

# RESPONSIVE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO CONFLICT- AFFECTED HOUSEHOLDS (REACH-4)

## Providing food security for the most vulnerable in Damboa, Borno state

MARCH 2021



## IMPACT STORIES

## From the Program Manager's Desk

I am highly delighted sharing my thoughts about Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict-affected Households (REACH 4) which was implemented in Damboa over the period of 14 months. The program aimed at increasing access to food and mitigate the need for harmful negative coping mechanisms. Despite all odds, REACH 4 has been a successful program, which had integrated outcomes that encouraged availability, demand, and consumption of nutrition-dense foods.

We have worked to increase adequate access to nutritious food through the engagement of multiple market actors which promotes sustainability and resilience, production capacities through simple and sustainable SMART agronomy and livelihoods techniques that foster long-term diet diversification and awareness creation/Social Behaviour Change (SBC) for improved household nutritional status.

Our unconditional food vouchers intervention has reached 13,436 households direct program participants that translated to over 94,052 indirect program participants in Damboa. This has provided them with monthly food ration over the period of the program. Another 5,000 households with under five years old children and pregnant women, a subset of the 13,512 households targeted for staple food were also provided with e-wallets for vegetables, fruits and animal proteins to enable them have diet diversification at household level.

The REACH 4 program promoted household poultry production and kitchen gardening using the SMART agronomy concept to encourage dietary diversification at the household level. Similarly, community engagement, awareness creation and social behavior change (SBC) throughout the lifespan of the program was done in order to shape behaviours and promote good nutrition practices and diet diversification among vulnerable households.

We look forward to continue touching lives and restoring dignity to the vulnerable populations in Damboa and other parts of northeast Nigeria, implementing such likeminded interventions. I hope you will enjoy reading the stories enclosed in this booklet.

Best regards,

Maxwell Samaila  
Humanitarian Program Manager, Mercy Corps Nigeria



## Meeting urgent humanitarian needs

Many communities in northeastern Nigeria continue to face various levels of humanitarian crisis because of the conflict, with about 2million displaced and 1million returnees in need of urgent humanitarian assistance (IOM, 2021). With the increasing levels of insecurity, many families have had to flee their homes, often times leaving the most vulnerable behind, consisting of the elderly, women, and children, and their major source of livelihood.

These conflict affected households in hard-to-reach areas mainly have little to no food stocks and access food through wild foods. They also face limited market access, no purchasing power and emergency. Damboa, in Borno state is one of the most affected, cut off from major roads and food supplies, with families having to heavily depend on humanitarian assistance.

To support the most vulnerable households in Damboa, Mercy Corps through funding from the United States Agency for International Development Office for Food for Peace (USAID FFP) implemented the **Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict-Affected Households (REACH-4) program**.

## About REACH 4

REACH-4 aimed to build the resilience of 13,512 vulnerable households consisting of over 94,000 individuals living in Damboa, Borno state, by investing in their food security and nutrition. The program began in 2016 and was in its fourth iteration, which ended in March 2021. Mercy Corps built upon the previous iterations of REACH's food security responses in Northeast Nigeria by working with local markets and vendors to increase access to both staple and nutrient-dense food for conflict-affected households, while also shaping behaviors to support optimal nutrition and increase the availability of nutrient-dense foods.

Working closely with women, community leaders and government officials, our participants were connected to a variety of interventions including the provision of monthly food baskets, promotion of good nutrition practices, nutrition surveillance, supporting long-term food security and safe access to fuel and energy.

