Mercy Corps Niamey office, and supported initial contact with the evaluator's survey team. Details about the evaluation methodology are provided in the following section.

[5] This section is pulled from Mercy Corps statements in documents and on the Mercy Corps website about Mercy Corps' work in Niger since commencement in 2005.

3. Methodology

In this section I explore the different theories used to design this evaluation. The last two subsections provide details on the schedule, selection of commune and village sites, and the different data-gathering strategies.

Elements of SMART, the Michael Scriven Key Evaluation Checklist, &CIPP evaluation tools, adapted to conditions of:

- Emergency responses and protracted emergencies unquestionably intertwined with long-term development and poverty concerns;
- Timeframe available to conduct evaluation;
- Human Resources and logistical resources, including Mercy Corps M&E staff, contracting surveyors, office space, vehicles and supporting MC staff;
- Includes interviews with broad range of stakeholders, from community beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, implementing partners, coordinating agencies, government officials, logisticians, and Early Warning Committee members.

ALL INTERVIEWS were conducted confidentially unless interviewee requested otherwise.

3.1. Theories

This external evaluation is an integral piece of the design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the LEARN, or the Localized Emergency Assistance Response in Niger, project, which borrows from three frameworks: (i) the Key Evaluation Checklist, (ii) SMART, and (iii) CIPP/FNSAS/local contextualization approaches.

3.1.1. Key Evaluation Checklist

The KEC is a comprehensive evaluation approach proposed by Michael Scriven and extensively adopted throughout the world. For this evaluation, the KEC challenged the external evaluator to look beyond the projects' impacts by taking into consideration many other relevant matters related to Mercy Corps' operations such as potential positive and negative side effects, quality of implementation process (e.g., ethical issues), costs (monetary and nonmonetary), comparisons with possible alternatives, and sustainability.

3.1.2. SMART

Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) informed but was not directly nor precisely utilized in this evaluation, as the SMART evaluation segment has been tasked separately, external to the SOW for this evaluation. However, the indicators of SMART and the approach to evaluating an emergency response, particularly in the case of a food security crisis, have informed this evaluation, although this evaluation is weighted more in the qualitative data than the quantitative data.

About SMART:

—The interagency Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) Initiative, led by USAID, seeks to ensure that reliable and consistent data, starting with three critical data points on mortality, nutritional status, and food security, are rapidly accessible for policy and resource decision making.

The initiative developed a new computer-based system, SMART Methodology Version 1, to improve data collection and assessment capabilities of NGO and host government partners. The Windows-based analytical software program and its standardized reporting format simplify the tedious process of entry and analysis of complex nutrition and mortality data. Unlike previous methodologies, SMART is easy for field workers to understand and to apply. With its ease of use and adjustment for migration and population displacement, SMART is a practical tool for monitoring fragile, conflict-prone situations where more frequent, good quality data is needed. The SMART methodology is available from the community shared website www.smartindicators.org.

SMART was developed by an interagency expert team led by UNICEF and USAID, with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). "We are pleased to announce a major step forward in understanding of the real needs of populations in crisis situations," said UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman at the official launch in June 2005. Ms. Veneman noted the Task Force on Hunger of the UN Millennium Project recommended the support of SMART to help build and strengthen early-warning systems. ..

SMART harmonizes core elements of several existing methods and current best practices. It is an iterative tool with continuous upgrading informed by research and best practices. The flexibility of the software program enables adjustments and the addition of other indicators, or can be used in conjunction with other tools. Since its launch, the nutrition/mortality survey method and software have been used or is in the process of being used in several countries such as Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The food security component is a work in progress with initial positive feedback from its pilot test."

http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/smart/

3.1.3. CIPP and local contextualization

The approach, structure, and process-thinking that went into developing and implementing this context-specific evaluation methodology were informed as well by the CIPP Model:

The CIPP Evaluation Model[6] is a simple systems model applied to program evaluation. A basic open system includes input, process, and output. Stufflebeam, who developed this model, added context, included input and process, and relabelled output with the term product. Hence, CIPP stands for **c**ontext evaluation, **i**nput evaluation, **p**rocess evaluation, and **p**roduct evaluation. These types are typically viewed as separate forms of evaluation, but they can also be viewed as steps or stages in a comprehensive evaluation.

Context evaluation includes examining and describing the context of the program you are evaluating, conducting a needs and goals assessment, determining the objectives of the program, and determining whether the proposed objectives will be sufficiently responsive to the identified needs. It helps in making program planning decisions.

[6] http://www.cglrc.cgiar.org/icraf/toolkit/The_CIPP_evaluation_model.htm

Input evaluation includes activities such as a description of the program inputs and resources, a comparison of how the program might perform compared to other programs, a prospective benefit/cost assessment (i.e., decide whether you think the benefits will outweigh the costs of the program, before the program is actually implemented), an evaluation of the proposed design of the program, and an examination of what alternative strategies and procedures for the program should be considered and recommended. In short, this type of evaluation examines what the program plans on doing. It helps in making program structuring decisions.

Process evaluation includes examining how a program is being implemented, monitoring how the program is performing, auditing the program to make sure it is following required legal and ethical guidelines, and identifying defects in the procedural design or in the implementation of the program. It is here that evaluators provide information about what is actually occurring in the program. Evaluators typically provide this kind of feedback to program personnel because it can be helpful in making formative evaluation decisions (i.e., decisions about how to modify or improve the program). In general, process evaluation helps in making implementing decisions.

Product evaluation includes determining and examining the general and specific outcomes of the program (i.e., which requires using impact or outcome assessment techniques), measuring anticipated outcomes, attempting to identify unanticipated outcomes, assessing the merit of the program, conducting a retrospective benefit/cost assessment (to establish the actual worth or value of the program), and/or conducting a cost effectiveness assessment (to determine if the program is cost effective compared to other similar programs). Product evaluation is very helpful in making summative evaluation decisions (e.g., what is the merit and worth of the program? Should the program be continued?).

3.2. Details of Visit

Fieldwork for the LEARN distributions evaluation was carried out in December, 2010. The evaluation team was made up of Emilie Parry (evaluator) and a group of 8 surveyors (heretofore referred to as ~~-~~the surveyors") selected by Parry.

Leadership in Mercy Corps also played very important roles in making sure the evaluator and surveyors were able to interview all the selected families in each project:

Days 1-5: The evaluation began with a briefing at the Mercy Corps Niger headquarters in Niamey and an interview of M&E staff, the out-going Deputy Director, and a meeting with current Country Director and Deputy Country Director. During the briefing, the evaluator clarified questions about operations, project background and contextual dynamics, determined selection of the external surveyor team, randomly selected villages and households to be interviewed, and organized logistics for the training of the surveyors and the 3-commune/6 village interview schedule, as well as for the Niamey and Filingué interview schedule of the evaluator with government officials, coordinating and partner agencies, logisticians for the LEARN distributions, program coordinators, the Country Director, and the Early Warning Committee. The travel schedule was discussed in greater details, as well as the general approach for the evaluation and the specific requirements for conducting the exercise. Due to time constraints, the evaluation structure and questionnaire had to be prepared in-country, after the debriefings, and while planning the site visits (rather than a preferred period prior to arrival in country when methodology could be developed). The evaluator set up most of her own meetings in Filingué town and in Niamey after the village interviews.

Geographical selection of villages in each of the three communes where the LEARN distributions took place took into consideration feasibility and logistics (roads, number of vehicles and drivers available, distances and time available), security contingency planning and safety of staff, as well as the need to cover a fairly equal spread of pastoralist and agricultural or ag-pastoralist areas. In order to maintain neutrality in the findings, Mercy Corps staff had no say on the villages where the field interviews would transpire.

