



Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism (VRAI)

Final Project Report

September 27, 2016 - February 28, 2018



PROJECT SUMMARY

Award No: AID-624-A-16-00015
Start Date: September 27, 2016
End Date: February 28, 2018
Report Date: March 30, 2018
Total Award: \$ 500,000

I. Executive Summary

Mercy Corps has been implementing the USAID-funded *Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism (VRAI)* program since September 2016. This program was developed to promote peace and stability in West Africa through the design of replicable data collection tools, which will enable national, regional and local level state and civil society practitioners to identify communities most vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

Mercy Corps partnered with local organizations in three regions, including two in Niger (Diffa and Tillabéry with partner Karkara) and one in Burkina Faso (with partner Centre de Gouvernance Démocratique (CGD)).

Mercy Corps carried out phase one of the assessment in March 2017 in the Diffa region of Niger; phase two from July - August 2017 in the Gorom-Gorom commune of Burkina Faso; and phase three from October - November 2017 in the Tillabéry region of Niger (see below).

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

All of the deliverables were successfully met in the project. There was, however, a delay due to the complex and evolving security situation in the implementation areas and two no-cost extensions were granted to finalize the objectives of the project. Various reports and learning materials were developed at the end of the project, which can be used by donors, practitioners and stakeholders to replicate the assessments completed by Mercy Corps and partners. In addition, data was collected and collated from three regions, including via 705 households surveys; 86 focus groups; 35 local authority questionnaires; over 30 participatory mapping exercises with communities and leaders; and over 30 meetings to prepare and validate the village selection tool (VST) criteria with commune and community leaders, which set the stage and context for all of the research VRAI completed.

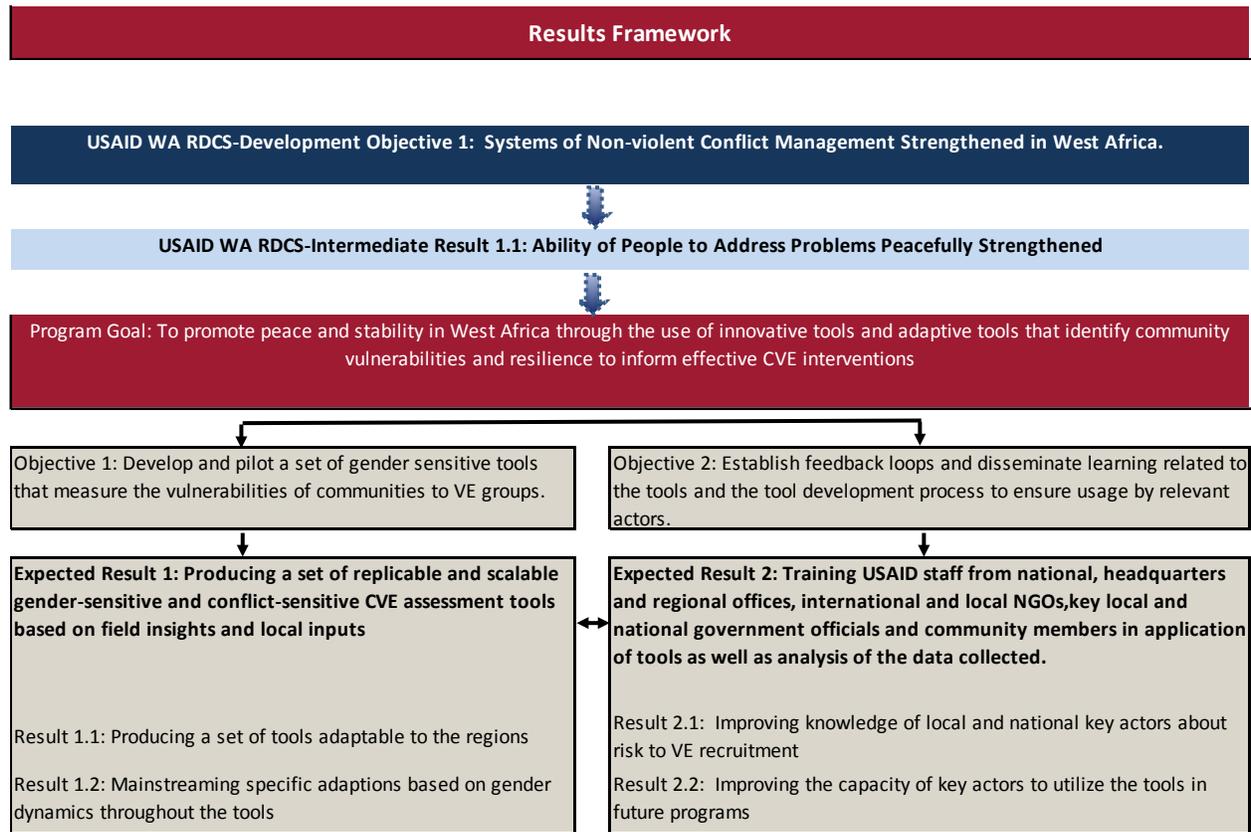
1. Describe accomplishments in accordance with the program description.