## Our Impact



**94,052** individuals  
(13,436 households)  
received food  
vouchers to purchase  
dry and fresh food  
from locally selected  
vendors



**116,556**  
individuals  
reached with  
nutrition services  
consisting of Mid-  
Upper Arm  
Circumference  
(MUAC) infant  
screening and  
sensitization for  
key population  
groups



Provided **240**  
households with  
access to a  
nutritious source of  
protein in the form  
of chicken and  
eggs, thereby  
improving their  
nutritional status  
and increasing  
households'   
livelihood activity



Provided **945**  
households with  
tools and skill-  
building training for  
kitchen gardening  
to grow locally  
staple vegetables  
and seeds they  
can incorporate  
into their meals



**5,099** fuel-efficient  
stoves distributed  
to vulnerable  
households. To  
ensure that they  
can prepare staple  
and fresh foods  
safely and  
hygienically on a  
regular basis





## How one woman's love for amaranths helped improve her family's nutrition

*Amina holds amaranths seeds produced from her front yard farm*

Amina Adam, mother of five lives in Damboa with her husband and extended family. Her family used to depend on farming to fend themselves and provide food for the family, but since the start of the insurgency, she has been unable to access her farm and get the needed food supply. Her other source of livelihood, which involves selling firewood is unstable due to the frequent attacks on community members who venture into the woods.

*"Life is tough here, we are constantly living in fear, I cannot access my farm. The food we collect from Mercy Corps has been our major source of food. It is with the seeds that Mercy Corps gave me to start the kitchen gardening that I was able to plant some crops and sell them to buy uniforms for my children. Sometimes I take 10-20 naira out of the money to buy something to eat," Amina shares on life in Damboa.*

One of the major challenges her family and several others face in Damboa is limited access to food, because they are unable to farm. Many families have had to flee Damboa, facing attacks along the way, which made Amina's family decide to stay behind. Her household was selected as one of the vulnerable households that were given food vouchers to receive monthly fresh and dry food items consisting of beans, flour, sugar, rice, groundnut oil, seasoning, spaghetti, fruits, vegetables and other items depending on their needs.

To help sustain their food supply, Amina was selected to undergo the kitchen gardening training, where she learned how to plant amaranths, carrot, onions, cabbage and lettuce and how to carry out pest control. Her interest for kitchen gardening came from seeing her husband work as an irrigation farmer, while supporting him on their household farm. Amina found the amaranths seeds to be the most nutritious from her farm, adding it to everything she cooks, from jollof rice to soups. She expressed her excitement with how profitable she has found the kitchen gardening to be, especially from the sale of lettuce and cabbage, which she says can fetch her about 700 naira from a sale. Amina hopes that peace would be restored to Damboa and her children would be able to complete their education.



**A father shows resolve to feed his family with food assistance and kitchen gardening training from Mercy Corps**

*Muhammed Usman displays food supplies received by his household for the month*

Muhammed Usman is an indigene of Damboa, who supports his family of five, his parents and brother's family. Muhammed shares how unsafe it is to access their farm, making it very difficult for him to farm and feed his family. He has had to depend on Mercy Corps monthly food supply and occasional menial labour as a construction worker and irrigation support farmer to provide for his family.

Community members are unable to walk 2km away from the boundaries of Damboa, where most of the fertile lands are found for fear of being attacked by insurgents. He noted that the closest land for people to farm is populated, with farmers having to spend a lot of money to cultivate available farmlands without yielding much.

Muhammed like several other breadwinners in Damboa are unable to maintain a sustainable livelihood due to increasing security concerns which has forced many households to remain reliant on humanitarian assistance. *"Working as a labourer is a work that should be done by a younger person. As I grow older, I wish to start a profitable business that I can use to support my family. Even with the monthly food supply, we sometimes still face food shortages,"* said Muhammed. They were also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the cost of food items, adding to their concerns with food shortages.

*"I heard about the support Mercy Corps provides to conflict affected family before coming back to Damboa. I am very grateful for the food items. It is only someone who has eaten, that can go and find another one. I wish that Mercy Corps will continue providing this support, till we get a relief from this crisis,"* added Muhammed.

Apart from the monthly food assistance, he also received irrigation training under the kitchen gardening intervention, which improved his skills for planting good yielding crops like onions, carrots, lettuce and many other vegetables. Muhammed believes that with agricultural assistance providing farming tools, water pump, seeds and fertilizer, he and other farmers in the community can utilize the skills they have gained to continue to sustain and feed their family.