Geographical Selection for the LEARN distributions Evaluation:

COMMUNE 1: Filingué	COMMUNE 2: Abala	COMMUNE 3: Sanam
Village A: Gardi	Village A: Tanchiley	Village A: Allela
Village B: Sabon Yayi	Village B: Indikan Faku	Village B: Banikane

The Evaluation Team

Day 6-7: The teams were made up of external surveyors and a few Mercy Corps Filingué staff who knew the department of Filingué well. After travel and logistics management, the 8 surveyors and the evaluator gathered in Filingué town the first day for a 12 hour training (conducted by the evaluator) of the evaluation methodologies and effective interview techniques, intensive review and preparation for the interviews (including simulated interviews and group feedback).

Two weighty factors contributed to such a long and intensive training period: a) Language and Comprehension: the survey questions were originally written in English and translated by the evaluator into French, but the interviews with community leaders, households and focus groups were conducted mostly in Hausa, and occasionally in Djerma. It was essential that the surveyors understood not only the questions they were to pose, but also the information, data and context the questions were intended to reveal. This thorough comprehension of evaluation methodology and the understanding sought by this evaluation were important not only due to the multiple language translations, but also as this was most fitting for the open-ended conversational interview technique in which the evaluator had trained the surveyors; b) The Red Zone and travel restrictions for the evaluator: due to recent kidnappings of foreign nationals, the evaluator, a US citizen, was not permitted to travel into the Abala and Sanam communes, which have been designated ~~-~~Red Zones." Although the evaluator first accompanied the surveyors in their interviews in the Filingué commune, checked in by phone throughout the day, and debriefed each evening and planned each morning, because she could not be with the surveyors during the interviews in the Abala and Sanam communes, it was especially vital that the surveyors be trained extremely well, and that additional time be committed at the beginning to ensure a clear understanding of the nature and process of the evaluation and survey questions.

Day 8, Filingué Commune: Following the training day and prior to the Abala and Sanam interviews, the entire team of 8 surveyors and the evaluator collectively conducted the ~~-~~test" first meeting with the village leaders and then the household interview together in the village of Gardi, Filingué, and reviewed the interview immediately afterwards for clarification and improvements. Then the group proceeded to split up into teams (4 teams of two each, male/female each team, 5 households each village) and conduct all of the interviews for the two villages in the Filingué commune, Gardi and Sabon Yayi. Once all the individual household interviews were completed for Gardi and Sabon Yayi, as well as the 2 non-beneficiary interviews, the teams split up along

gender lines, and males interviewed a focus group of men, and females interviewed a focus group of women.
Days 9-12: the survey teams divided up into 2 men and 2 women per commune (keeping each survey team of 2 gender-balanced) and travelled to the two communes, Abala and Sanam, each appointed to a village for village leaders and prefect meetings, household interviews, focus group interviews, and 2 non-beneficiary (NP or non-participant) interviews per spot. Travel and logistics also ate up a fair bit of time. Each evening when the teams returned, they filled out tables and questionnaires (in addition to their survey templates) the evaluator created for them, breaking down the number of men interviewed, number of women interviewed, number of children age six or younger in the households, number of pregnant and lactating women in households, number of HH members 18 and older, number of HH members aged 50 or older-- for all of the interviews including individual beneficiary households, NPs, and focus groups. After these tables were filled out, the evaluator would facilitate an evening debriefing with the surveyors, gathering overall impressions, comparisons, and patterns, while also identifying concerns, and making corrections or improvements either to the schedules and logistics, or to the survey questionnaires.

During the period of time during which the surveyors were in the Red Zones, the evaluator set up and conducted interviews in Filingué town with the local prefect, the Early Warning Committee, Défi (the implementing partner for LEARN), Timidria (an implementing partner of Oxfam), Oxfam Great Britain, and SAEDEV (a state/NGO combined actor implementing a limited food distribution project for FAO). In addition, the evaluator and two data entry specialists utilized that time to enter data (qualitative and quantitative) from the in-coming survey questionnaires and tables.
Day 13: Travel of surveyors back to Filingue town, completion of village-based numerical tables, debriefing and contribution of input, assessments, and suggestions from surveyors.
Day 14: Travel back to Niamey.
Days 15-17: Evaluator interviews in Niamey with government representative, Défi, SAEDEV, FAO, Africaire, logistician. Evaluator prepares presentation of ~~-~~first impressions" to Mercy Corps office, presents on final day, accepts feedback and questions for report
Days 19-21: Evaluator departs next day for US via Ouagadougou, Casablanca, Amsterdam, Washington DC, Chicago, and San Francisco to Chico. (Weather-related flight delays in Amsterdam and Washington and airline delays in Ouagadougou-incoming- added 2 days to this flight--out and return.)
Days 22-29: Evaluator enters and sorts data, reviews notes, writes draft evaluation report.
Days 20-32: Evaluator writes revisions and submits final report.


Photo credit: Emilie Parry 2008

Randomized Household Selections:
10 households per commune, 5 per village
2 non-beneficiary households
Focus Groups, 2 per village (separate groups 1= Women, 2= Men)

The evaluator, Emilie Parry, randomly selected 10 households for each commune (from two separate villages in each commune) from a list of beneficiary households, plus 5 ~~-~~back-up" households for the cases where those originally selected were not present or otherwise unavailable. The focus groups were similarly selected.

The evaluation debriefing, or ~~-~~initial impressions presentation," in the Niamey Mercy Corps office took place on December 22, prior to the evaluator's departure from the country on the 24th. During the debriefing, the evaluator discussed her first impressions of the LEARN emergency distri-

butions' impact in the region and clarified some questions regarding what she observed in the 3 communes, as well as the city of Niamey and city of Filingué. This presentation was also an opportunity for Mercy Corps staff to ask questions, make clarifications on issues raised, or provide additional information to the evaluator which would contribute to a more accurate and informed final evaluation.

3.3. Data Gathering

3.3.1. Key Areas of Consideration and Criteria for the evaluation (comprehensive details of indicators for the evaluation provided in section 4 Findings)

- Timing of distributions
- Perceptions of distributions
- Utilization of distributions
- Household Consumption of famine foods
- Market behaviors, impact of distributions on local markets
- Pastoralists and ag-pastoralists (differences in livelihoods, differences in impact)
- Did households or members within households go without food (for one day, two days, three days, periodically?)
- DRR and mitigation (chronic, cyclical emergencies)

The Evaluation

Baseline study findings from the Vulnerability Survey:

Baseline vulnerability survey questions were also repeated in the evaluation survey, in order to have a point of comparison against the baseline pre-distribution information.
A limited number of questions related to food insecurity during the lean season (the critical period right before the harvest when hunger is an obstacle to farmers working in their fields) were retained. They are as follows:

1) Do you still have some stocks of commodities or means of purchasing cereals?

This question provides information about the availability of food stocks during this period covered by the survey and also about the means to procure commodities in the short term.

2) Did you become indebted to meet the food needs of your household?

This question gives the % of households which have resorted to indebtedness during the lean season, and it is pertinent where loans are available or possible.

3) Did your household consume famine foods' (Anza, Jigga, Aga, Guera, etc…?)

4) Did your household reduce the number of meals daily?

These questions validate the response of food stock availability at the household level.

5) Did your household sell some reproductive animals to satisfy food needs?

This question informs us of whether the household resorted to this strategy as a solution; it is one of the last solutions used by the household that have some animals to sell in response to a crisis.

6) Did your household sell or not some productive assets because of the food insecurity?

This question informs us on the % of households which adopted this last recourse as response to food insecurity.

