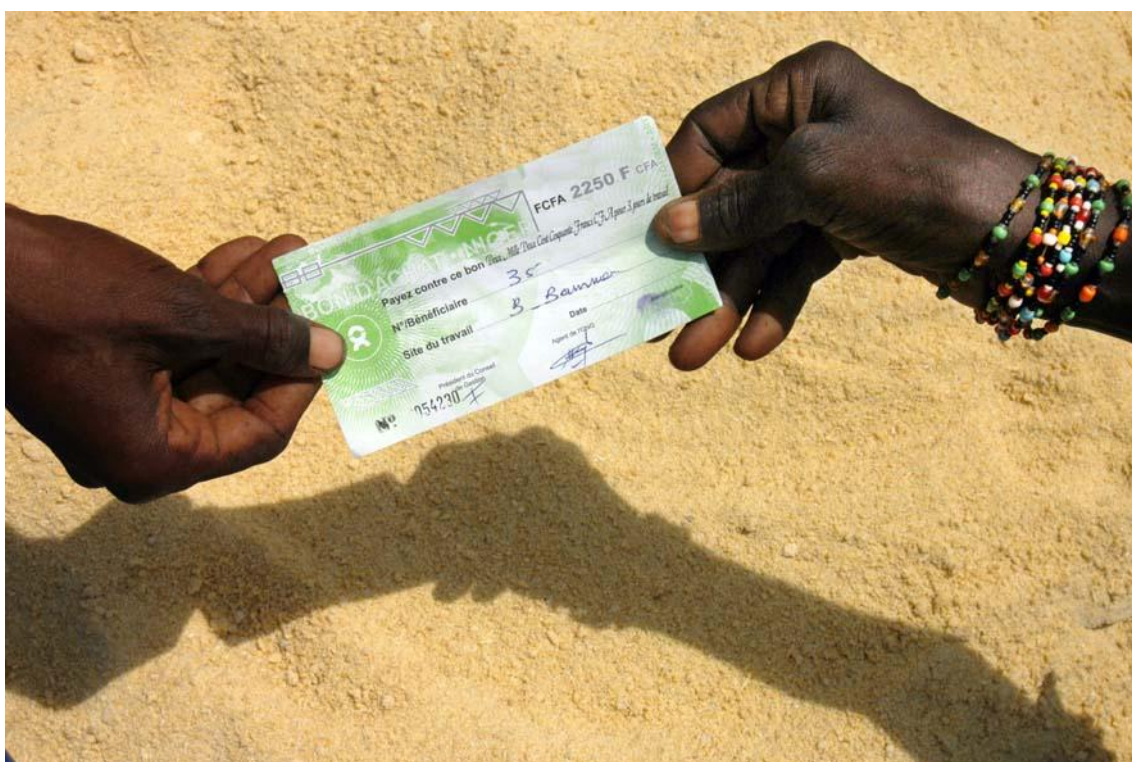


VOUCHER FOR WORK – AN OPTION FOR EMERGENCIES?



A Programme Evaluation in Mali & Niger 2005

Mali (Gao) & Niger (Dakoro & Tillabéri)

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Annex

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1. Executive Summary

Following the invasion of locusts in the Sahel countries in Sept/Oct 2004 and an ongoing drought in the same areas, food security on household level for many families was very limited throughout the year 2005, and especially in the hungry season from March till September. Due to lack of diversification of income sources and already depleted assets and lack of coping strategies, this year's increasing food prices and at the same time reducing livestock prices (due to reduced animal conditions caused by lack of water and pasture), had a significant impact on the household food security of the agro-pastoralist and pastoralist communities in Mali and Niger.

Oxfam's decision to implement an emergency food security programme with the main objective of creating work opportunities to enable families to access food was a correct decision. The voucher for work programme was implemented with the main objective of transferring access to food to the families and not to create infrastructures. Therefore, the working hours and activities were low impact, which was adequate for the situation. Part of the programme activities was a de-stocking component, to ensure minimum prices for the remaining livestock to the herders, which was integrated into the working activities. Main focus in term of geographical areas were the pastoralist and agro-pastoralist zones of Niger (Tillaberi/Dakoro) and Mali (Gao Region), which were badly affected by the crisis.

The starting position for both countries was very different: Mali having an established development programme since 1984 in Gao with good partner NGOs, Niger with no country programme relying on some fragile support from Oxfam Quebec. The set up had significant impact on the programme implementation due to differences in familiarity with the partners and the areas of implementation, as well as capacity and experience of the partners to implement an emergency working programme.

Main constraints of both country programmes were the correct and transparent targeting of beneficiaries due to lack of sensibilisation of the communities and lack of impartiality by the partner, lack of market structures to integrate the vouchers resulting in increased administrative work for partner and Oxfam teams, management of food delivery with traders and transporters to ensure sufficient commodities for distributions, distance in the field especially in the rainy season and a clear lack of sufficient technical human resources to implement the programme in Niger.

Main success realised can be noticed as a quick reaction and implementation of the emergency programme and especially of the de-stocking activities in Niger, a good analysis of the situation and therefore an appropriate response to the crisis, coverage of most remote areas, a programme set up based in the communities which is most efficient as seen in Mali, recognition of Sphere minimum standards and realisation of a considerable coverage of population reached by the intervention against all odds.

Many recommendations for the improvement of the voucher and its system, especially in terms of voucher design and value, and the administration of the vouchers and necessary monitoring activities have been made.

Interaction with the free food distribution of WFP in Niger have lead to similar discussions as in the past, considering the comparison of cost-effectiveness of the two programme approaches of free food distribution vs conditioned food programme, e.g. working programme. It has been realised again, that the most important arguments for a working programme cannot be measured in monetary values, as the dignity and well being of the beneficiaries through a timely response need to be the utmost aim of an emergency programme.

In total, 245 communities in Mali and Niger have been participating in the programme extending the support to 25,765 household representatives.

The overall recommendation from the evaluation of the programme is certainly the preference of cash for work programme due to minimised administrative work and the absolute choice to the beneficiaries. If this is not possible, due to various issues (e.g. very high local market prices, security, etc) and vouchers are used, it needs to be ensured that an economic market system is existing to efficiently integrate the vouchers to ensure the main objective of making a choice to the beneficiaries. If this cannot be ensured, the choice should be made for a direct food distribution (food for work) to reduce administrative work and increase time efficiency. If possible, a mixture of cash and food for work (e.g. 40% cash/60% food) could be thought of. In all cases, Oxfam's decision on which kind of programme approach will be implemented shall not be donor driven!

2. Background

The invasion of locusts in October 2004, in the Sahel region has left significant traces on peoples economic activity, production and coping strategies. Due to loss of harvest and loss of pasture, own production and on it relying household economy has been badly affected. The lack of pasture especially in the pastoralist areas has had impact on the conditions of the animals, which had lead to loss of productive assets. The developing drought since last year and late starting and erratic rains in Niger and Mali has had an additional impact on the pasture and water availability for animals and regeneration of natural resources during this rainy season.

On top of general problems with market access and remoteness of especially pastoral areas, market politics in neighbouring countries have especially in Niger increased the food prices on local markets since May 2005 due to lack of food in the markets. This was induced by limited harvest due to natural disasters (locust/drought), increased needs in the region (Sudan/Chad) and mentioned change of import and market politics.

In October 2004 and May 2005 a food security assessment was facilitated in Mali, in May 2005 in Niger. Both identified the clear need to intervene and support the most vulnerable households threatened by various factors of the crisis situation. The clear lack of income sources and purchasing power lead to the decision to implement a working programme, providing paid working activities to the local communities to enable them to access food.

A voucher for work programme was implemented in three regions: Dakoro and Tillaberi in Niger and Gao in Mali (Annex 0). The main objective of the programme was the indirect transfer of cash to the households and availability of food on household level to avoid further depletion of assets and increasing debts structures. Working activities were focused on community work, though the output was secondary. In Dakoro, a destocking component was the start of the working programme; in Mali the destocking was a contribution of the working programme. Main objective was the access of food to the people in need while trying to maintain their dignity and honour through natural exchange system (work against enumeration).

This review tries to concentrate on the programme activities and implementation. Certainly, there are many other issues, which could be discussed and included, more on finance, more on cost-efficiency, more on management on various levels, more on support from the region or the headquarters. Probably, all these aspects could do with a separate evaluation. Some of these have been touched in this report, though have not had the time nor have been the task to go into further detail.

This evaluation is trying to gather success, constraints and lessons learned during the implementation of the programme. The different programme approaches in Mali and Niger, appropriateness of activities, the administration of the voucher system and the impact on the communities and markets, interference with general free food distributions in Niger and accomplished works will be evaluated.

Discussions have been held with community representatives and groups of men and women benefiting from programme activities, partner staff in the field and at senior level, and Oxfam teams in the field and at senior level in both countries.

- This kind of box highlights a positive experience and/or recommendations!

Both countries will be reviewed together, trying to ensure to capture all lessons learned from various ideas and experiences. Recommendations for similar future programmes in emergencies will be given in the end of the document.