Over the course of the project, Mercy Corps and its local partners achieved all of the planned results. VRAI was designed in response to the evolving threat of violent extremist (VE) groups in West Africa and the lack of harmonized tools to identify factors of community vulnerability to

VE. VRAI aimed to promote peace and stability in West Africa through the use of innovative and adaptive tools that identify community vulnerabilities and resilience capacities to inform effective CVE interventions. **The program achieved this goal through two objectives, which were fully met by the end of the project in February 28, 2018:**

- 1) **Developed and piloted a set of gender sensitive tools that measure the vulnerabilities of communities to VE groups; and**
- 2) **Established feedback loops and disseminated learning related to the tools and the tool development process to ensure usage by relevant actors.**

The VRAI program covered three regions in two countries, including Diffa and Tillabéry in Niger and the Sahel Region in Burkina Faso. Mercy Corps began implementing the program in September 2016 in partnership with Karkara (in Niger) and the Center for Democratic Governance (CDG in Burkina Faso) and closed on February 28, 2018 (after no-cost extensions).



2. A comparison of actual activities and results with the plan established for the life of the project (presented in narrative and table format).

2.1 Program achievements

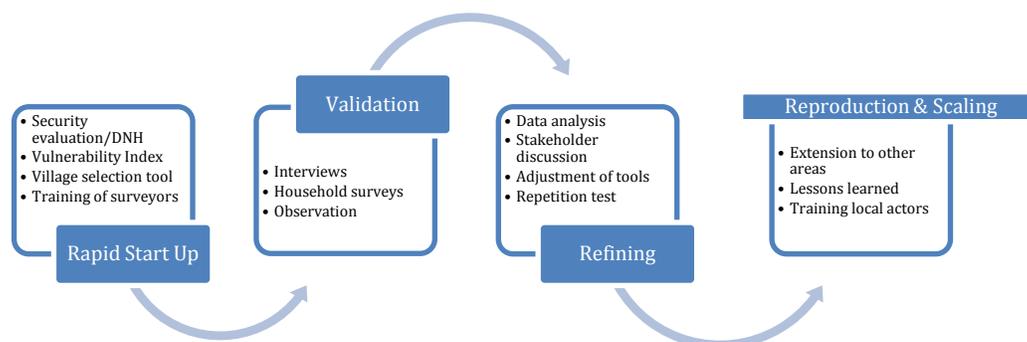
Description of Activities		Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description
		Achieved	Ongoing	No	
Program start-up activities					
Update and approval of the activities work plan, including workplan narrative.		X			Annual work plan approved by USAID
Elaboration and approval of the Branding and Marking plan		X			VRAI Branding and Marking plan completed, approval from USAID received.
Signature of sub-agreements with local partners		X			- Sub-award agreement signed with Karkara - Sub-award signed with CDG
Security assessment in target zones (Diffa & Tillabéry in Niger and the Sahel region in Burkina Faso)		X			Assessment carried out by Mercy Corps' national and regional security advisors (final report available)
Recruitment of a research consultant		X			After a call for applications, a local and international consultant were identified; both met and exceeded deliverables and worked well with Mercy corps.
Program kick off meeting		X			The kick off meeting was held in December 2016, in the presence of the USAID Representative in Niger and several key government figures.
Baseline assessment		X			Baseline completed in January 2017.
Objective 1: Develop and pilot a set of gender sensitive tools that measure the vulnerabilities of communities to VE groups					
A1.1	Conduct a rapid scan of existing CVE approaches, frameworks and methodologies	X			A desk review/rapid scan of existing CVE approaches, frameworks and methodologies has been done and a report has been issued and shared with USAID.
A1.2	Engage key state, traditional, and civil society stakeholders in consultations and finalize the Village Selection Tool (VST)	X			Based on the desk review, a set of VE risk factors has been produced and shared with and reviewed by stakeholders during the first steering committee meeting of the project. The village selection tool (VST) was validated with local stakeholders in January/February 2017. This tool was revised again before the Burkina Faso activities and is included in the index of documents produced, as well as a recommended update to the tool.
A1.3	Use the VST tool to rank vulnerable villages in selected regions	X			Completed for the Diffa region of Niger; Oudalan in Burkina Faso and Tillabéry, Niger. Stakeholders validated the VST in each location.
A1.4	Work with local partners to adapt the tools	X			This work took place throughout the process of development, testing and refinement of tools in all three locations.
A1.5	Validate the VST with selected communities	X			Completed in all three locations.
A1.6	Hold presentations with key stakeholders to adjust tools	X			Completed following the initial test of the tools in Diffa; validated for Burkina Faso and Niger.
A1.7	Revise tools based on community input and conduct two more iterations	X			Completed by November 2017.
Objective 2: Establish feedback loops and disseminate learning related to the tools and the tool development process to ensure uptake and usage by relevant actors					
A2.1	Establish participatory feedback mechanisms within communities	X			Following the initial test of the tool, this was completed for all communities where VRAI was implemented; the process was fully