The analysis of the data collected reflects various and diverse food insecurity situations in the seven communes of the Filingué Department in late June 2010.

Baseline vulnerability findings:

The SMART survey was administered to 795 households (composed of 5,565 persons) from a total number of households estimated at 76,819 (composed of 535,733 persons) in the department, based on the 2001 census of 2001 (GPC/H 2001), or about 1% of the total population. The overall results of this survey are presented below:

Note that in the baseline vulnerability survey:

- 83.52% of surveyed households in the 7 communes declared that they did not have any food stocks or any resource with which to purchase food;
- 52.88% of the households have gone into debt to respond their family's food needs
- Consumption of famine foods' was confirmed by 43.40% of the households in the department;
- The sale of productive animals was made to respond to the crisis by 33.21% of the households;
- 20.50% of households reduced their number of meals;
- 5.66% of households resorted to the sale of productive assets to cope with the food crisis.

The degree to which these variables can be applied equally to each commune is mixed. Considering lack of food stocks and inability to purchase food', a majority of households in each commune was vulnerable to food insecurity in late June 2010.

Acute malnutrition (according to WHO standards):

- Global acute malnutrition affects an estimated 16.0% in all 3 municipalities and 2.8% are affected by severe acute malnutrition.
- In the commune of Abala, the prevalence of global acute malnutrition among children 6 to 59 months was 16.0%, severe malnutrition affecting about 2.3% of these children.
- In Filingué, 18.6% of children aged 6 to 59 months suffer from global acute malnutrition and 4.1% of these children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition.
- In Sanam commune, the rate of global acute malnutrition is 13% and 1.6% are affected by severe acute malnutrition.

Chronic malnutrition (according to WHO standards):

- The rate of chronic malnutrition or ~~-s~~tunting," in all 3 communes overall is 33.8% including 9.2% suffering from severe chronic malnutrition.
- Stunting affects approximately 30.3% of children 6 to 59 months in Abala.
- These rates are respectively 32.3% in Filingué and 39.2% in Sanam.
- Severe chronic malnutrition affects around 8.6% in the town of Filingué and 8.1% to Filingué commune, 11.0% in Sanam.

Purpose of the LEARN emergency food distributions response:

LEARN's baseline assessment of the nutritional status of children 6 to 59 months was first and foremost intended to better inform and strategically focus the various emergency and long-term mitigation and prevention programs to counter malnutrition.
Mercy Corps commissioned a methodological survey system (SMART), including field data entry to develop quality data on anthropometric measures. The SMART methodology was used for this survey on nutrition in the Department Filingué more precisely in the communes of Abala, Filingué and Sanam. Sampling was conducted using a survey methodology by drawing areolar, stratified by municipalities and two degrees. The survey's aim was to produce representative results on nutrition of children 6 to 59 months in the three county Abala, Filingué and Sanam. The information gathered from this survey is useful as a baseline for the evaluation of the LEARN distribution response conducted in December, 2010.

Some elements which the LEARN Evaluation survey examined:

- **Market behavior & accessibility (including barter, sharing, price flux);**
- **Planting & Harvest periods, hungry seasons, food trends;**
- **Climate Change;**
- **Criteria viability & HH beneficiary selection process (vulnerability determination);**
- **Distribution transparency and appropriateness (content and implementation);**
- **Community perceptions;**
- **Food and household management trends;**
- **Health and nutrition indicators;**
- **Economic indicators;**
- **Livestock management and sale;**
- **Selling off of productive/valuable assets;**
- **Livelihood differences: Agro-pastoralist and pastoralist = different impacts of the distribution?**
- **Intended and unintended impacts of the distributions;**
- **Migration/Displacement;**
- **Gender dynamic & Distributions;**
- **Utilization and impact of distributions**
- **Debt management, sharing and distributions**
- **Distribution implementation (distances from villages, procedures, logistics, etc.)**

The LEARN Distribution Evaluation Survey:

Mostly a qualitative questionnaire, with some quantitative data components, the LEARN distributions evaluation survey considered impacts of distributions on food security, local markets, local response coordination, overall methodology and approach of response, quality of services, procurement and logistics, and a number of decisions made about both the process and content of the emergency food distributions.

In addition to the survey for beneficiary households, focus groups and non-beneficiaries, the evaluator conducted interviews on an individual basis with members of the EARLY WARNING COMMITTEE and with the entire group, with coordinating agencies in the area, government officials, logisticians, and other relevant actors or stakeholders. Those interviews went deeper into overall coordination and communication issues, as well as gaining the particular insight and opinions from variant perspectives, roles and experiences.

The villages visited by the survey team were selected by the evaluator, based on several criteria that would allow the identification of a good set of projects which would best represent Mercy Corps' work in the region, The evaluator was provided with a list of communes/villages/and household distribution beneficiaries from which she randomly selected the families to be visited. Two non-participant families in each village were also interviewed by the surveyors; those families were randomly selected as much as time constraints allowed.

In order to ensure autonomy, the majority of interviews[7] were conducted without the presence of representatives from Mercy Corps; the surveyors also made an effort to have it so that during interviews with recipients of the Mercy Corps distributions, normally carried out at their homes, no persons, except the family members, were present[8]. The evaluator and surveyors met initially with local government and the local chief or village leader, which in every village meant the entire village gathered around for the introductory explanation, determination of presence of families to

[7] Given time constraints, local cultural norms, and security concerns, this could not be the case for every interview, but it was for the majority of interviews.
[8] Given the cultural context, extremely large family size, and the fact that in many villages everyone qualified for distributions, this was not always possible to guarantee.

be interviewed, and an informal discussion of the distribution. In each of the 3 communes of Abala, Sanam, and Filingué, after the initial introductory meeting, teams of 2 split up to each interview 5 beneficiary households, each team to interview one non-participant household, and then finally the teams evenly divided up along gender lines in order to separately interview focus group, separated as well by gender and matched up with surveyors of that corresponding gender identity. In a few occasions, the evaluator had also to change the families initially selected for the interviews or interview families indicated by the project leader because participants were not available—had either outside jobs, were pastoralists who were gone for the season, some displaced, or worked in fields far away, or lived in a neighboring village (including in the scope of that village distribution center). Interviewees were informed that the evaluation was being conducted externally to Mercy Corps, and that all answers would be kept confidential unless otherwise requested by the interviewee.

Prior to arrival in Niger, during time in country, and following, the evaluator's efforts involved (i) document review (before, during and after the evaluator's visit to Niger); (ii) interviews with different stakeholders including project recipients and non-recipients, community and project leaders, government representatives, project partners, and Mercy Corps staff; (iii) direct observations during the site visits; and (iv) online research and preparation for food security emergency conditions in Niger. The following are details about each of these data sources.

3.3.1. Interviews

Table 2 provides the number and gender of the people interviewed at each project site. It also indicates the number of people interviewed by the evaluator on an individual basis.

As part of the evaluation, the surveyors and the evaluator interviewed 897 individuals (project beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, community leaders, project partners, local government, and representatives from other agencies, i.e., ~~-~~coordinating agencies."). The gender breakdown of interviewees averaged a ratio of 10 men to every 7 women. This discrepancy might be explained in part by the fact culturally, when one visits and interviews a household, it is the head of household, usually a man, who speaks for the entire family, exceptions being when a woman has been widowed, or her spouse is elsewhere herding the livestock or seeking paid work, or in the very rare cases, where there has been a divorce. By conducting the focus groups along gender lines (women interviewed in a group by female surveyors, men in a group interviewed by male surveyors), there was an attempt to allow space for women to communicate their perspectives and experiences in the distributions as well. It is recognized that this opportunity, due to cultural constructs, was not completely equal for both men and women.