3. Appropriateness of the programme and decision making

Voucher vs cash vs food – the decision of the type of working programme implemented is very much dependent on the local situation. Overall, Oxfam encourages working schemes, against free food distributions, where communities improve their local infrastructure or perform activities needed in their own community to improve living conditions. Working units and measurements are depending on the main objective of the programme: e.g. to achieve a working task or using the scheme as a tool to get food to the most vulnerable.

The **voucher system** is often used for a one time off distribution for e.g. inputs like seeds, animals or tools. Though in a situation integrated in an existing market can be a great tool for indirect cash transfer as it leaves the choice to the beneficiary, given full acceptance by services and local traders, e.g. food, non-food, medication etc. It is as well, given well integrated in the market, a possibility to indirectly transfer cash to most vulnerable households in insecure situations with e.g. civil war and robbery. **Cash for work** will certainly be the easiest and fastest procedure to transfer cash in emergency working programmes. It leaves the choice to the beneficiaries, it minimises the administrative work and reduces time needed to transfer cash. Though, if used in remote areas the beneficiary might need to pay a significant proportion of the allocated money for transport cost for food. Cash might be prone to fraud and insecurity, as it is easier, more flexible and unconditioned as compared to vouchers or food. **Food for work** restricts the choice to the beneficiaries as the commodities are pre-defined and food is handed out directly. Food for work is certainly the best implementation approach if no markets are established and a lot of cost would be invested into transport of the commodities, or if market prices are higher than normal which exhausts the purchasing power of the households.

3.1 Adequacy of the programme in the Sahel 2005

The programme activities and their adequacy for the local situation are similar for Mali and Niger, mainly due to similar geographical remoteness and market access, as well as price development this year. Along key factors a quick review of appropriateness will be given.

A lack of **harvest** in 2004 due to **locusts** and therefore lack of food stocks and a longer than normal lean period, have lead to a situation in which many families where in need to deplete remaining assets or increase/go earlier for migration this year. Especially pastoralist families had already **lost many animals** due to the **drought**, which reduced their **coping strategies**. In general, the target population, herders and nomads lack diversification of their income sources, and are therefore very vulnerable to shocks. Other coping strategies, e.g. relying on wild foods were affected by locusts and droughts in a similar way as pasture and harvest. As the lean season had started early this year, jewellery or other valuable assets have been used for pounding, enabling the families to access food. The season before the rains, is

characterised by a lack of **labour opportunities**, which had an impact on the availability of cash and food on household level which again reduced the **purchasing power**.

At the same time, **food prices** in markets were much higher than normal due to various external and /or internal factors (**Annex 1**). Market prices of animals, which had survived so far, were very low due to bad **conditions of the animals** due to lack of pasture and water. Additional factors for the areas of intervention are the extreme **remoteness** and lack of market and road infrastructure to ensure good **access** to food and markets, and hence affecting the availability of food on household level.

Taken all the above factors and arguments into consideration it was decided to **create employment** to influence income on household level and encourage/strengthen purchasing power. The objective was as well to avoid **further depletion** of animals or assets and avoid increased migration on search for work and leave behind women and children in difficult times of need. The realisation of community works was used as tools to create work and transfer payments to the households **without creating dependency** and receiver attitude, while using a traditional system of **economic exchange** and ensuring **dignity** to the beneficiaries. The programme was developed with the objective of food/cash transfer, not with the objective of creation of infrastructure. The implementation of the **de-stocking** component, to purchase animals at fair prices above local market prices, ensured a minimum value to the households who were in need to sell the animals due to requiring food, although bad condition of the animals were prevalent.

Emergency programmes and distributions should focus and support the population during a time of need. When the situation improves, the distribution programme should scale down. If the situation remains unstable, a review or re-focus of the programme is needed to optimise approach, activities and impact on the communities. The **point in time** of the commencement of the programme in June/July was certainly in time of real need. In **Niger** communities mentioned that the programme commenced right at the real time of need, though it remains unclear if the households could have saved some more assets or resources if the programme had began 2–3 weeks earlier. Tillaberi reported that the programme should have commenced earlier, which was not possible due to lack of human resources. In **Mali**, after a programme component earlier this year (March/April), communities were of the opinion, that the gap between the two programmes was too long, and the summer programme (June) should have commenced in May already to protect further depletion. It is left to speculation, if earlier implementation (May/June) could have reduced the impact of the crisis on the livelihoods of the pastoralist communities.

The **programme duration** was initially planned for 50 working days in Mali and Niger. Though in the very beginning for 90 days were planned in **Mali**, increasing of millet prices without ability to increase the budget did not allow for the whole 3 months. Idea was to buy animals and provide working opportunities until the situation had improved, e.g. for the livestock when water and pasture were available, and for the working activities after the harvest when food prices were reducing to normal and availability was improved. This rationale was appropriate. **Niger** reported positive feedback on a short extension of the working activities until the end of October, whereas no extension was implemented in Mali so far (though recommended by PHP assessment in September) due to the harvest being much later and some parts of the population still being in need.

The general decisions to facilitate a working scheme and a livestock–destocking programme in the concurrent situation in Mali and Niger were good and appropriate.

Overall, the implemented emergency programme during the food crisis 2005 in Niger and Mali with its components of de–stocking and working activities, were needs based and beneficiary orientated in the time of urgent need.

The initial decision was to facilitate cash for work programme to ensure the choice and flexibility to the beneficiaries. After discussions in May 2005 with the donor (ECHO) for Mali, a request was formed to use vouchers instead of cash due to security reasons. At this time, a decision was made to use vouchers, but without the needed reflection, due to lack of time and experience, on basic circumstances needed to make a voucher programme most efficient and suitable.

The decision later in the process of the programme, to stop the vouchers as a system in some parts of the programme area, was very justified as the vouchers could not ensure the main objective of choice to the beneficiaries and basically imposed more administrative work for partners and Oxfam.

4. Programme approach in Mali and Niger

Generally, the programme approaches in the two countries were different in terms of their starting position, programme set up and responsibilities. Various factors, which have had some influence on the programme quality, will be discussed in this chapter. In Mali, three partners namely GARI, Tassaght and Adessah are long term (since 1986) well established and known partners of Oxfam GB. In Niger, programme activities were implemented in partnership with AREN, who was new to Oxfam and emergency programming, though has an indirect relation with Oxfam GB through a regional programme (education/PPR) implemented by Oxfam Quebec.

4.1 Existing structures vs new structures

Mali has an ongoing, long established programme with good relationships to local partners, communities and administration. In addition, internal procedures and structures are well established and partners know administrative procedures. Mali commenced a first phase of activities in March/April to support the most vulnerable families with working opportunities and continued a second phase in July till September 2005. Different programme approaches, especially different enumerations (March CFA 1400/day, July CFA 750 /day) due to changes in donors, funding and discussions, had a confusing effects on the beneficiaries, who were reluctant to participate in the beginning of the programme. Though, it needs to be mentioned that the value of the ration in March was not supposed to be CFA1400, but resulted from a miscommunication between partners and Oxfam. In **Niger**, Oxfam GB has not had an established long–term programme, though a regional programme which works in a defined area with local partners. Office structure and procedures and programme support were non–existent and commenced at the same time as the programme activities started in June 2005. Knowledge on the local used partner was only indirect through the regional programme, which is supervised by Oxfam Quebec. The partner had no experience in emergency programmes in general, as well as implementation of working programmes.

Overall, lack of knowledge of the partner and the terrain has had certainly an influence on the programme implementation. Bias or affiliation of the partner, towards certain ethnical groups (e.g. Pheul) instead of towards a livelihood group as such (Nomads/Pastoralists) has influenced the programme impact on the population in need, as some settlement or villages have been left out. Established focus on one group due to background of the organisation might as well increase the risk for internal misuse of resources, distraction of funds and problem with impartial targeting of villages and beneficiaries.

- Ensure sufficient background information on partners to enable Oxfam team to support impartially and equity in programme implementation, e.g. selection of villages and beneficiaries.
- Ensure sufficient human resource for programme and support positions to cope with working load and focus in case of new office set up.
- Ensure clear and transparent communication about approach to communities and partners!

4.2 Programme Structures on village level

The programme activities were set up in a different way according to country, and according to familiarity with country and partners. Both programmes used partner volunteers and supervisors to implement the programme in the field. In addition, positions on Oxfam's side to support the programme implementation were created, e.g. food security monitors and voucher tracking officers. Within the communities, village committees were set up for management and support to the programme implementation. Traders and transporters were involved in the programme, on individual basis and traders unions.

In **Mali**, the programme supervision activities were based directly in the communities. **Partner volunteers** have received training and briefings on their role and responsibilities, principles of the programme, monitoring and voucher application, committee management etc. They were based in the villages/sites with responsibilities of up to three neighbouring sites. These volunteers were reporting to a central volunteer who was based at a key location or major site, e.g. Bourem or N'Tillit. Overall, each of the three partners had a programme supervisor who was responsible for the implementation of the programme, reporting, monitoring etc. The supervisors are frequently reporting to the Oxfam emergency programme coordinator.

A **village committee** was formed in all the working sites, with about 4–5 members including women representatives. The committee was supposed to be chosen by the population, voted in a general assembly of the community. The committee was supporting the beneficiary selection, activity selection, activity monitoring, presence list, management of food storage, supervision of distribution of vouchers and food. Some problems occurred with the lack of literate people in the communities to support monitoring and presence list etc. Fortunately, the partner volunteers were based in the sites to support the committees.