Description of Activities	Achievement			Quantitative and Qualitative Description	
	Achieved	Ongoing	No		
				participative.	
A2.2	Distill gender dynamics and develop recommendations for gender sensitive application of the tools.	X			After the tools were developed, a team of gender experts and advisors in Niger reviewed the documents to ensure gender was specifically accounted for – updates were made and the tools were finalized. As the tools were tested, additional adjustments were made to questions and grouping of women, men and youth to ensure all voices were adequately heard and recorded in the assessment. For example, the first field test in Diffa, did not include a focus group of young men, this was corrected for the two additional assessments given the importance of this issue within the context of youth and young men.
A2.3	Establish two national learning exchanges fora to share experiences, challenges and insight on VRAI's approach.	X			A National Forum in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso was held in January 2018 and a National Forum in Niamey, Niger was held in January/February 2018. In addition after each forum, training and learning exchange took place for practitioners and stakeholders to work together to better understand the tools and provide feedback to the VRAI team to further improve the tools.
A2.4	Organize two training sessions for national and regional USAID staff, government and civil society actors, and community leaders	X			As noted above, two training/learning exchanges took place each in Ouagadougou and Niamey. In addition, presentations were given to the U.S. Embassies in Ouagadougou and Niamey and included participants from USAID, the Department of State and the Department of Defense.

2.2 Program Achievements Narrative

VRAI was based on an adaptive and collaborative research model that emphasizes a pragmatic approach focused on the development and refinement of tools and community participation. VRAI's strategy enabled it to be adaptable in a complex and constantly changing environment while remaining relevant to the global and regional context. The tools developed by the project were tested in Diffa, and observations were noted to refine the tools for the next phases of the study in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso and Tillabéry, Niger.

VRAI Project Research Process



The project met all of its deliverables, although there were some delays in implementation, notably, the length of time to develop the village selection criteria for the first pilot in Diffa, the amount of time to assess each of the villages in Diffa and Mainé Soroa, and the implementation of the tools in Diffa for the pilot. We initially assumed this would take around three months; however, it took closer to six months.

Select key findings are noted below, however, more information can be found in the full research reports that were produced following each phase of the study, as well as the final synthesis report which synthesized each of the earlier reports.

Key Findings

While the primary purpose of the VRAI project was to design a set of replicable data collection tools, Mercy Corps recognizes that the data it collected while designing and testing these tools is nevertheless important and worth discussing.

The data collected from Diffa, Gorom-Gorom, and Tillabéry indicates that multiple factors play a role in driving people to engage in violent extremism (VE). These include the perception that VEOs provide easy access to financial and personal gain, as well as grievances toward the central government that could be exploited by VEOs.