Table 2. Overview Tracking of Interviewed for LEARN 2010 Impact Evaluation:

Mercy Corps Tillaberi LEARN distributions Impact Evaluation

Instructions: Enter number of interviews completed in each category in each village. Village Names will enter from worksheets; Totals are automatic.

Commune and Village	Participant Household Interviews			Non-participant Household Interviews			Focus Group		Leaders & Project Parters		Total	
	Families	[illegible] families	6 and under	Families	Women	Men	Groups	People	Groups	People	Interviews	People
Filingué--village Gardi	5	75	13	2	7	11	2	54	7	52	16	212
Filingué-- village Sabon Yayi	5	42	12	1	4	6	2	36			8	100
Abala-- Tanchiley	5	51	18	0	0	0	2	54			7	123
Abala-- Indikan Faku	5	63	22	2	4	9	2	44			9	142
Sanam--Allela	5	48	15	2	6	3	2	136			9	208
Sanam--Banikane	5	59	15	2	7	6	2	18			9	105
Niamey									2	4	2	4
Other relevant actors										3		3
Totals	30	338	95	9	28	35	12	342	9	59	60	897

* Estimated total number of individuals interviewed by the external evaluation team combining household visits, focus groups, and interviews with local leaders and coordinating agencies.

Interviewees: Participant households, non-participant households in the 3 communes, EWC members regional and department level, community leaders, project partners (Le Defi), coordinating partners (Oxfam/Timidria, SAEDEV, Africare, Qatar Charity, UNS, WFP, GON

Differentiation pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities? * need clarity-- need to breakdown by community, or ensure even split of HH and NP interviews (would require 2 NP vs. 1 interview)

Remarks: Also tracked elders, female-headed households, pregant and lactating women, pastoralist and agropastoralists.

Info tracked as well: children between 6 and 18, 18 and older in the hh, male to female configuration, both in HH, NP and focus groups

3.3.2. Documents

In preparation for the site visits and in preparation of this evaluation, I studied the following documents:

- Project summaries of the LEARN distributions;
- Project proposals and baseline vulnerability surveys for the LEARN distributions;
- Maps for Niger and for the specific regions where LEARN was implemented;
- Lonely Planet travel guide (country-specific backgrounds, history, language, culture);
- The World Fact Book by the CIA: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html;
- LEARN sub-grant contract with Défi;
- LEARN final narrative report;
- LEARN FFP quarterly report;
- LEARN Nutrition survey;
- LEARN Vulnerability survey (SMART);
- LEARN Commodity Price Monitoring sheets;
- LEARN Abala/Sanam/Filingué Commune lists, household beneficiary lists;
- ECB report on collaborative NGO emergency/food security early warning systems and response in Niger: www.ecbproject.org/disaster-relief-in-niger ;
- ECB goals and review (www.ecbproject.org);
- FEWSNET article: www.fews.net/pages/country.aspx?gb=ne ;
- RESPOND/LEARN/LIDR database;
- The Human Development Index reports for Niger
- ―Enhancing Disaster and Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery through Evaluation," ed. Ritchie, MacDonald, no. 126, Summer 2010, American Evaluation Association Journal.

3.3.3. Direct Observations

The main sources of the evaluator's direct observations were the visits to the communities, interviews with coordinating and partner agencies, government officials, and debriefing with surveyors (due to Red Zone and multiple language limitations). A comprehensive checklist was used to systematically observe the households visited and their surroundings. Observations in four main areas: (i) markets, food, water, and housing conditions for project participants and nonparticipants; (ii) livestock markets, livestock general condition and presence, access to food and water; (iii) health, sickness and mortality rates; and (iv) displacement.

4. Findings

This section presents the main findings of the evaluation of the impacts of Mercy Corps' LEARN emergency food distribution response, from August to October, 2010. The discussion begins with a synthesis of LEARN's overall impact and key findings. Findings related to the general criteria outlined in the Methodology section are presented. It is important to note that the evaluation team has generalized findings across all three communes and six village visited during the country visit, with a few noted distinctions between pastoralist and agro-pastoralist economies (When generalizations across projects are not possible, exceptions by project are noted).

4.1. Synthesis of Findings

Based upon the evaluator's careful review of multiple data sources, it can be asserted that the Mercy Corps LEARN emergency food distribution response saved lives, prevented or postponed displacement, and did not create any major negative, unintended impacts upon local, national, or regional market chains, including small retailers, traders, transporters, household consumers, or other known agents within the market chain of the department of Filingue, Tillaberi, Niger, West Africa. Perceptions of Mercy Corps' work in the communities of the department of Filingue are overwhelmingly positive, with vulnerability criteria and selection of beneficiaries viewed for the most part as appropriate, accurate, and helpful, and the logistical, procedural implementation of the distribution viewed as transparent and consistent with beneficiary criteria, in keeping with purported intent and target populations. It is clear that the designers of this program understood well the economic and cultural behaviors and patterns of the communities in this area, as well as the graduated levels of their coping mechanisms and specific vulnerabilities to environment, climate patterns, markets and livelihoods.

Mercy Corps' LEARN emergency food distributions program is a positive first step and one component of what it will take to break the cycle of vulnerability to chronic food emergencies, severe malnutrition, skyrocketing preventable mortality rates, and extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunities. As appreciated and ~~-~~on track" as the LEARN food distributions response was, it cannot be a stand-alone program if malnutrition, suffering and death are to be prevented, and if Niger is to find a way out of this increasingly devastating and undermining chronic annual food crisis. There must be developed a ~~-~~packaged response" of multiple components, which include:

I) Complimentary health and nutrition programs for pregnant and lactating women and chidren age 6 or younger;

II) Resourced, interlinked and supported early warning systems and committees effectually tied to resource allocation from the GoN in Niamey and to global inter-governmental and international non-governmental agencies, and IFIs;

III) Comprehensive sustainable livelihood development, building off of existing market chains, facilitating the training and development of new sustainable/eco-friendly industries, social entrepreneurs, small and medium businesses, along with potential micro-finance and micro-credit programs to enable local economies to stabilize and grow; the support of community Disaster Risk Insurance programs;

IV) Capacity-building support for governmental and community capacity-building for Disaster Risk Reduction, disaster mitigation, and emergency prevention and preparedness policy and programming.

The timing of the distributions and number of distributions (potentially two cycles of distributions, one earlier in the hungry season and one later, positioned favourably around expected harvests) is another area that could be improved upon, when preparing for the food crisis that will arrive again in 2011. For many, the LEARN distributions arrived in late August and early September, after 5 months of the hungry season, and people were famished, starving, when the distributions arrive. Many had been skipping meals and consuming famine foods for months. Some villages had already sold off their assets, packed up, and were planning to leave in search of food and income the very next day. The distributions prevented their having to depart, but their resources, health, and strength had already been depleted down to the last of their reserves, they were weak and their capacity was already undermined.

The interventions saved lives, increased nutrition and caloric intake among the most vulnerable, prevented or postponed displacement, were transparent and well-received by communities. The interventions were necessary and appropriate!

KUDOS:
The Department of Filingue in the Tillaberi region was not on the government's map for allocating resources and directly agencies to address vulnerability simply because there was no data that had been collected in that area. Mercy Corps therefore conducted a vulnerability survey which served both to qualify the area for emergency interventions and put Filingue communities on the map, and set a baseline for the emergency response.