In one site, beneficiaries reported that the village committee was not chosen by the community but named by the partner volunteer. The beneficiaries did not feel well represented and raised concerns. Decision making on what working activities and the distribution of food were questionable. Steps were taken with the partners and staff members to improvement of the situation.

In addition, Oxfam has employed **food security monitors** who are supporting the programme implementation with monitoring activities in the field. They are based at key sites in the areas of intervention and visit the sites for monitoring of work and distributions, as well as market monitoring. The positions were filled after programme activities had already begun. Their main objective of work is the monitoring of working activities, distributions and the general situation in the programme areas, e.g. market prices. The beneficiaries explicitly reported that transparency, and works had improved since the monitors were in place.

In **Niger**, the partner **volunteers** formed teams, which travel in the field during the week and return to their base (Dakoro/Niamey) at the weekends. Throughout the time in the field, they facilitate the monitoring and the distribution of vouchers/foods during visits of all the sites. Each team has up to 15 villages/sites for supervision, which are visited on the weekly or fortnightly interval. Each project site, Tillaberi and Dakoro, has one partner supervisors, who is supposed to coordinate and manage the partner teams, and report in regular intervals to the responsible Oxfam Food Security officer. The supervisor in Tillaberi was unfortunately less active, has spend 2 days in the field and the submission of any report is still outstanding. The issues have been discussed various times with the supervisor and the senior management level within AREN, though nothing has changed. This has certainly had an impact on the programme quality, and increased the workload for the Oxfam food security officers, as he has managed the partner volunteers and programme implementation directly.

The **village committees** were not newly formed as already existing activities in the villages had established committees, e.g. regional PPR programme. The committees did have a slightly different function before and a lack of sensibilisation on the needed functions and responsibilities for the programme existed and lead to some clarity problems. Main problems with the literacy of the committee member led to double work for the volunteers and the Oxfam staff members who needed to ensure the accuracy of the presence list.

Oxfam commenced the programme with **voucher tracking officers** and **food security monitors**. Each volunteer team had one Oxfam member on board to support distribution and monitoring activities. Aside the voucher tracking officers (VTO) are in charge of the vouchers. The food security monitors do market monitoring activities every week. In reality, the monitored and VTOs supervise the distribution of vouchers and foods directly, which reduces their time for effective monitoring.

Overall, the community based system in Mali has had better possibilities of programme follow up and monitoring than the Niger system. The permanent presence in the communities enables the staff to better understand the local situation and social system, and clarify issues and continuously support the community with sensibilisation and discussions. In addition, the extra work for the food security monitors in terms of committee support needed due to lack of literate member, was reduced as the volunteers were able to directly support to the needed, degree. The supervision and monitoring role of the food security monitors was a needed position to ensure transparency and accountability, and needs to ensure the focus on the monitoring without distraction by the voucher administration.

- Ensure community based volunteers for supervision of programme activities to support the local committee, though use volunteers from outside the village to ensure impartiality and equity!
- Ensure fair and transparent vote of the village committee!
- Ensure orientation for partner staff for good comprehension and clarity on programme procedures and objectives!
- Ensure good and continuous sensibilisation and mobilisation of the community by partner staff!
- Ensure partner staffs do have the capacity to perform their position or else ensure needed degree of influence to exchange them!

4.3 Targeting

Targeting activities differed between the two programmes. Short programme guidelines on the preparation of the programme were developed to support the partner teams with the initial set up of the programme (**ANNEX 15**). In both countries, the village committees and the communities were asked to define the targeting criteria to ensure the most vulnerable would be benefiting from the **working programme**. The following criteria were used:

- Female headed households without external support sources
- Families with many family members relying on one economic productive member (elderly, disabled, children U5, etc)
- Families who had lost many animals
- Total number of animals in the family
- Families with bad/no harvest last year

The selection of the beneficiaries according to the criteria was not performed in all programme zones. No active targeting was done in **Dakoro**, where all families were able to participate if in need, with multiple members of the family. This was decided assuming that the daily wage would facilitate a self-targeting, which was not the case and which resulted in participating beneficiaries, which would not be classified as most vulnerable, e.g. family of the sous-prefet.

In **Mali**, the partners perceived the initial calculation of the **total number of beneficiaries** based on the number of working days needed for identified works. The calculation of beneficiary numbers based on working output and not on population needs is generally more of a development approach with the objective of creation of infrastructure. In case of an emergency, it should be ensured to carefully assess needs and define beneficiary numbers accordingly. Due to a gap in communication and facilitation, the partners were not clear and had problems with the targeting itself, due to lack of beneficiary numbers at hand, while having much higher needs. Though, even later increase of budget, to increase beneficiary numbers, especially for Tassaght was not taken to ensure all families in need could participate. In general it needs to be ensured that all sites with population in need are considered. In some cases small campments, which are most vulnerable and food insecure were not taken into account as no works could be identified.

Not all partners were able to use the targeting criteria and given beneficiary figures. **Tassaght** did facilitate a rotation of working groups, which would allow more families to benefit from the distribution, e.g. a new group of 60 people every 3 or 6 days. Hence, the calculated ration would be shared by more families than initially estimated, e.g. a sheep on a fortnightly basis for 7 beneficiaries or for 21 beneficiaries has a significant impact on the total ration available to the household. The initial reason for this targeting issue was confusion with the calculation on the total numbers of beneficiaries in the beginning of the programme.

The beneficiaries for the **destocking programme** were chosen in a different manner. In **Dakoro**, all herders who had animals, which they wanted to sell, could register in a list, which then was slaughtered for the according prices (**Annex 2**). The owners of the animals and the butchers were paid in cash. The helpers to clean up and support the slaughtering were paid in voucher, which they were able to exchange for food. The meat was dried and then given to the beneficiaries as part of the food distribution. In **Mali**, the meat was also part of the component, with the objective of destocking animals of those families who were really in need to sell their animals and to have meat component in the ration (as locally accepted protein component) and help to. The prices were fixed for goats (CFA 11,250/-) and sheep (CFA 13,500/-) slightly above market prices, though later on were below the local prices. The animals were presented to the village committee, who would choose on base of quality of the animals and needs of the households to accept the animal. The sellers of the animals were then paid in vouchers, which they exchange for food or other items with the programme (**Annex 3**).

In addition, it was decided to support **disabled and elderly** community members with free distribution, which were about 20% of the beneficiaries. Due to average households sizes of 7 members, it was decided that one person for each 7 members of the family could work. In Mali the highest number observed was three per household, in Niger that increased up to 6 members per household, though, the number will not reflect household size as due to lack of time no cross-check and control of the regulation and beneficiary lists was possible.

A **masterole** with the selected households and registered information are not completely available for all programme sites, mainly again due to lack of time. The lack of a list has resulted in extra work every week for the monitors to write a new list as well as lead to participating beneficiaries who are not the most vulnerable. The total number of households touched with the programme activities is difficult to calculate, as beneficiaries have been targeted. In the other programme areas it was the households who have been targeted to ensure that the activities or obligations of the families can continue while some members work for the programme. Therefore, the comparability of target population and coverage is difficult, as measured in different figures.

In Tillaberi, **beneficiary identification cards** were handed out matching the masterole information (**Annex 4**). This has been very appreciated by the beneficiaries, as it seems to ensure them that they are part of the programme, and in fact have sometimes been good to clarify and identify the benefiting families in case of name duplication and confusion etc.

In general, all organisations have problems with targeting issues, especially with food distribution measures. Looking at working programmes, the level of the salary or payment

can probably have a positive impact on self-targeting, though if too high or the situation is too bad, no natural selection will be taking place.

Why did the targeting work in some areas (as it seems) but not in others? Was it simply a time and experience factor within the programme teams or really important difference in the food security situation on the ground? Was it just not possible to make a difference between more and less vulnerable in the beginning of the programme? Were some areas in a better state and therefore a distinction between better off and more vulnerable was possible? Very low malnutrition figure in the areas of intervention in Mali would probably support this argument (as compared to Niger). In addition, Oxfam did facilitate a first part of the programme already in March/April. Did this period avoid a further deterioration to a similar degree like in Niger? The malnutrition figure have not been high since observation in March/April, which means a direct impact on the nutritional status through the programme is difficult to associate a) because the baseline before programme start is missing b) reliable nutrition data for pastoralist communities is generally difficult, as the standard protocol for nutrition survey can not take small populations into account to ensure significant and representative prevalence.

It needs to be questioned how **effective targeting** is in acute emergencies. Is it a useful tool? Does it impose a split within the community? Is it at all really possible to define criteria in an acute situation where everybody is similar affected? Is it a social appeal to ensure the richer families are not on the list? A village chief might be a poor man himself as he has given already everything to other people he is taking care of in a system of solidarity. Are we actually wasting valuable time for a quick response, cause we need to have a targeting process which need 3 or 4 weeks to be able to define the most vulnerable, when after all in the end, we realise the list is not well taken? This could be due to lack of sensibilisation of the partners. Could be due to bias of partners or dishonest committee members– or it cold simply be that targeting is not possible in such a situation where everybody is affected. Could it be more sensible, in fast onset acute emergencies, especially on village level, to target all households in the first acute phase, and after a few weeks when the most acute time has passed by and we are more familiar with the situation on the ground, e.g. social system, hierarchies, etc, we do a selection of the most vulnerable?