**Fati's journey on exclusive breastfeeding and good nutrition practices pays off for her family**

*Fati shows how healthy her son, Abdul looks after putting him through six months exclusive breastfeeding*

36 years old mother of six, Fati Inuwa was affected during an insurgency attack, which displaced her and many members of her family. Fleeing into different directions, she found herself alone in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Biu, Borno state. It was not until after a couple of months, that she was able to reconnect with her husband and children, before they could return home to Damboa when it was declared relatively safe. Fati confirmed that some families had chosen to return to Damboa, despite the security issues because it was their ancestral home. However, she and her husband are unable to work and do not have the means to purchase food for themselves, a major reason they rely on Mercy Corps' food assistance.

*"We used to be constantly worried about hunger. I cannot tell you how important this food assistance is. I used to borrow money from neighbours and do odd jobs to survive. Now, we can eat food we would not have been able to buy with our own money. I could not even buy 2 eggs, but we are able to get about 1 to 2 crates from Mercy Corps,"* says Fati concerning the monthly food rations her family receives.

She is a member of the mother to mother support group in her ward, where she received nutrition lessons on exclusive breastfeeding and how to prepare nutritious supplementary meals from cooking demonstrations. Fati's 9months old baby, Abdul shows great improvement from being a beneficiary of these lessons, as he looks very healthy and active. She said both her and Abdul hardly fall ill unlike other of her children who were not beneficiaries of exclusive breastfeeding. Her family's favourite meal is now sesame seed porridge, one of the meals she learnt, replacing their former favourite of sorghum. She was also a poultry rearing participant, where she received 10 chickens to rear, which she sold some and used the remainder to feed the family.

As a strong advocate of good nutrition, Fati actively shares the lessons she has received with other mothers during naming ceremonies and hopes that every new mother in her community will adopt and reap the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding.





**Meet Kellu Adamu, nicknamed “Dr Mercy Corps” for her dedication as a lead nutrition mother and support for new mothers in Damboa**

*Kellu shows off one of the chickens from her pen started with poultry rearing support from Mercy Corps*

Kellu Adamu is a lead nutrition mother and was one of the pioneer participant of our mother to mother support group in Damboa. She is known for educating mothers and several women at community events such as naming ceremonies and women gatherings on the importance of exclusive breastfeeding and how to prepare the right supplementary meals for Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF). She noted how out of ignorance, many mothers in Damboa would buy baby formula to feed their children, even having to go as far as borrowing money to buy this food. However, with the knowledge that she has passed on to these women, many have adopted exclusive breastfeeding and have started noticing great changes in the health of their children. Some of the changes were noticed in the stool quality passed out by the babies, which she noted was solid unlike the watery stools passed out by children on mixed feeding.

Kellu noted that her baby, who is also on exclusive breastfeeding, appears to be more active than her older children who were not. There was an event that became a turning point for her. She witnessed a mother who had just given birth and her placenta did not come out for a while, she advised that the child be placed on the mother’s bosom to initiate breastfeeding and immediately the placenta was out. The women present were so impressed with the outcome, that they nicknamed her “Dr Mercy Corps” when she told them how she learnt that early initiation of breastfeeding could produce such an outcome. Ever since, she has become the go to nutrition mother to support other women with exclusive breastfeeding.

Kellu is also a recipient of poultry nutrition support and fuel-efficient stove, which she confessed have played a great impact to her family. *“I appreciate being one of the participants receiving food from Mercy Corps and one of the nutrition lead mothers in the community. I also received poultry assistance for livelihood where I received 10 birds and bought 10 extra, out of which I sold all 20 and bought the 50 I am currently rearing. I was able to pay my daughter’s school fees with the money I made. I have never seen this type of stove before and I am looking forward to testing it,”* she said.