4.2. Breakdown of Findings (Impact of Distributions and Quality of Services)

4.2.1. Household Consumption of famine foods/ Going without?

Leading up to, and just before the LEARN distributions, the majority of households surveyed were in fact consuming famine foods and many household members were going without some meals, some for days at a time. With the delivery of LEARN distributions, almost all households reported that they did not consume famine foods nor did they skip meals over the months of those deliveries (late August through to November). Another positive sign for surveyors was that they were greeted by villagers with full meals and returned at the end of the day with full bellies from the field. During the hungry months and even prior last Spring, such a thing never would have happened, as families had absolutely nothing to share with their hosts. Distributions definitely increased daily nutrition and calorie intake, and allowed for some stores of food!

4.2.2. Determination of Household Size

Mercy Corps set the household family size at 8 and designated monthly distributions for 8 household members; when the GoN pointed out that their official –family size" is 7, Mercy Corps did shift the terms to fit the GoN, but continued to distribute the same amount of food, which was appropriate to the circumstances, as the determined amounts, 80% of caloric needs, was the same for both distribution definitions. However, in every village, at least 2 or 3 of the randomly selected households for interviews had between 15 and 22 people living with them. Mercy Corps' distribution policies provided no alternative option or graduated distribution for families whose numbers were double or triple the government determination of household size. These families therefore received the same amount of food as a household of 7 or 8 did, but had to stretch those calories over 2 or 3 times as many people. Lack of flexible, problem-solving options for situations such as this clearly was a flaw in the program.

4.2.3. Family Card Required: Registration of qualifying households

The method used to register and track distributions for qualifying households was the use of –family cards." Each head of household in Niger is supposed to have in possession a family card with name of the head of household and accompanying identification number. In the initial identification of vulnerable families, those deemed to qualify for the distributions were asked to register and present their family cards at registration; once the family card was shown and the number registered, that household would be on the list for distribution. While this is probably the best method for registering, tracking and managing such large numbers of people for distributions, there were a few shortcomings that, with some minor planning, and implementation of alternative registration solutions, could have solved those problems that prevented some households from receiving distributions even when they were just as qualified as their neighbors who did receive them.

Due to the very tight time schedule and short notice of this distribution, many heads of households (with their identity cards) were not in the villages at the time of identification and registration

of qualifying households; if there had been sufficient notice in the villages, those pastoralists gone for the season or heads of household sharecropping or working in other regions of Niger would have returned to their villages for the registration. Some households were missing family cards due to death, loss, or other disturbance to daily life. Alternatives for those families missing family cards or with very large households were not proffered.

> "If it were my responsibility to choose between corn and millet, I prefer millet."

There does seem that there may have been a slight communication gap between Mercy Corps management in Niamey and the ex-pat logistician who coordinated and supervised the distributions. Mercy Corps management in Niamey stated that there had been alternatives put in place for those missing family cards to be registered, or for higher family numbers to increase the amounts of distributions, this was not clearly understood by the logistician, who viewed both the possession of family cards and the amount for each food distribution no matter the family size as "absolutes" with no accommodations possible. To add, the logistician mentioned that whenever there were duplicate names across various villages, it was believe that these were the same people who had married into other families and were attempting to gain access to multiple distributions. While Niamey office understood that this would not be the case because of the way family cards are distributed by the government, and also that the culture of naming in Niger is such that many, many people have the exact same names, the logistician coordinator did not understand this, and deleted duplicate names from the distribution lists, although the accompany ID numbers were different. This means very likely that qualified, registered families with family cards were removed from the list in error, and received no distributions whatso-ever. In these and other cases where vulnerable, qualifying households were not permitted to receive the monthly emergency food distributions from August through October, in almost all cases, neighbors shared their food distributions with them (meaning that the neighbors' stores of food and caloric intake was also less than desired). In the future, in order to avoid such potential confusion, it is important that there are regular updates and communications between logistics and program staff, particularly country office management, as to determination on these points, most especially when ex-pats have been brought in to assist on implementation who may not have the same familiarity and awareness of local customs.

4.2.4. Criteria for Beneficiary Identification (Vulnerability Criteria)

The criteria established for determining vulnerable households as beneficiaries was considered appropriate across the board, in every interview from community meetings to focus groups and individual households. It was a widely held sentiment across all three communes that Mercy Corps' LEARN distributions were transparent, inclusive, appropriate, and largely accessible (with the minor note that additional burden was placed on those beneficiaries who had to walk to the central distribution point from neighboring villages and pay for transport of the distribution back home). The criteria for determining vulnerability and identification of targeted beneficiaries (listed in section two; including but not limited to: presence in the household of elders, disabled, children 0-6 years, Pregnant and Lactating women, female-headed households, lack of food stores in the home, consumption of famine foods, etc.) was reflected in the household data in our household samplings, suggesting that the initial identification of beneficiary households was accurate. The process of household identification in June/July correctly targeted the most vulnerable households, and the vulnerability criteria was widely known and understood, and agreed upon by communities.

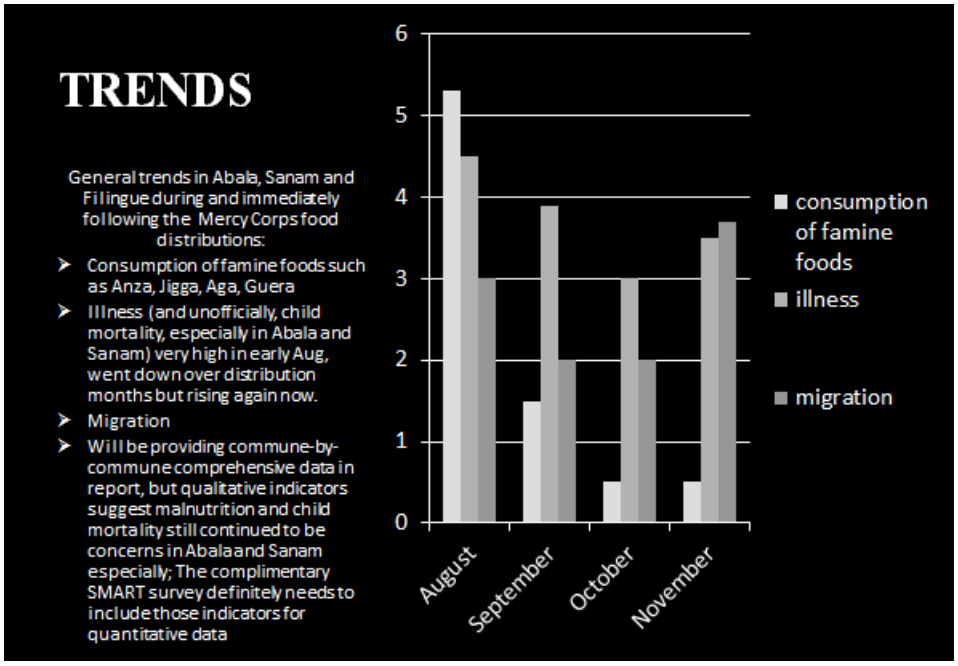
4.2.5. Determination of food stuffs for distributions

The monthly emergency food distributions included corn (maïs), cowpeas, oil and salt. Most people prefer to eat sorghum or millet—which is one of the reasons Mercy Corps determined to distribute corn. In the planning of the distribution, Mercy Corps took great consideration as to how to disturb or impact the local markets as little as possible, to avoid negatively impacting the existing market chain, goods availability and commodity pricing in the local and regional markets. None of the foodstuffs were imported from outside of West Africa, and the oil and salt was distrib-

ute through a vouchers program linked with local small traders of oil and salt. The cowpeas were purchased in Niger, and the Maïs from Nigeria. Since corn (Maïs) is not people's first choice (millet and sorghum are preferred), this reduced the likelihood of creating a parallel market in trade of Maïs, and increased the likelihood the food distributions would actually be eaten by the intended recipients.