Probably, this would work better in two ways: 1) be faster in the beginning and no one is left out or is forced to share, 2) we can make a decision on targeting later when more familiar with the situation and produce a real and reliable list of the most vulnerable beneficiaries.

- Ensure estimated beneficiary numbers are based on real needs!
- If targeting is facilitated, ensure good criteria and reliable list of most vulnerable beneficiaries together with the communities!
- Ensure masterole of the beneficiaries for easier monitoring of distribution and programme activities!
- Ensure good sensibilisation on partner and community level on the objectives of the programme!
- Consider beneficiary ID for ease of participants and clarification purposes!
- Ensure similar targeting units in programme areas for easy comparison!

4.4 Voucher management and administration

In both countries, a complex system of voucher tracking was developed, including a lot of paper work and forms (**Annex 5 & 6**) to be filled by various levels. An extra guideline for the distribution was prepared to support the partner and Oxfam teams to implement the distribution of vouchers and food commodities (**ANNEX 16**).

In **Mali**, the partners led all voucher management and distributions. In the beginning of the programme, Oxfam has handed the total necessary amount of vouchers needed for working activities to each partner (**Annex 7**). The volunteers are directly involved in the voucher distribution. They are supporting the local committees with the presence and working lists, and need to request sufficient vouchers from their supervisors according to the completed working days in the field. After distribution, which involved several different lists and papers, the volunteer will deliver this documentation to the supervisor and finance person within the partner, who will deal with the payment of the trader. Extra work was created for the finance person on partner level, as not all traders are literate and familiar with billing systems. Therefore much time was spent with the traders to count vouchers and write bills, on top of the general crosschecking and voucher procedures. On Oxfam level, an additional logistician and an extra finance person were recruited for the emergency programme to support the implementation of activities.

The Oxfam voucher-tracking officers (VTO) in **Niger** were the direct link to do the distribution of the voucher in cooperation with the partner volunteers. The VTO, after the monitoring activities in the field, requests sufficient vouchers according to working days completed from the Oxfam finance department, to then conduct the distribution of the voucher in the villages. With the documentation of the distribution (signed name list, presence list) etc., the VTO would account to the Oxfam finance department, who will then take care of the trader's payment.

The heap load of administrative work and paper work especially Oxfam staff level in Niger have led to frustration and significant delay in distributions. Together with the finance level in Oxfam and partners the administration efforts with crosschecking and re-counting are enormous. This led to the decision to stop the vouchers and only do direct food distributions.

A **voucher monitoring system** has been established with the finance departments in both countries. In Niger, Dakar had extended a support person to set up the tracking system, in Mali the finance officer himself has created a system to follow up in the outstanding and recuperated vouchers. It is to be discussed which system is more effective, time efficient and easy to understand and follow up with.

4.5 Traders involvement

Both countries have been struggling to motivate traders to work for the programme especially in the remoter areas of intervention. In the beginning, the traders were very reluctant, due to unclear benefit and unknown partnership with Oxfam (Niger). The system was set up in very different ways in Mali and Niger.

In **Mali**, the trader worked with the committee to stock the food on village level, and the committee was responsible for the management and distribution of the food against vouchers. Three different approaches have been observed for the delivery of food on village level:

Due to lack of markets and local traders, distances, remoteness and rainy season, **Adessah** bought once a bulk of millet in the very beginning of the programme. The full amount of cereals needed for the duration of the programme was stocked on village level, managed by the village committee. This ensured an equal amount of millet per voucher (9kg/voucher) to all beneficiaries, instead of differences according to distances e.g. Bourem 4kg and Chinkaye 2 kg per voucher! Adessah was able to provide the maximum ration to all beneficiaries against constraints with local price variations.

Due to lack of markets and local traders, **GARI** organised traders from Menaka to delivery cereals to the programme sites. This a few times throughout the activities, according to the vouchers exchanged with the traders representative on village level. In the beginning of the activities, GARI agreed on fixed prices with the traders to ensure the 9kgs of millet per voucher. This lead to problems with the traders when the prices increased. Though a solution was found to ensure the maximum ration to the beneficiaries (see value of the vouchers.)

Tassaght was working with local or close by traders, identified by the communities. This lead to very frequent deliveries of foods on village level, due to low capacity of the traders and therefore the need of frequent purchase. Sometimes this lead to a rupture of cereals available on village level. The prices were not fixed, therefore the increase of market prices needed an adoption to ensure maximum ration to the beneficiaries.

Many **traders** had employed an extra person as a representative to be based in the villages with the food. This **representative** had to register all vouchers and beneficiaries who exchanged food. In the beginning, this was another reason for the traders not to get involved. Though after a few distributions, more traders were interested to participate in the activity and gain benefit. The prices of the food were fixed according to the local prices. When the beneficiaries had exchanged their vouchers, the trader would present himself with the vouchers and the food distribution list at the partner office to exchange all against a bank cheque for payment. The **cheque** had to be exchanged in Gao and money was received from the partner account. Many traders complained about the need to travel to Gao to receive the payments, as it was far and taking lots of time. Extra costs for transport and overnights were covered by the traders themselves.

Oxfam did a money transfer to the partner in the beginning, as an advance, and then against proof of vouchers being exchanged. This posed an additional problem, as many traders who were based away from Gao, did not exchange vouchers in a timely fashion but kept them to the end to exchange them all together. As long as the vouchers were not handed back to partner/Oxfam, no money was transferred and payment was given. Without payment, problems with the availability of foods were realised. Another problem occurred, if the transport of the vouchers from partner to Oxfam finance for controlling and payment was delayed, or the process at Oxfam level was delayed. Then the transfer to the partner account was delayed as well. Hence, traders who came to town to exchange their cheques were not always able to get their money, which led to rupture in food. In an area of intervention were, e.g. Menaka is 350km away from Gao, it needs to be ensured that payment systems are functioning and not posing an additional working constraint for the traders and teams in the field.

Overall, considering the lack of choice to the beneficiary (cause only cereal was provided) and the need of ensuring sufficient foods on village level in due time, Adessah probably made the best and easiest decision to procure in bulk to low prices. This has ensured the maximum ration to all beneficiaries (despite great distances) in the most cost effective way, as not extra cost in a later stage occurred (see voucher value for Tassaght and Gari). This made it possible to stop the vouchers, as now, they were of no use anymore as no traders were involved to do the exchange of the vouchers against the food, and distribution were managed by the village committees and partner volunteers. It needs to be mentioned that this was the same system in March/April, when the first part of the programme activities were conducted.

The approach in **Niger** was different, certainly led by the lack of partnership and familiarity with the area. In **Dakoro**, Oxfam monitors are responsible to inform the food security officer about the food tonnage needed according to the working days monitored. The total tonnage for each site was then discussed with representatives of the traders union, to arrange tonnage, sats, dates and prices. Prices were revised every week. The food security officer would as well discuss transport with the transporters union, linking the two unions to work together. At the day of distribution, the respective traders would be present together with Oxfam staff and partner volunteers. After each distribution, the trader would sign a paper of realisation of total amount of foods and transport value, for the food distributed. Together with the vouchers received, he would then hand in the realisation paper to Oxfam finance to cross check and do the payment. Oxfam finance would as well receive the distribution list from the Oxfam VTOs to perform a cross check on accountability of the distribution. If everything is matching and sufficiently documented, the trader would receive a cheque. Similar, the transporters would account of the number of trucks send to distribution sites, to then be paid through the logistics officer. All in all, much time is spend into discussing, arranging and controlling distribution and payment procedures.

In **Tillaberi**, the traders would be informed (inform themselves after a while) on what tonnage was needed at what place and date. Initial prices were discussed with the local administration, but were certainly reviewed to late, only when beneficiaries mentioned that local prices are lower then Oxfam prices. The traders were responsible to transport their commodities to the respective sites of distribution, and Oxfam subsidised the transport according to distances. The distribution was similar to Dakoro: the vouchers are given to the beneficiary and straight afterwards were exchanged against food with the trader who is present. In the end, a realisation paper is signed to document how much of which commodity was distributed. Together with the vouchers the trader would approach Oxfam finance, who then after documentation from the VTO would pay for commodities and transport.

Few sites in Tillaberi (Ayourou, Quallam) had the possibility to integrate the vouchers in the local market due to existence of local market, closeness of the villages to the market and accepting traders who were interested. Here, the vouchers were distributed to the beneficiary who could then use them in their own time schedule and interest. The trader would receive the voucher and account them with Oxfam finance in the same process of payment.

In general, working with markets or provision of goods over a longer time needs to ensure a close monitoring and review of prices if fixed, to ensure local markets are not negatively affected but stimulated. It should be avoided to continue distribution programmes after the harvest, if the harvest is good and situation can restore to normal. Food prices in Dakoro have been **reviewed every week** together with the traders to ensure fair prices and appropriate

quantities for the beneficiaries. Close collaboration with the traders syndicate has been exercised, and discussion and negotiations have taken a lot of time and energy. In Tillaberi, the review of prices was commenced when local communities complained about the prices calculated for the voucher programme.