- Participants perceived socio-economic factors as the most significant types of vulnerability factors in all three of VRAI's regions.
- Participants perceived having a culture of non-violence, the existence of inter- and intra-community dialogue, and possessing a religious conviction that opposes violent extremism as the most significant types of resilience factors.
- Following revisions to the VST and the suite of participatory community research tools used in Diffa, the VST became more capable of identifying the communities most vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

After the data collection was completed and the reports drafted, a series of reviews took place between Mercy Corps, its partners, stakeholders and eventually USAID Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as West Africa, which provided critical insight and guidance in finalizing the reports for each region.

Mercy Corps also successfully closed the agreements with our two local partners Karkara (Niger) and CGD (Burkina Faso) after organizing and disseminating our lessons learned and results at two national forums and training sessions: one in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso from January 24-25, 2018; and another in Niamey, Niger from January 31 to Feb 1, 2018. These national forums and trainings included stakeholders, practitioners, community members and local, religious and traditional leaders, researchers from universities throughout both countries and USAID staff. The forums and trainings together reached over 80 individuals.

3. Describe reasons why targets were not achieved or surpassed and why activities were delayed or not carried out, if appropriate.

All of the targets for the project were achieved; however there was a delay in the project primarily due to insecurity and the significant amount of data to be collected, collated and analyzed in a fluid environment. The major factors for the delay included:

- The fluid security situation in all three locations, which required continual re-assessment and adjustment of work, activities and teams;
- Identifying qualified and proficient data collection teams as it was important to use local individuals for cultural, language and participatory reasons;
- The sheer amount of data collected and processed from the communities in each of the three locations; and the synthesis of this data in both French and English;
- The fact that the data collected from Diffa was collected via paper, as opposed to electronic tablets like the ones used in Gorom-Gorom and Tillabéry;
- Staff turnover from key technical teams in headquarters and country-level.

For example, as a result of the fluid security environment in Tillabéry, Mercy Corps needed to identify other suitable villages where data collection could safely take place instead of the 10 originally identified by the Village Selection Tool. These delays led Mercy Corps to request and receive a no-cost extension extending the program to have an end date of February 28, 2018. This new end date allowed Mercy Corps sufficient time to finalize all of the necessary reports, prepare and deliver the national-level forums, dissemination meetings and training workshops, and successfully close-out the program.

4. Success stories, including examples of synergy and collaboration with partners.

A major success of the project was the use of a participatory community action research approach to implement the project. This approach allowed community and commune leaders to guide the process and also engaged community members who let their voices be heard regarding violent extremism in their community.

Mercy Corps worked closely with government agencies in both countries and had a local staff on the ground, including the Program Manager, researchers, enumerators and monitoring and evaluation staff. This made a significant difference in our ability to learn about communities, the context and to ask very sensitive and at times, taboo questions about violent extremism and resilience in communities.

One of the major results of this research was the response from community and commune leaders who were extremely supportive in ensuring the project could progress, even in tenuous security situations, but also the support they requested after to develop action plans to continue to discuss and address the issue of extremism in their communities. Every commune and community in which we worked asked for follow on activities and guidance to continue the discussions and take the learning from VRAI to the level of

implementation. Mercy Corps is exploring how best to do this with existing programs and local partners, as well as advocacy within the communities.

5. A summary of progress made in achieving indicator targets during the activity implementation (based on valid data collection and analysis and credible baseline).

As this was a pilot research project, a true baseline was difficult to implement and not entirely appropriate. However, a qualitative baseline was developed, which also helped inform the start-up and data collection of the project. The baseline is described below. A formal endline evaluation was not appropriate to implement, however, all of the projects reports and deliverables are listed below in the last section of the report.

For the baseline study for this research project, Mercy Corps used qualitative data collection methods, specifically individual, semi-structured interviews carried out in person and over the phone. However, in the Commune of Mainé-Soroa in Diffa we also carried out a focus group with targeted group of stakeholders (community leaders and key actors). Mercy Corps developed two interview guides for data collection: one for community leaders and another for key actors. The distinction was made so that we could collect relevant information from community leaders who might employ informal rather than formal tools to assess vulnerability and resilience. On the other side, key actors were defined for the purposes of this baseline assessment as people belonging to an organization, whether public or non-governmental, who intervene in the CVE space. Data collection for the baseline took place from January 11-24, 2017. The Mercy Corps team recruited two assistants to assist in data collection. One conducted interviews in Niamey and telephone interviews with actors in Tillabéry and the Sahel Region of Burkina Faso. The second facilitated data collection in Diffa. Interviews took place in the offices of stakeholders in Niamey and in Diffa commune where the interviews took place in the municipality's conference room in Mainé-Soroa.