## Bulama's journey of resilient; from being a labourer and carpenter to being a fresh food vendor

*Bulama stands at his store on Damboa road, with a display of fresh foods*

One of the major impact of the crisis in northeast Nigeria is the high prices of food and lack of access for local markets to participate in the food market. To empower local actors, Mercy Corps worked closely with community members with the potential to participate and revive the local market. Bulama Maina is an indigene of Damboa and one of the fresh food vendors who was selected to participate in the food distribution process. He lost his home to insurgent attacks and had to flee to Gombe, hiding in the bush and trekking for days to arrive in Gombe. Upon returning to Damboa, Bulama used to support his family doing menial jobs fixing returnee families' homes before being a food assistance recipient and then a vendor with Mercy Corps.

Bulama saw the opportunity to become a fresh fruits and vegetable food vendor when he saw a call for application for vendors and realizing that requests for rebuilding homes were dwindling. With some money he had saved from doing menial jobs, not spending on food while receiving food assistance, and running his fresh fruits store, Bulama went on to register his business, a requirement for people to be selected as a reliable vendor. He was able to secure his registration certificate and was eventually selected as a vendor. Ensuring that vendors have a registered business was a reliable way for us to ensure that these businesses would be sustainable, long after the program intervention.

With the profits made from his fresh food business, Bulama has been able to build a house for his parents and renovate his house. In addition, his family hardly faces any food shortage, as he is able to conveniently feed them with proceeds from his store. It was also business as usual for him during COVID-19 pandemic, as demands for fruits increased during this period.

*"I have a family and people who depend on me, without this business I would not have been able to provide for them. Even with the end of the program, I will still be able to continue this business. I see hunger for my people as they are unable to venture out of Damboa to find firewood, I hope that Mercy Corps will continue with this life-saving assistance,"* said Bulama.





## Halima's inspiring story from being a food assistance participant to poultry farmer and owner of livestock

*Halima holds a chicken from her pen of 500 birds, 2 out of 5 sheep and a cow*

40 years Halima Ali returned to Damboa after peace was relatively restored in 2018. Living constantly in fear, Halima says that she and other people living in Damboa have tried to make life livable for themselves. *"Life is hard in Damboa, we still hear gunshots, no good road and school for our children, no market and no access to farm,"* she said. To support her family, Halima rears livestock and poultry. Long before that, she was a recipient of Mercy Corps food assistance, receiving monthly food rations for her household. She later became a participant of our Poultry Development Resettlement program where she was given 10 birds to start her livelihood. She later received additional 10 birds as a nutrition participant under REACH 4, which she then reared to expand her business.

It is from the sale of the birds and savings from her work as a volunteer with UNICEF, that Halima was able to expand her livestock to include five sheep and a cow. She is also able to feed her family with meat from her poultry, pay her children school fees, buy their uniform and books from the money she makes. *"I feed my family with the meat and eggs from my farm and it has greatly improved their nutrition. My children have not fallen ill in a long while,"* shares Halima.

Seeing how profitable running a poultry livelihood has been for Halima has motivated several other people in the community to consider starting one, and she has connected many of them to the mother unit that supplies her birds. Halima has become an inspiration and a symbol of resilient for other community members.

*"I am very grateful to Mercy Corps, I received food assistance. I also got fresh food and fuel-efficient stove. It is with the lesson on livestock and poultry rearing I received that I was able to start and expand this business. I wish for peace for Damboa and that God will restore peace and people can have access to the road, electricity and go to school,"* added Halima.



**I am happy to fulfill the broader goal of providing food for the community – Ibrahim Abbana**

*Ibrahim holds up a module of beans as is used to measure for participants during food distributions*

Father of three, Ibrahim Abbana is an indigene of Damboa and a dry food vendor of the REACH 4 program. Ibrahim noted that before the start of the conflict, people could easily fend for themselves but things changed when the conflict started and it became difficult for people to venture out of Damboa and feed their families. *“Thanks to the support from Mercy Corps, people can now find something to eat. Even those who are not participants of Mercy Corps sometimes get food from those who are,”* he said.