Close collaboration with the local administration was exercised, though has not been too fruitful. Prices in Mali have been fixed, for GARI and Tassaght, though have had a negative impact on the total amount of cereals provided to the partners. Adjustments with additional costs were needed. Involvement of local administration is to be questioned as the agreement for prices might be politically influenced, and though it needs to be evaluated case by case on what support might be needed from the local administration or association of traders.

- Reduce paper work and lists to register vouchers to a minimum for all levels!
- Ensure sufficient human resources and time to support voucher accounting activities on all level!
- Try to integrate vouchers into existing market activities and structures!
- Ensure the most cost-effective approach with maximum benefit to the beneficiaries!
- Ensure to work with capable traders who have the access to sufficient commodities!
- Ensure good payment possibilities for traders, especially if bank connections are far!
- Try to use traders or transporters union! Ensure that no monopoly is created if using private traders!
- Try to organise traders to be responsible for transport of commodities to reduce time for discussions and extra administration for partner/Oxfam!
- Avoid fixed prices for commodities for ongoing procurement activities!
- Ensure regular review of prices and market dynamics for quick adjustments!

4.6 Food management

The management of the food, as mentioned above already, was different in both countries. In this paragraph a closer look will be taken at the food commodities and distribution mechanisms.

In **Mali** – the benefiting communities were asked in the beginning of the programme to decide which commodities they would like as payments. The choice was on cereals, therefore most decided for millet, rice or wheat (Bulgur/semouil). The food was then brought and stored on village level (as described above), where it was managed by the village committee. The committee together with volunteers managed the distribution of the vouchers to the beneficiary every 3 days, though they could accumulate for 6, 9 days etc. At the same time of voucher distribution, beneficiaries could access the cereals for exchange with committee members. The beneficiaries were then free to choose the stored commodity at their time frame, directly after the voucher distribution or 3, 6, 9 days or any time when possible. In Adhessah's programme areas, the same system was performed, though without voucher transfer.

A few times, only in the beginning when traders were not really habituated yet, a lack of food on villages level was a problem, as the beneficiaries had not possibility to exchange their vouchers. The ration was calculated as 9kg of cereal for one voucher (3x4hrs working time), which was providing cereal for about 3 days for a family of 7 members. In addition, every two weeks a slaughter was planned to ensure the meat component of the families, which shared one animal amongst 7 families. As a rough total, 428 grms of millet per day plus about

43grms of meat per person per day mount to a total of 1613 kcal/person/day. This ration has a provision of 112% of protein needs (51grms of 45.6grm on daily recommended amount) and 62% of the recommended daily fat intake (31grms of 50grms). This is **acceptable** as a **complementary ration**, (though lacking the total fat intake and some vitamins), sufficiently covering for a healthy and balanced ration according to SPHERE standards (**Annex 8**). In case of Tassaght, who did a rotation of the beneficiary groups the nutritional calculations are slightly lower, due to decreased amounts of meat and not in a continuous manner as for other benefiting households.

In **Niger**, the markets were more arranged and artificially placed. The distribution day of the vouchers was the same day, same instant as the distribution of the food. The food brought by the traders was requested to provide millet, rice, gari (manioc flour), maize, beans and oil. In Dakoro, the traders were asked to bring 50% starch foods and 25% each of beans and oil, of the total monetary value of the distribution to ensure a balanced ratio after bad experience in the beginning where only sugar and tea were left at the end of the distribution. Unfortunately this was not always possible, due to problems with the availability e.g. of beans, which was insufficient. Often, the traders did not bring the total needed quantity of foods requested to the distribution point. The VTO and volunteers in place did make a ration calculation according to available commodities and number of vouchers per beneficiaries, which was suggested to the beneficiaries. Miscalculations by the monitors sometimes led to change of ration or running out of ration for the later beneficiaries in the list, who only received millet and/or oil.

Sometimes it was decided not to distribute the whole value of the vouchers (and keep some for the next distribution) to ensure all beneficiaries have similar rations. It happened as well, that villages refused to do distribution due to lack of sufficient commodities available at the distribution point as they had the same experience before, which resulted in conflict on village level. Arrangements were made to serve the most needy (disabled, elderly, women) first and leave the men for the following week.

The initial calculation for Niger is based on the local price for rice due to availability and preference by the beneficiaries, which bought about 5.6kg with one voucher at the beginning of the programme. As no additional ration of meat was given (only in Dakoro), and the market prices stayed high, a decision was made to double the number of vouchers, which lead to a rough value of 11.2kg of rice. An average calculation (with all commodities) according to one example distribution has been made in **Annex 8** which come to a total of about 1875kcal per day per person with 114% of the protein needs (51.8grms/45.6grms) and 90% of the fat daily allowance (45.2grms/50grms). This calculation, if shared well over the various commodities, can provide the families with an acceptable complementary ration according to SPHERE standards.

In Dakoro, a reduction of the vouchers per day was done in the end of the programme due to two reasons: 1) an extension of the working days to create firebreaks without more available funding and 2) significantly reduced market cereal prices due to harvest in Nigeria. Then, with reduced market prices and better accessibility in the markets due to onset of harvest.

The **quality** of the food commodities was a problem in some cases, especially due to the rainy season and difficulties for food storage. Mouldy cereals were refused and replaced by the traders. No problems were encountered with the traders when requesting an exchange due to bad conditions of the foods.

The question to be asked is: a) which is the best way to do the distribution? Some communities mentioned that they were glad to have **Oxfam representatives** present at distributions against fraud and mismanagement, and b) which is the most **cost efficient** and well-balanced way of providing a ration? Certainly local acceptability of meat and its distribution to the affected families is a good example, but does the amount of meat in comparison of the price and time investment actually give the whole benefit to the family? Could they access more protein and fat sources from local sources like beans and oil with the same amount of money? The extra value for the families who are able to sell the animals need to be considered and poses the best solution for linkages. Overall, the meat component in the ration was highly appreciated (in Mali and Dakoro).

- Minimum variety of commodities to ensure SPHERE Nutrition standards needs to be present at markets/distributions!
- Ensure sufficient variety and quantity of commodities in the market to really leave the choice to the beneficiaries!
- Ensure food items are in place in due time for distributions!
- Ensure good calculation of rations according to market prices and nutritional needs!
- Ensure good quality food and the possibility to exchange if necessary!
- Ensure transparency in the administration of the vouchers on all levels, e.g. committee, community, partner!
- Ensure review of programme and decision making in the field to adapt to the most efficient way of working!

5. The voucher itself and its system!

The initial idea of the voucher system is to enable the benefiting households to choose amongst various commodities according to their needs and define the point in time they would like to exchange the voucher and buy products. The ability to choose non-food items is important in comparison to food for work activities, where the food commodities are pre-defined in kind and amount. The possibility to integrate the voucher system into local market structures is an additional benefit for logistical provision of products and transport matters, as well as for vitalisation of local economy.

In Mali, the differences of arrangements as compared to the **last programme** in March/April 2005 led to confusion with the partners and well as some communities. Working remuneration was different and introduction of the vouchers was not easy to understand. In addition, the initial discussions of doing cash vs food vs vouchers was not clear and led to delay and lack of transparency on community level.

5.1 Value of vouchers

The value has been calculated on base of **local labour rates** and of purchasing power according to market prices. The labour enumeration has been calculated on daily rates of CFA

750/- for about 4 working hours per day, enabling households to spend time on other commitments and activities. Each voucher is holding the value of three working days adding up to CFA 2250 per voucher every three days. Local wage rates are ranging between CFA 1000 and 2000/- according to area for unskilled labour, in which the daily wage of CFA 1500 (2x CFA750 for 8hrs day) integrates well. The calculations on the **purchasing power** of each voucher were made according to market prices of rice and millet (as above in food management section). Allocation of CFA2250 per voucher, spread over three days is a complex system and has created some confusion with the beneficiaries and communities. It is appreciated to be paid on a daily basis.

In **Niger**, the programme allocated CFA 2250/3jour per beneficiary, which with increasing commodity prices did not enable the households to ensure food availability according to minimum needed standards. Therefore it was decided to double the amount of vouchers per working unit, calculating CFA 4500/ 3 jour.

In **Mali**, as mentioned above, similar problems with rising cereal prices affected the programme. **Adhessa** had bought in a one-time bulk and was not affected by later rise of commodity prices. **GARI** had fixed prices with traders, which resulted in a problem when prices increased. As traders refused to continue the programme, adjustments were made as to ensure the beneficiaries still get 9kgs per voucher. Hence, the value of the voucher in GARI's programme activities varies from date to date and site according to millet prices, e.g. CFA 2250 up to CFA 2430/- (**Annex 9**).

In **Tassaght** programme areas a different solution was found. Due to increasing market prices it was decided to give one extra voucher for every 6 days of working (3 vouchers in stead of two vouchers for 6workign days) to account for the decrease in value of the voucher. Initial, this was an additional 8 vouchers per beneficiary during the duration of the programme. It is commendable, that the Mali and Niger team made efforts and found acceptable solutions to adjust changing markets prices to the utmost benefit of the beneficiaries.

- Voucher value should be designed on daily basis (e.g. CFA 1000/day/voucher)!
- Permanent review of markets to ensure necessary value adjustment to ensure purchasing power for the households to reach minimum standards!
- If programme continues over long timeframe, ensure well-balanced and acceptable daily wage according to seasonality's!