While there might have been a preference for sorghum or millet, as many, many people pointed out, when you're starving, you become ecstatic about corn. In Appendix 7.4, there is attached a video from one of the women's focus groups in Tanchiley, Abala, where women performed an impromptu "Dance of the Corn" to express how grateful they were for the corn distributions at a point in time that they were desperate for food.

In instances where women picked up or were able to receive the food distributions, in the majority of the cases almost all if not all of the distribution went to the households. Men were split between feeding their own households, and using part the food distribution (on average ¼ - 1/3 of the distribution, sometimes more) to share with neighbors or to pay off debts. In most reported cases, this was a unilateral decision made by the male head of household, although there were some cases where the household couple or the family as a whole determined to share some of their distributions or pay off some debts. These reports were fairly widespread and common in all survey results, for all geographical regions covered.



4.2.6. Selling off of Assets

Generally speaking every 4 out of 5 interviewed sold off assets (livestock mainly—oxen, cows, sheep, goats) they would have otherwise kept, in order to pay for household food needs. This fact points both to issues of timing (if distributions had come earlier, or if there had been two periods of distribution, that could have prevented such last-resort asset-selling of otherwise productive and valuable livestock for rock-bottom prices), and the need to facilitate a "package of food crises response" programming includes livelihoods development and other complementarity in programming, to strengthen local economies, resource buffers and create more options and ca-

pacities for families. In most of the communities, they were down to the wire when the distributions came in, just in time. People were packed up and ready to leave the next day seeking for work/food wherever they could find it (mostly going to towns or hiring themselves out on others' land). The distributions prevented or postponed their migration, but arrived after most of their assets had been sold at very low prices, depleting their already meagre assets and destabilizing them further.

4.2.7. Displacement, Dependence, and Debt

> *I learned about the distribution through the communications of the village chief. The distribution took place in the village with no problems*

As mentioned above, the distributions just barely prevented some displacement, but in most cases, due to the very poor harvests in late September, October and November, displacements were delayed rather than completely prevented by the distributions. Already at the time of distribution (and also during the identification of beneficiaries period in July), heads-of-household were seeking work in towns such as Filingue town or in Niamey or along the borders of Nigeria, Burkina Faso or Mali. They also were selling their labor on others land rather than working their own land. The distributions enabled people to work on their own land and assets, rather than have to continue hiring out their labor to others. There was no mention of people reinvesting profits from income-generating activities instead of food because of the distribution, mainly because a) the harvests were so bad that little income was made, and the price of livestock was abhorrently low in response to the desperation of these communities (there are actually –vulture-like" individuals, mostly from other countries, who will scour the countryside during the hungry season and food crises to buy up livestock at exploitatively cheap prices), and b) because many owed massive debt from the past years of food crisis, market price fluctuations, flood and drought, and so if there was any extra, it went first to paying off debts, not reinvesting into the income-generating activities of the household.
Again, this points to need for economic development/livelihoods and market chain programming support.

4.2.8. Markets

Market prices prior to the distributions were extremely high, but did not seem to be impacted by the distributions or the vouchers for oil and salt. Traders and retailers said that the folks to whom the distributions were made didn't really buy food at the markets, and this was confirmed by most of the household and focus group interviews. The choice of maïs (corn) nonetheless did provide an additional buffer to avoid impacting market prices and sales, since that is not a popular staple on the markets. The purchasing of oil and salt locally through a voucher system proved successful and appropriate, and the purchase of cowpeas in Niger helped keep prices stable and avoided the deflationary impact of imports; the regional purchase (Mali, Nigeria) of maïs was in keeping with usual trade routes and imports, so was not found to be problematic to local market systems. Future programming would benefit from a component that supported the market linkages and support economic capacity of vulnerable beneficiary households so that they could be positioned to contribute to the health and strength of local market systems.

4.2.9. Experiences with Distributions:

The majority of beneficiaries were at a desperate point just before the distributions arrived, and the distributions definitely helped people shift out of that point. Children and adults were getting more calories, the households were able to work their own land and could stay in their villages

rather than have to be displaced, seeking basic survival resources (although some were still displaced later, in November and December, many were not, and were able to stay in their villages).

The logistics of the distributions were such that various central villages were chosen as distribution centers, and then surrounding village inhabitants would walk over to that central village to pick up their distribution, and pick up their vouchers to purchase oil and salt from the local vendors (who in fact were there at the distribution point as well; the logistician pointed out that the voucher system was unnecessary in this case, as everything was done at once and the vendors for salt and oil were all in the same place. Managing and creating the vouchers stole precious time from the start-up of the distributions, and it would have been better in this case just to use a list and ID numbers system).

Survey Questions: Did you have to travel to receive your distribution?
Do you know someone who knew of the distribution and qualified/was selected, but was unable to get to the distribution point?

i. I learned about the distribution through the communications of the village chief. The distribution took place in the village with no problems
Through the village chief I was alerted of the distribution. The distribution was done in a central place. Do not know anyone who has received nothing.
iii. Through the village chief was notified to come to the distribution. Do not know anyone who was in this situation of being able to come to the distribution.
iv. The village head notified us and made sure everyone got to the distribution point. I do not know anyone who was unable to pick up their distribution;
v. I was told by the village chief and everyone was served.

All the same, those people who had travelled from their villages to a nearby distribution center still faced challenges. The biggest challenge was transporting the distributed foods back to their home villages. Too much and too heavy to carry on their heads, many had to pool their extremely sparse resources and rent a cart and donkey (charrette des asines) to port the foodstuffs back home. This was money these families did not have to spare, and thus the distance of the distribution point from some beneficiary villages did prove a headship for some.

Distribution and procurement logistics: Lack of storing capacity in the area and in Niger in general is a major concern, and in distributions in the future, arrangements should be made in advance and managed by Mercy Corps for the storage and transport of the food stuffs. The award of the grant came so quickly and unexpectedly, neither Mercy Corps nor the implementing partner Le Défi were prepared, meaning the capacity to implement the distribution and the arrangements for storage and transport were not in place. Thanks to many extremely dedicated people working overtime and tirelessly working to resolve storage and transport problems, the distributions wound up working, but they were delayed and could have been implemented sooner if these arrangements and capacities had been in place. Since timing was a big issue for the distributions (arriving rather late when people were already extremely destabilized), this definitely is a point for improvement in the next response. Storage is a real problem, and there are very few warehouses that can be used; in some places a school was even used for storage, but that space was lost once school started up again. The staff of Défi did not have the time, resources or capacity to manage storage, and other complicated logistics, so there should either be support for developing their capacity to manage this in the future, or that should be a component planned for by Mercy Corps staff (Défi is very capable in many other ways, extremely dedicated and hard-working—especially as most do not get paid for this work, but have other jobs on top of their commitment to and passion for the work of Défi). Trucks were another logistical issue: there are many massive tanker trucks that traverse the Sahel and Sahara on the main road, but to branch out to these small, roadless villages, smaller trucks would be more useful and appropriate.
Accessibility: The distributions were implemented at distribution points in villages that generally were central to other qualifying, participating villages. People (mostly women) who had to walk in from other villages to the central distribution point village did have difficulties carrying the foodstuffs back to their home village, and some had to pool limited resources to pay to share a cart

and donkey to transport the goods home. This was an accessibility issue, but it did not prevent people from picking up the distributions. This did, however, create a minor discrimination element for those who had to come in from neighboring villages and pay for the transport of their goods home.

4.2.10. Selection Criteria for Target Beneficiaries: On the Mark?

As for the criteria for selection, across the board the communities felt it was appropriate, transparent, without favoritism. The criteria clearly matched to the make-up of the randomly selected households across the 3 communes. The Selection and registration process, however, had some areas for improvements—there was no prior notification to villagers that a beneficiary identification study be conducted, so many were not present (out in pastoralists lands, or seeking paid labor in other regions; often it was just the head of household gone, and with him, the family card), and so even though they qualified for the distributions, they were not able to be registered, and so deemed ineligible.