With the increasing security concern around Damboa’ borders, many community members are unable to get the resources they need to run their business. However, Ibrahim has been able to sustain his business working as a food vendor for Mercy Corps. He heard of the opportunity to become one from someone who was going from store to store telling people about Mercy Corps’ plan to boost market economy and was advised to try out, considering he was already a marketer. He sort for more information, and saw the expression of interest advert on how to apply and was selected after fulfilling all the requirements.

The fasting period is one of the toughest time for people in Damboa as they are unable to farm and buy food to eat, Ibrahim supports by giving out food to people who are unable to. The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the price of food, forcing people to rely on smaller portions; however, support from Mercy Corps, Ibrahim’s business was not hit much by the increasing food prices. Ibrahim also takes special care to ensure that participants follow the necessary safety guidelines during the food distribution process.

On how it has been like working as a vendor under REACH 4, Ibrahim said he feels like a father who is able to provide for his children and is proud to be part of Mercy Corps’ broader goal of providing food assistance. *“Long before Mercy Corps’ arrival, I tried to provide for my family, but with this support, I am now able to do so effortlessly. However, with the continuing insecurity, people are still unable to fend for themselves without Mercy Corps’ assistance, I wish for there to be peace so that people can return to their normal lives,”* added Ibrahim.



**Food and cash support from Mercy Corps renews hope for mother of 6 and inspired her to be a lead nutrition mother**

*Halima Mustapha at her tailoring shop*

30 years old Halima Mustapha is a mother of six and a lead nutrition mother in Damboa. She was affected by the conflict when their house was burned and four of her family members were killed. They fled Damboa but had to return to restart their lives. Her family used to suffer from food shortage, with barely enough to eat while they slept on mats in their old home. Her husband does not work, as he is unable to go to his farm. However, they were able to cope with these challenges when they started receiving food and cash assistance from Mercy Corps, in addition to Halima's business as a tailor.

*"It was difficult to feed before Mercy Corps food and cash assistance, we sometimes begged for food. COVID-19 prevented our men from going to the market. We barely had clothes to wear but with the money we received, I am able to sew clothes for us all. We hope that we will continue to access food because we are still unable to go to the farm,"* said Halima. She bought food items to supplement the monthly rations she received, mattresses for the family to sleep on and drugs for her children when they fell ill. She joined a mother to mother nutrition support group, where she became a lead mother and was also given 10 poultry birds to supplement their feeding and support her livelihood. Halima used some of the birds to feed the family in addition to eggs that they laid. She also sold some and used the proceeds to buy a goat that recently gave birth. She hopes to rear the baby goats and make some additional profits to buy more chickens.

As a lead mother, Halima provides nutrition support for women in her ward and passes across all the trainings she has received. She coaches new mothers on how to practice early initiation of breastfeeding, noting how important it is for them to practice exclusive breastfeeding without giving water to the baby. Many mothers living around Halima used to practice mixed, feeding giving their babies water and milk while breastfeeding. However, with guidance on exclusive breastfeeding from Halima, she confirmed that these mothers say their babies hardly fall ill and are looking healthier.





**We normally face difficulties getting firewood; this stove will help us prepare our meals without stress. In addition, the poultry I received have started laying eggs, some of which I used to feed my family and the remaining I sold to support our other needs -**

*Zainab Ibrahim at the fuel efficient stove distribution point*

Other participants receiving their stove. In total, Mercy Corps distributed 5,000 fuel-efficient stoves in March 2021.





## REACH 4 activities in pictures



Participant using the fuel-efficient stove



Mother to mother support group session



Kitchen gardening



A cooking demonstration nutrition session



Participants at a food distribution point



Participants waiting to receive their food items



## **ABOUT MERCY CORPS**

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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