5.2 Designs of the voucher

The creation of a fraud proof voucher was the aim at the beginning of the programme, enhanced by donor pressure. Various signatures (beneficiary, local committee, NGO representative), name of the beneficiary, date and place of distribution are requested for the distribution on the voucher. A security strip has been integrated with a special colour (shiny silver) to discourage the duplication of vouchers. The vouchers were printed in Dakar and shipped to Mali and Niger for programme implementation.

Keeping in mind a high illiteracy rate amongst the local population, signatures of beneficiaries and local committee are taking a lot of time, if at all possible. The filling of beneficiary name, date and distribution site twice (the voucher and the remainder in the voucher booklet) takes an additional time. Talking about 80,000 vouchers distributed per months, the necessary time

for filling the requested information is enormous and poses an extra burden for the teams, which in the end has led to a cessation of the vouchers.

Availability of printing facilities in the country are given and shipments from Dakar are unnecessary, especially if the security stripe is not really effective due to lack of defined colour, e.g. grey instead of silver.

- Local printing facilities should be used to minimise logistics cost and procedures!
- Simple double coloured (Oxfam green/blue) vouchers with serial numbers plus a stamp will be sufficient security against fraud!
- Identity numbers should be given to distribution sites and beneficiaries to reduce writing necessities!
- Fingerprints can be used for beneficiaries to sign the voucher upon reception to reduce time!
- Date stamps can be used to reduce time needed to write the date of distribution!

5.3 Voucher integration

The initial advantage of a voucher system is the possibility to **integrate them into a market system**, reducing the extra logistical and administrative work for partners/Oxfam and to encourage local economy and exchange. The aim of integrating the vouchers into local markets was only of limited success in all programme areas, mainly due to the same reasons:

- Simple lack of markets in the target areas and therefore a lack of opportunities to integrate activities into the local structures.
- Lack of time to raise awareness and arrange the programme and ensure acceptance with local traders made it difficult to fully integrate exchange of vouchers into the existing markets.
- Increasing needs to get food to the population affected by the crisis, did not allow much time for planning, discussions etc.
- In Niger, the set up of the base in Dakoro with lacking human resources took additional attention and time, and distracted programme focus.

Due to these reasons, it was decided to arrange artificial food fairs/markets at the distribution points. Therefore it was important to ensure close cooperation and needed motivation to the traders and transporters to ensure food availability at the programme sites. The lack of local infrastructures has hampered the programme to take full advantage of a voucher system.

5.4 Utilisation of the voucher

Another great advantage of a voucher system is the choice of commodities that it gives to the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries are encouraged to exchange the voucher for food or any other needs. The free choice of the beneficiaries on the market is of utmost importance. Where integrated into the market, no problems will occur to ensure all commodities and articles are accessible to the beneficiaries, when arranged with the traders and suppliers. In areas, where artificial markets need to be arranged to give beneficiaries the opportunity to exchange their vouchers, it needs to be ensured to have a minimum variety of commodities and items available. Especially important for a planned food distribution is the availability of a variety of

food items according to SPHERE standards, trying to provide a balanced diet and nutrition to the household members.

From the beginning onwards Mali focused on cereal provision only. It was clear that beneficiaries would not be able to have the choice at site of distribution. Though they were involved in the initial decision making of the cereal they wanted to access, e.g. millet, rice, semouil. The general working beneficiary was therefore not able to make the best advantage of the vouchers as no choice existed. With Tassaght in contrary and to frustration for the working beneficiaries, the beneficiaries of the destocking component, who were paid in vouchers as well were able to access other items from traders assortment. This seems not to be fair and has raised tensions amongst the beneficiaries. In Adessah areas, the lack of traders and shops in the local areas lead to a demand of destocking beneficiaries to Oxfam to pay them in cash or exchange the vouchers into cash. As Oxfam was not able to do so (due to security reason with cash money transfer in the areas of Bourem), the herders arranged themselves with traders or community leaders to get the voucher exchanged for cash (as traders would be paid according to the vouchers they bring), by the partner in Gao. This imposed an extra transport cost ranging between CFA 2,000 et CFA 10,000, according to distance and due to lack of public transport systems. It remains unclear who paid the transport cost, though needs to be assumed that the beneficiaries have shared the cost out of the money they got for their animals. This should be avoided, as beneficiary contribution cannot be expected in an emergency situation, especially not if due to administrative problems on Oxfam side. In GARI sites, the vouchers of the destocking were as well exchanged for millet or the respective cereals, and no friction amongst the population occurred.

In **Niger** it was tried to ensure various commodities at the distributions points (as above) to enable the choice to the beneficiaries. Though, as quantities of food items were limited, no free choice was possible to beneficiaries due to disproportional distribution amongst the receivers, e.g., in the first beneficiaries got a full ration at their choice, the later ones only tea and sugar. This resulted in the calculations of the ration with available commodities by the distribution teams to ensure all beneficiaries will receive the same. Small remaining amounts e.g. CFA175/- were exchanged for salt, spices etc.

In the beginning of the programme, those places where the vouchers were integrated into the market (Ayourou, Quallam), reported strict choice of cereals by the households. This might be due to a lack of clarity of the objectives and timeframe of the programme, and the households therefore trying to get as much as possible. After few distributions, the beneficiaries changed their choice and integrated more staples (manioc flour, maize), beans and oil. Since the beginning of the harvest, the households are integrating again more non-food items, e.g. soap, clothes, etc. Once, in an extreme case, cigarettes were chosen. This was certainly discussed with traders and volunteers, though leaves the question of why this was chosen. Had the situation improved and stabilised so that food security was not a priority problem anymore? Was it a part of the targeting problem, and the household was not the most needy? Was the person who is responsible in the house for food not in charge of the vouchers? Or maybe, they were exchanged for petty trade trying to access cash to cover other needs. The later was observed in various other sites, especially where WFP rice occurred to very low prices in the markets. Food distributed by Oxfam/partner was sold to lower prices

(mostly high value foods like beans or oil), to be able to cover other needs e.g. medication, transport, etc. while still being able to access some food to low prices as well (WFP rice).

In Menaka (Mali), a case was reported where a family tried to exchange the voucher for a malaria treatment. The nurse was new in the position and accepted the voucher, though when trying to exchange with the traders was rejected, as he was not on the beneficiary list. This is a shining example of good monitoring activities and transparency of the traders and communities, but shows as well the need for other items but food.

Given the load of paper work and time invested into the vouchers, and the non-utilisation of real market structures and lack of choice, it was decided to **stop the voucher system in Niger (and Mali with Adessah)** and to facilitate simple food distributions with the same value as the vouchers. Basically, the distribution included the same activities, just without the hand over and paper work of the voucher to the beneficiaries and to the traders. The ration stayed the same and was well accepted by the beneficiaries, who then had fewer problems to understand and less time to wait to receive their food.

5.5 Programme Monitoring

In order to follow the food security situation and monitor the programmes, a tight monitoring system has been developed with various formats. In the beginning, a **baseline** information survey was conducted in all programme areas (reports available with Regional FS Coordinator, Dakar). Throughout the programme, household and **post distribution** monitoring for voucher and food distributions were conducted. All forms have been standardised for Mali and Niger to facilitated comparability. All teams have mentioned that the monitoring activities are very heavy and in some cases **respondent fatigue** was noticed. This is important as to ensure that the information collected is valid and not biased due to lengths and frequency of repetitive questionnaires. Unfortunately, due to lack of time and programme set up, the Niger team has not been able to perform as well as Mali with monitoring activities and follow up. The lack of capacity of the partner and therefore the need for Oxfam monitors to invest more time in the distribution management and voucher administration are the main reason for lack of monitoring. (ANNEX 10 & 11)

- Try to integrate vouchers in to local markets and services, e.g. health services etc!
- Ensure good sensibilisation of beneficiaries and traders!
- Ensure sufficient HR for the beginning of the programme to focus on set up!
- Ensure good monitoring of prices and choices of beneficiaries for programme follow up and exit strategy!
- Ensure that no cost are created on the side of the beneficiary due to Oxfam constraints or regulations!
- Ensure good monitoring but no overload on programme staff and beneficiaries to avoid respondents and interviewers fatigue!!

6. Interaction with WFP free food distributions in Niger

Oxfam tries to avoid the distribution of free food in emergencies, given other options like working programmes as conditioned aid can be facilitated. The programme activities in Niger and Mali were definitely a good example where conditioned aid was easy to facilitate as

compared to free food distributions. Many discussions have been held in the past and are ongoing about the advantages and disadvantages of free food distributions facilitated by WFP and other partners.

One of the main arguments for free food distributions are often the cost of food being delivered to the beneficiaries. Certainly, for WFP as a logistics institution and direct distribution without much monitoring and facilitation, the cost per MT is definitely lower than for most NGOs working programmes. In the following some counter arguments will be used to reflect on the real cost of one MT given to the beneficiaries through a working programme. For the majority of these arguments it is not possible to allocate a monetary value and calculate the real value of the price per MT.

It was decided not to work in the same villages as the WFP distribution villages. This was basically trying to avoid overlap and duplication, but as well confusion of the beneficiary population due to different approaches. The approach of WFP was **targeting** by village and leaving the commodities to the chief to distribute.