4.2.11. Reasons for non-participation:

As stated earlier, there were some who qualified but because they were not present at the time of the identification and registration, or because they did not have a family card with them for whatever reason, they were not permitted to receive distributions along with their neighbors.

That said, it was consistently expressed that people felt the selection itself was transparent and just, not exhibiting any favoritism towards any groups or individuals.

In many villages, everyone qualified for the distributions, so this was not an issue. Where there were some NPs (non-participants) who did not qualify, seems they did not feel they needed the support. There were a few instances where, at the time of the June assessment and July identification/registration of beneficiaries, there were those who did not need support and did not qualify. However, by the time the distributions start in Aug and Sept, many of those who previously did not qualify after months of hunger and lean times, and the delay of the harvest and then a very poor harvest, they did qualify and have a great need for that support, and requested it, but because they were not in the original registry from July, they could not receive assistance. There were some bordering villages to recipient villages who were not included in the response (governmental designations and sheer need overwhelmed by capacity and resources available)—some of which did have other agencies working and conducting distributions there, but they thought Mercy Corps was doing a better job and requested MC come work there. They expressed they did not feel other agencies were helping in the way they needed it.

Why did you not participate in the distribution?
—"did not have family card, but did qualify according to vulnerability criteria…"
—"did not have family card, but the neighbors shared their distribution with us…:
—"there was full awareness of the distributions but unable to receive them (although present for the distributions) because not registered…"
—"was not included in original identification and registration because not present for that, although I qualify…"

4.2.12. Child illness and mortality?

In the commune of Filingue, it seems that the distributions had more of an effect on the health and well-being, as well as the prevention of mortality among children age 6 and younger. In Abala in particular, and Sanam as well, there were far greater numbers reporting both illness among children as well as, sadly, deaths of children just before and during the distributions. These areas, particularly northern Abala, are more pastoralist than agro-pastoralist, and it is worth considering the dynamics, movements, and conditions there that may differ from more agro-pastoralist areas in Filingue, and how this has made children more vulnerable there. A health and nutrition component in a package of food crises response, with child and maternal health experts advising on prevention, mitigation and protection measures that can be adapted and integrated into programming with these most vulnerable of beneficiaries.

4.2.13. Pregnant and Lactating Women's Health and Nutrition

There were similar findings for pregnant and lactating women, comparing health status in Abala and Sanam unfavourably against the beneficiary populations in Filingue commune. While the distributions definitely helped protect the health and survival of women and young children in these communities, their vulnerability was such that it appears a health and nutrition program is an essential component to any mitigation or response work. Reports of illness among women were far greater than reports of mortality.

4.2.14. Coordination with local and national NGOs:

Mercy Corps made great efforts to coordinate, communicate, cooperate and consider the other coordinating agencies, both governmental and NGO in the department of Filingue. This point was confirmed consistently from multiple sources outside of Mercy Corps, including within some of the other agencies in the area that admitted to not doing as good of a job as they could have both in communicating with Mercy Corps and Défi, and in tracking their own programming geographically and sectorally.

Mercy Corps took great care to avoid overlap with other agencies working in the area, mainly Timidria (Oxfam's partner) and SAEDEV. SAEDEV was not interested in engaging in coordination or collaboration. Timidria did share information and coordinate, but somehow still this evaluation found some overlap of distribution in a few of the same villages designated to Mercy Corps/Défi, where Timidria was distributing emergency foodstuffs, but only to households with handicapped members. It seems that there may have been a small unnoticed project or "left-over" funds that had to be spent, but this is unclear, and Mercy Corps had not been aware of this. This overlap in no way negatively impacted community perceptions of Mercy Corps. Oxfam in Filingue expressed an interest in collaborating with other agencies to work in the same areas with complimentary programming.

4.2.15. Working with and through a local partner:

Mercy Corps partnered with Le Défi for the implementation of the LEARN procurement and distribution response. As the award for LEARN came through with little time before implementation must be done, Défi was caught unprepared, as they had not been expecting that they would be implementing such a large scale distribution program. Most of the members of Défi (if not all) work other full time jobs, and the work of Défi is their passion, their contribution to healthier communities. Because of this, their skills, resources, and time are compromised to a certain degree with other obligations. This is not, however, a recommendation against working with Défi. On the contrary, the members of this organization exhibited enormous dedication to the implementation of LEARN, working extremely late every day, weekends, holidays, without being asked to and without questioning it. Despite many deficits, Défi made certain that the procurement and distributions went well, were transparent, appropriate, effective and well-considered. When there are such dedicated, hardworking people in a local partner NGO, it is very important for the INGO to make efforts to support the learning and capacity-building within a local agency, to help that agency become operationally sustainable, resourced and effective, from accounting and finances, to program planning, social mobilization, feasibility and risk reduction, to implementation, monitoring, evaluating, and otherwise running a clean and appropriate agency.

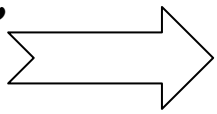
At the end of the project, there was some confusion around financial reporting that was eventually resolved, but pointed to the need to support the financial capacity of a local NGO, and to work closely with them on monitoring, tracking, allocating and reporting financial expenditures as well as operational issues (Supporting the integration of monitoring systems for fiscal and operational/implementation reporting and management). Despite this confusion, Défi worked to resolve this issue, and proved itself to be an excellent and commitment partner for Mercy Corps. Communication and close coordination is often key in these relationships.

It is also vital that prior to the start-up of a response such as this, Mercy Corps ensures it has the internal financial, logistics and operational capacity not only to support a partnering agency and build capacity there, but also to manage its role efficiently, in good time.

4.2.16. Early Warning Committee:

As part of this evaluation, the evaluator examined coordination with local government, leadership, forum and community groups in the region where distributions took place. The Early Warning Committee is a key group for coordination (and alerting to food security vulnerability) in the area. The Early Warning Committe meets regularly during periods of food security vulnerability in Filingue town, has been in existence for over 10 years, but has been increasingly ramping up its activities since the massive food crisis of 2005. With each year of increasingly severe conditions, crop and weather unpredictability and global market price fluctuations, the EWC has gained greater knowledge and experience. Representatives of local and regional government, chiefs, women's groups, local NGOs, professors from the Tech University, and International NGOs (mainly Oxfam and Mercy Corps), as well as SAEDEV are members. The EWC has served mainly as an information sharing forum, a network to help communicate and coordinate, but it has not been very effective in terms of leveraging governmental and international resources and support to response to early warning indicators of severe food crisis vulnerability. Without the support or backing of the national Niger government in Niamey, the group tends to fall back on its own capacities, attempting to address the problems they face themselves, but with very few resources to do so. A key reason for this lack of support and responsiveness from then national government in Niamey has largely to do with politics and preferences, and the department of Filingue has not ingratiated itself to current policy makers. A potential resource investment that could improve the impact and capacity of the Early Warning Committee would be to appoint a liaison between that committee and national government actors in Niamey, who could also play the role of supporting capacity within the committee to improve information-sharing (with Niamey in particular) and reporting, and to support regular meetings and tracking to catch and respond to indicators earlier and introduce more mitigation or prevention efforts.

Compare the situation last year with this year as recipients of the intervention; did this distribution make a difference in your lives?



“”The distribution allowed us to work our own land rather than sell our labor to others.”

“There was better availability, accessibility and diversification of food because of the distribution. We were experiencing great poverty and famine before the distribution.”