Results of the baseline showed that violent extremism is emerging in the regions of Tillabéry and Diffa in Niger and the Sahel region of Burkina Faso and stakeholders interviewed for this baseline listed several different factors that make communities vulnerable to violent extremism. Key areas that were highlighted by interviewees as being linked to vulnerability to VE, included: poverty, poor governance, borders/proximity of countries in conflict, heavy-handed government response, weak family/community ties and low levels of education. In addition, the baseline found that some resilience capacities were identified as important to assist communities in responding to and preventing violent extremism – these included: the availability of income generating activities, increased level of formal education and improved perception of an active and fair government. In the opinions of stakeholders interviewed, these capacities are critical to building resilience in communities in the face of violent extremism. The information collected during the baseline set the stage and foundation for the development of the VRAI research tools, the implementation of the research, and the results that were found. It was also a key step in preparing information and solidifying stakeholder and partner engagement in the process, which lasted throughout life of the project.

Key results at the end of the project:

Monitoring and Evaluation Plan			
	Indicator	Estimated Target	Achieved
Expected Result 1: Producing a set of replicable and scalable gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive CVE assessment tools based on field insights and local inputs	Indicator 1: Number of in depth rounds of research to adapt the tools	3	3 (1 in Diffa, 1 in Gorom-Gorom and 1 in Tillabéry)
Result 1.1: Producing a set of tools adaptable to the regions			
Result 1.2: Mainstreaming specific adaptations based on gender dynamics throughout the tools			
Expected Result 2: Training USAID staff from national, headquarters and regional offices, international and local NGOs, key local and national government officials and community members in application of tools as well as analysis of the data collected.	Indicator 2: Number of organizations at learning events	NA	Over 60 (Over 30 at each event)
Result 2.1: Improving knowledge of local and national key actors about risk to VE recruitment	Indicator 2.1: Pre and post survey showing an increase in knowledge	70%	Not completed; however, discussions at the forums and training showed a greater understanding of the concepts, tools and potential responses.
Result 2.2: Improving the capacity of key actors to utilize the tools in future programs	Indicator 2.2: Number of participants at learning events	70	Over 110 (Over 80 total for the two forums and trainings; over 30 at the meetings at USG embassies)

In addition, the work with our two local partners showed their increased skills and abilities to refine the tools and adapt to the situation on-the-ground while implementing the study. This was evidenced by the rapid turn around and iterative feedback loops throughout the implementation. For example, when security issues threatened to derail activities – our partners pivoted effectively and kept the project on track. Our partners also demonstrated increased ability to contribute to effective M&E mechanisms, as we collected information, collated the data and analyzed the data together. Not only in the quantitative data management, but also in the ability to synthesize information and help disseminate it to wider audiences as they both did during the national forums and trainings we held in conjunction with our two partners.

6. Other pertinent information, including recommendations with-in depth- analysis and lessons learned, related to the overall activity results.

See the Synthesis Report Mercy Corps developed, which highlights key lessons learned and in-depth analysis of the overall process.

7. Index of all reports and information products produced under the award

- a. Final Synthesis Report
- b. Phase One Assessment Report in Diffa, Niger (English and French) – Full report and Brief
- c. Phase Two Assessment Report, Gorom-Gorom, Burkina Faso (English and French) – Full report and Brief
- d. Phase Three Assessment Report, Tillabéry, Niger (English and French) – Full report and Brief
- e. Package of Tools
- f. Data sets (Diffa, Gorom-Gorom, Tillabéry)
- g. GIS Coordinates of Activities
- h. Maps of Assessment Locations (3)
- i. Agenda for Niger and Burkina Faso Forums and Trainings
- j. Forum Reports (Niger and Burkina Faso)
- k. Brief Presentation for U.S. Embassy Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
- l. Brief Presentation for U.S. Embassy Niamey, Niger
- m. Full Presentation for reference (Burkina Faso and Niger results)
- n. Baseline Report