Many villages have reported that they had to wait for another week till the chief distributed the food and they did not get fair shares or people who were not in need of the ration got some as well. The final **distribution points** for WFP are at the end of the main roads or easy accessible villages, which sometimes leave a long way for the beneficiaries to access their food items.

In addition, WFP/partner distributions were a **one time off** distribution of **determined commodities**. Due to time and pipeline difficulties to **import**, the three commodities (rice 50kg, bean 15kg and oil 3l) arrived very late and again were **not available together** at the same time in the country and ready for distribution. The **quality** of the rice was not appreciated (small broken grains) and the oil was palm oil, though should have been vegetable oil as locally acceptable.

The delay of the food distribution did in fact result in **sales on the local market**, as the rice was distributed after the harvest had commenced in some areas already. The prices realised were much lower than local rice, due to quality and quantity on the market. Prices of new millet, which are normally lower than the old millet, increased on a short notice to similar prices when WFP rice entered the market. Oil was observed to be sold to small commerce and restaurants to very low prices.

The **impact** on the local communities can be argued e.g. for establishment of a dependency and receiving attitude. On the other hand, lack of support due to one time off distributions can be realised and might actually not have any impact on the food security situation of the population, as they were in earlier and longer needs. Certainly, after the distribution nothing stays behind in the communities.

In comparison, a distribution of food through a working programme has certainly higher costs in terms of administration and monitoring. Especially a programme with vouchers needs sufficient human resources to administer. In addition, Oxfam has subscribed to SPHERE minimum standard in emergencies, which try to ensure important facts for a food distribution in emergency situations. The social and local impact of a working programme cannot be valued in monetary terms. Various factors will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The **targeting** process was facilitated on households level assuring that in case of bigger families, sufficient members could be participating in the programme to create income/food. It was decided to do distribution more **frequently** to ensure the population had sufficient food items available in time of need and have a more durable impact on livelihoods to avoid further need for asset depletion.

The **natural system of exchange against working** activities was appreciated by communities as honour and respect are kept, and they are included into a system and not just receivers. Changes in the communities can be looked at as **double gains**, to receive food and do some structure work for their own communities.

It was realised as well that, due to the programme **stress migration** in the areas of intervention has not been utilised, as the availability of work and food was given. This has certainly a positive impact on the family as a whole, but especially on those members who are left behind in times of greatest needs to cope by themselves.

Distribution through a voucher system had given the beneficiaries the **choice** of commodities. In some areas markets had been arranged, at minimum discussions with the beneficiaries on which commodities to offer were held before. **Quality control** was possible right at the distribution in presence of the trader, and exchanges if necessary were facilitated. The availability of all **commodities together** in a **timely** manner has surely supported the programme impact on the food security status of the population. Distribution points were not more than 8 km away from the village or site (as according to SPHERE), and were mainly at the site themselves.

Through use of local traders and transport, the **local economy** benefited from the programme as well. In some areas it was realised that markets or shops have opened and traders are more interested to serve the more remote areas now.

Overall, taking all these issues into consideration, a price of one MT in Oxfam programme will certainly be higher than the cost WFP can realise. Though how can we measure a monetary value for a socially and timely response, supporting people's life in dignity? Looking at our humanitarian position, one MT of food distributed to the population in need, should be worth the amount of money it needs to make support to the people in need most harmless and acceptable in due time and should not be measured on logistical efforts.

- Prefer and promote working programmes over free distributions where context allows, e.g. working activities possible, food/cash available etc!

7. Community works– set up and realisation

Again, different approaches or realisations in the two countries have had impact on the overall output of their programme activities. Probably, the higher capacity and experience of the Malian partner and programme team has enhanced the working outcomes of the Mali project as compared to the Niger activities.

Decisions on the **type of working activities**, were made by the village committee together with the partner volunteers and the community. Lack of **sensibilisation** in some communities by

the partner staff, especially in Niger, resulted in confusion about the ownership of the programme activities. Some individual cases, reported a lack of motivation to continue after the programme e.g. watering the trees. Some activities, which were defined by the communities themselves, e.g. firebreaks, trees, dykes were continued even after the programme had ended, as promised by the communities.

The lack of measurements or **units per working day** in Niger lead to confusion for many beneficiaries as well. The lack of clarity on what needs to be achieved, on e.g. a community working plan, lead to discussions and conflict within the community, as different work outcome was paid similarly. For example, the collection of pasture seeds by women resulted in different achievement, e.g. 0.5kg vs 5kgs in the same number of days. Total number of demi-lunes or trees planted per day per person could have given a better orientation for the beneficiaries, comparability amongst the villages and more power and support to the monitoring teams. It is certainly clear that the objective of the programme was not work output oriented, which is appropriate in the current situation. Though, a definition of working units does not need to have the objective to reach maximal output, but can be moderate measures for basic orientation. The Mali partners did calculate and define measurement for the daily work (e.g. 0.45 cqm/person/day for dykes), which was very much appreciated by the communities and beneficiaries.

The working days were arranged to be only three or four hours per day allowing for other obligations of the household. For some activities in Niger, e.g. community field cultivation, it was realised that the fields are too far away to be able to reach there and do some work within three hours. Therefore it was decided that working times need to be **flexible** and community fields can be worked on in 8/9 hours days, which would be accounted for vouchers. As well, campments and **nomadic** families, searching for pasture for their animals, was given a chance to participate, without needing to rest longer than normal at one place. They had the chance to work full days instead of spreading it over 3 days. This was greatly appreciated by all community members.

Some communities in Niger complained about the quality of working utensils and tools, which were distributed. They were not long lasting and falling apart too quickly after having commenced the work. Though in many sites, the **tools** and **trees** were late to be delivered. Especially for the planting of the trees with sufficient water before the end of the rainy season, had an important time limit on the delivery.

In all project areas it was envisaged to include the **technical services** in advise and support, to ensure sustainability and appreciation of the administrative services. Technical servants from the services for environment, local development, water, agronomy and the veterinary services were involved in the activities. Their tasks were mainly taking measurements and given technical inputs on constructions e.g. demi-Lunes, tree plantations, fire breaks, road repairing etc. The veterinary services were supporting the animal control before and after the slaughter for destocking. The linkage to the technical services was again much stronger and successful in Mali, which is certainly due to the long established relationship between OXFAM and SLACAER. In Niger, Dakoro had certainly a better connection with the civil servants as Tillaberi, who were reluctant and slow in taking the initiative to support the programme

activities. The cooperation with the local administrative services should always be envisaged and encouraged.

Working sites were mainly **mixed** for men and women, though women were performing different tasks than men. It was tried to arrange complementary activities, where men would do the physically harder work and women support with easier activities, e.g. men do the initial firebreak and women collect the cut grass, men will dig the wholes for the trees and women will arrange and plant, etc.

In **Dakoro**, men and women had separate activities and lists for presence and distribution. In some villages this was the reason to refuse the distribution when not enough food was there, as women feared they would not get any as the distribution would start with the men's list.

All project areas and sites are in really **remote** and not well accessible areas. **Distances** pose an extra constraint for all teams to facilitate and implement the programme. An extreme case has been reported by one of the food security monitors in Mali, who got stuck with his motorbike due to lack of fuel (as he got lost in Bourem trying to find a working site) and was in need to walk 28km to the next site. Lack of means of **communication**, positioning (GPS) and certain regulations, e.g. of storing fuel in the field where the monitors are based, need to be flexible to ensure a minimum capability to Oxfam staff to successfully achieve their work in a secure and sufficient manner. Occupational health, especially in these very remote areas should not be forgotten.

In some working sites in both countries, it was observed, that **children** under 18 years of age were working for the families. Certainly, in their rural situation it is common and normal for children to work. According to the law in both countries, employees need to be a minimum of 18 years old to be able to officially work. Discussions have been held about the consequences for the children, due to heavy work etc, and for Oxfam when conducting illegal action and 'employing' minors in working programmes. This could be a good link for the existing education programme to increase their impact and promote the importance of school and education.

The **visibility** in both project areas was rather low. In both countries all the cars used in the field had Oxfam stickers, though none of the funding agency's (DiFD, ECHO). T-shirts were printed, though not in sufficient numbers to serve all Oxfam monitors and supervisors plus minimum partner field staff. Banners for the distributions were used in Tillaberi and Dakoro, though were insufficient. One metal signboard was seen in Ansongo (Mali), which was apparently prepared for a donor visit. After all, no visibility for the partner nor for Oxfam or for the donors at project site was facilitated. Visibility products like caps and t-shirts are easy to produce locally and are an effective tool to create awareness of communities and team spirit and work motivation.

Oxfam has an integrated programme approach, which means water, public health and food security activities should be implemented in an integrated manner. In Niger and Mali, the crisis was clearly a food insecure situation and therefore water and health will commence in the second phase. Oxfam has thematic **mainstreams**, which should be included in all programme activities, which are implemented. Gender, HIV/AIDS and protection are to be considered in all the programme activities. The mainstream of **Gender** has not been very strong. The creation

of activities for men and women apart from each other might not have promoted an equity approach. The payment and registering of men in the list, as household heads, though women have worked, is not an approach of equity and representation. This was more an issue in Niger than in Mali. The inclusion of **HIV/AIDS** was non-existent. At distribution points and in sensibilisation activities, discussion and messages could have been included. **Protection** could have had important aspects, especially in the areas where slavery is still an issue. The protection of the ration to those who have actually worked and their rights could have been an important message and support.