“Without distribution, the products of the harvest would not have been sufficient to cover our needs.”

“This year it felt like we had an abundance of food.”

“There was a big difference, for the better!”

« On remercie Mercy Corps pour son aide! »

5. Recommendations

Timing is everything: From getting the funding up on time, to building up or maintaining adequate agency capacity from start-up, to reaching vulnerable populations before the situation becomes dire and life-threatening, strategic timing can make a great difference.

Program and Funding Requests:
Timing: Now is the time to start working on fund development for distribution of basics for the next round of food insecurity. Consider starting a round a distributions for March-May and again in Aug-Sept (or other possible dates, working with potential harvest, but it is clear the distributions need to start much earlier).

Getting at the root of vulnerability: Develop program strategies and proposals for a ~~"p~~ackage of food crisis response:" Complementary program planning and funding for livelihoods, micro-insurance, micro-finance/credit, and child and maternal health programs within Mercy Corps,

-OR-

Coordinate with other implementing agencies to compliment their livelihoods/health/DRR/micro-finance and economic development programming and create a collaborative package of complimentary services to address intertwined facets of food crisis and Climate Change vulnerability.

Funding and organizational capacity: make certain internal finance and logistics capacity is up for the beginning of the project and the duration, as well as resources to support capacity building for fiscal management and reporting with local partner, and be prepared for implementing every project for which there is a proposal.

Recurring Protracted Emergencies: require an investment in community and governmental Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) initiatives, emergency mitigation and preparedness programming. Without question, a package of services needed:

- Livelihoods, Economic Development, Diversification and Market linkages
- Community Health Programs (especially child and maternal health and nutrition)
- Community DRR Planning
- Community Disaster Insurance
- Consideration as well of emergency preventative seeds & soil, drip irrigation, tools and other support to mitigate poor harvest potential (Ag-Extension)

Family cards used for registration: it does seem that possession of the family cards at the time of selection and registration posed a problem for many; consider alternatives for the card, or allow a space of flexibility in those cases where cards are for some reason not available but the family otherwise qualifies

Baseline survey: a number of families were not present (or heads of households) at the time of the initial survey and so were unable to be registered: in the future, have animators notify villages with sufficient time for Head of Household to return with family card in order to be present for registration.

Family/Household size: For the most part, family size was appropriate, but if for 2 of every 5 households in the random sampling, there was at least one household of 16-19 persons, and they had to stretch the same amount of food as a HH of 7 or 8.

6. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Evaluation

The following are listed the main strengths and limitations of this evaluation of which the evaluator is aware:

Strengths

The learning curve for Niger was less steep at entry, as the evaluator had lived in Niger prior to the evaluation and supported programs there in two management roles with two separate INGOs. The Evaluator also has worked with Mercy Corps in various capacities in the past, and so therefore was familiar with the culture and systems of the organization prior to arrival in Niger for the evaluation. The Mercy Corps staff in Niamey and Filingue were incredibly helpful, available to support logistics, contacts for meetings, connections with potential surveyors, were willing to work late and long to see that what needed to be done for the evaluation within this very limited timeframe was done, and in general were a great pleasure to work with. The independent surveyors for the evaluation team stepped up to this very difficult task with great enthusiasm and interest, bringing to the table a wide breadth and depth of experience and expertise. Their contribution in the refinement of the survey, the discussion of the survey findings, and their critical analysis capacity were invaluable throughout the process of this evaluation.

Constraints of Evaluation

The time constraints and resources available created necessary limitations to what and how the evaluation could be conducted. With a few days between the time the evaluator was solicited for the job and the travel date to Niger, the evaluation methodology and survey, as well as the logistics and planning, had to be conducted in-country rather than prior to travel to Niger. As mentioned previously, the inability of evaluator to travel to –Red Zones" of Abala and Sanam due to travel restrictions upon US citizens and foreign nationals created another constraint which was mitigated with additional training and an exceptional team of surveyors.

The element –Telephone Tag" with language is always a risk, the transference of knowledge from English-to-French-to-Hausa-to-French-to-English of course opens possibilities for misunderstanding and confusion, leading at worst to skewed results and misinformation. Attempts to mitigate potential comprehension or knowledge loss were made, and the best scenario for the circumstances was fortunately realized (the nearest ideal would have been that evaluator was in all interviews with a Hausa interpreter, but that was not possible in Abala or Sanam.

This evaluation was conducted separately from the comprehensive SMART evaluation, and had more of a complimentary qualitative focus. Results will have stronger impact when combined with the SMART nutritional survey component conducted separately.

7. Appendices

7.1. Information about the Evaluator

Emilie Parry
Emilie Parry is a freelance consultant in the field of monitoring and evaluation, conflict transformation/peace-building, community capacity building, sustainable development and disaster management, contributing to such agencies as the Fetzer Institute, ODI, Oxfam, Tillers International, and Mercy Corps international. With experience working in Niger with two different INGOs in the past, Ms. Parry has conducted several assessments of the humanitarian coordination, response and recovery in post-1/12/10-quake Haiti for Refugees International. She's served as interim Director in the start-up of Zafen (www.zafen.org) out of FONKOZE in Haiti to contribute to economic recovery and stabilization of communities. Ms. Parry conducted research and helped with fund development and strategic planning for Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's Climate Change Adaptation and Human Resilience program concept development. Emilie has served as Asia Regional Humanitarian Director/Senior Research Manager and Deputy Director of global humanitarian programs for Oxfam America/International, the Indian Ocean tsunamis program response and recovery for Mercy Corps, covered senior management maternity leave in West Africa for Mercy Corps, and has worked in communities in upheaval and transition in Sri Lanka, Haiti, Sudan, Somalia, and many other locales. Research developed under her supervision for Oxfam in South Asia has been disseminated through peer review journals, across local NGO and academic organizations, and at forums at Oxford, Harvard, MIT and Tufts. Her own field research has been utilized by ECOWAS, PBS' Bill Moyers Program, SAPRIN and the Development GAP, among others. Ms. Parry has established offices and programs within conflict zones of Sri Lanka as district director and national adviser for the Sewa Lanka Foundation, focusing on sustainable community systems and development within conflict and upheaval. Emilie also has experience as a legal investigator for habeas and appellate cases working with Death Row inmates in California. She holds degrees in English and International Development Studies (with a minor in German) from the University of California at Berkeley, has completed a year of Masters in International Economics study at the University of Ghana, Legon's United Nations Institute for Social, Statistical, and Economic Research, and holds a Masters degree from Brandeis University's Heller School of Social Policy and Management from the SID (Sustainable International Development) program, with joint studies at Harvard Law/KSG in conflict transformation, dispute negotiation, international law & human rights.

The evaluator wishes to thank Mercy Corps for their investment in learning through evaluations and commitment to the never-ending process of improvements and innovation in the field of humanitarian and sustainable community development work. The staff members at Mercy Corps were enthusiastically supportive of my evaluation work, genuinely interested in learning and improving their program work, and intellectually, analytically engaged throughout the process. The evaluators groups of surveyors were a joy to work with, energetic, enthusiastic, and compassionate in their work, willing to work long hard days as well as late nights, putting their brains to work when their bodies were tired from a day of traveling from village to village. This evaluator has learned a great deal from her kind and generous hosts, and is grateful for those gifts.

7.2. Photos

Please see photos attached in Annex 7.2

7.3. Initial Impressions PowerPoint Presentation

Please see PowerPoint presentation attached in Annex 7.3

7.4. Video: Danse du Maïs

Please see video attached in Annex 7.4; this video is a women‘s focus group‘s response to the question asking about the choice of corn as one of the staples in the emergency distribution.