Money transfer from Dakar and to the bases need to be ensured in due time. Situations occurred where liquidity was not given and programme activities came to a standstill in Niger. Distributions and monitoring activities were delayed due to lack of money to purchase fuel for the vehicles to go to the field. This should certainly not happen, cost and expenditure projections need to be delivered and supervised in due time, on all levels.

- Ensure good sensibilisation and mobilisation of beneficiaries and communities!
- Ensure working units and community working plan, at minimum for orientation!
- Allow flexibility to arrange working days according to livelihood strategy obligations!
- Ensure good quality tools for sustainable resources on village level!
- Ensure delivery of materials in good time to make best use of seasonalities, e.g. rainy seasons!
- Ensure inclusion and advice of technical services!
- Avoid active separation of women and men in lists, activities and distributions!
- Avoid inclusion of minors in working activities!
- Ensure integration of OXFAM mainstreams!
- Ensure minimum visibility for teams spirit and awareness of communities!
- Ensure financial liquidity for the programme activities!

7.1 Work realisations

After all, the work of 134 communities in Niger (80 Dakoro and 54 Tillaberi) with 15,677 workers and 107 communities in Mali (Adessah 42, Tassaght 19, Gari 46) with 10,098 workers has resulted in the following realisations:

Total realisation of working activities in Mali and Niger

Activities	Mali	Niger*
	Realised (planned)	
Regeneration of pasture	960 (175) ha	–
Green belts maintenance	2 km	–
Tree plantation	15,000 (5,000)	20,802
Ponds/ deepening of ponds	30,000 m ³ (8/30 ponds)	–
Community buildings	4 (3)	4
Dykes/Dams	35 km (10km)	2km
Demi-Lunes	–	8,695
Seeds collection	–	500kg
Stone protections	–	4,454
Traditional wells	–	23
Villages cleaning	–	575,046 m ²
Road/Pistes repair	–	50,5 km
Community field cultivation	–	54,5 ha
Fire breaks	–	430 km
Animal slaughtered	7745**	621***
# of direct beneficiaries	10,098	15,677
# of indirect beneficiaries	65,637	101,901
Tonnes of cereals distributed	1047 MT (1,821MT)	2830MT

*More details to Niger results please see **Annex 17**

Goat or equivalent (1 cow = 7 sheep or 8 goats, 1 sheep = 0.9 goat) (For details **Annex 3)

*** All cattle (compare **Annex 2** for details)

In **Mali**, 130 ha of **pasture** were regenerated with local species: *Cenchrus biflorus* (cram cram), *Digitaria exilis* (wild fonio), and 830 ha of submerged land/river beds have been planted with aquatic fodder *Echinochloa stagnina* (bourgou). Real impact on pasture grounds need to be awaited in next years season, especially in Bourem the lack of rain this year has not supported the regeneration activities.

Due to higher price estimations in the initial budget for Mali, it was possible to increase the total number of **planted trees** from 5,000 to 15,000 trees in the project sites.

The initial plan to excavate about 30 **ponds** in Mali was hindered due to the rainy season, which made it impossible to work in some ponds due to heavy clay grounds etc. Hence, the communities worked only in 8 ponds, though reached a total of 30,000 m³.

Two shops, one community storage and one classroom have been constructed or repaired as part of the **community building** reconstruction works.

Niger's communities have been more active on the community infrastructure on a small scale and for water retention. The total number of demi-Lunes constructed under advice of the technical services for measurements and angles, was 8,695 demi-Lunes in Tillaberi. In linkage, 4,554 water protection and gabion boxes were arranged against flash floods. This will facilitate as well the control of waters and the use for cultivation or crops and pasture.

In total, again in Tillaberi only, 54.5 ha of community fields were supported to be cultivated. This had as well input on the harvest activities, as many the communities was able to work in the fields instead of trying to find other sources of income.

The total of 430km of firebreaks were constructed in Dakoro only, again with support from the technical services. The firebreaks were and identified activity by the communities after the destocking activities were finished already. Main reason for the establishment of the breaks were the very good pasture this year which could last for possible 3 years given no bush fires will occur. To ensure better management of pasture, firebreaks have been developed along key point of wind changes and occurrence.

8. Beneficiaries – Bringing about change?

A questionnaire for focus groups discussions was conducted by the Oxfam food security monitors in a sample of villages in all programme areas. The questionnaire (**Annex 12**) has been designed with open questions which were discussed with community leaders, local committee, female beneficiaries, male beneficiaries or a mixture between the various groups. The analysis was initially done according to interviewed group, though no significant differences were realised. Hence, answers have been grouped together according to geographical areas. Interpretation of the answers was based on positive statements versus negative statements, and various opinions given for explication were compared and counted. The main possibilities are shown in the analysis overview below. Limitations of the information gathered from focus group discussions needs to be realised, especially when conducted by various different people. The interpretation of the information cannot be objective, though will certainly give an idea about the satisfaction and ideas of the beneficiaries. Some questions are similar in the ongoing evaluation and appreciation questionnaire (**Annex 10& 11**) which has been performed at all sites, though is underway to be analysed by the regional food security coordinator in Dakar. It would be interesting to compare the results of the focus group discussion with similar questions of the questionnaires. **Annex 13 & 14** show the two countries separate, and results according to geographical region. The overview of the two country results is discussed and explained in the following.

Focus group discussions overview – Mali/Niger

	Total Mali (59)	Total Niger (120)
Appreciation of programme		
YES/positive	50 (84.7%)	116 (96.7%)
NO/not fully positive	9 (15.3%)	4 (3.3%)
Required change of system		
None	31 (52.5%)	89 (74.2%)
<i>Change to cash/cash & food</i>	12 (42.9%)	21 (17.5%)
<i>More food/more choice</i>	12 (42.9%)	N/a
<i>Food for work</i>	N/a	3 (2.5%)
<i>Animals for work</i>	N/a	7 (5.8%)
<i>Direct food distribution by Oxfam</i>	3 (10.7%)	N/a
Mixed work for women & men		
YES	53 (89.8%)	91 (76%)
NO	6 (10.2%)	29 (24%)
Equal salaries for women & men		
YES	57 (96.6%)	100 (83%)
NO	2 (3.4%)	20 (17%)
Impact on migration		
Reduced departure*	41 (69.5%)	77(64.2%)
Increased arrival*	28(47.5%)	16 (13.3%)
Change of mentality		
YES	51(86.4%)	106(88.4%)
NO/NEUTRAL	8 (13.5%)	14 (11.6%)
<i>Natural resource management (tree, water, etc)</i>	24(47%)**	86 (81.1%)**
<i>Solidarity Improved/Positive</i>	44(86.3%)**	98 (92.5%)**
<i>Solidarity Negative</i>	0 (0%)**	4 (2.5%)**
<i>Improved mutual (women/men) communication on community level</i>	42(82.4%)**	81 (76.4%)**
<i>Male decision making in households</i>	0 (0%)**	60 (56.6%)**
<i>Mixed decision making in households</i>	40(78.4%)**	36 (34%)**
Impact on local traders		
No change	28 (47.5%)	54 (57%)***
Change	31(52.5%)	40 (43%)***
<i>Opening of shops</i>	8(25.8%)****	12 (30%)****
<i>Lowering of prices</i>	8(25.8%)****	10 (25%)****
<i>More variety on offer</i>	4 (12.9%)****	12 (30%)****
<i>Reduced buyers, increased prices</i>	11 (35.5%)****	6 (15%)****

* Explicit statement (departure/arrival)

** Using positive statements (36/106) as total, multiple answers possible, counting positive statements

*** Excluding Quallam 26 group discussions

**** Only taking the positive answer (31/40) into consideration

The **appreciation of the programme** gave a range of three degrees for answer (*bien, passable, mal*). For an overall positive answer, only the *bien* answers were grouped, the rest was counted as No or not fully positive.

Explications for positive programme appreciation by the beneficiaries were due to transparency, clarity and the well organised programme set up. The easy exchange of the voucher against food was highlighted especially in Niger. Overall, the triple gain for the communities, some community work and activities improving living conditions, food accessible for the households and families and the possibility to sell animals to acceptable prices was very appreciated. The negative perception was due to confusing and complicated system, which was not efficient, slow and leading to rupture of food availability and lack of choice. This was especially in Mali, in one community an issue, as mentioned above where the beneficiaries were not satisfied with the partner volunteer and village committee.

'The programme gave us a situation as normal: we work and we gain! It wasn't as artificial as a free distribution. That harms the attitude! Though for future activities we would hope Oxfam could provide some amount in cash to enable us to buy other needs especially medical treatment!'

The majority of Niger's respondents did not want to have a **change of voucher system**, which could be due to lack of experience with other programmes, though very suggestions were made. It is clear from the majority of the respondents who would like to see a change that a cash component is required to cover for other urgent needs than food. This is similar to the experience and report about food being sold in the markets to access cash for other needs or the vouchers being tried to exchange for medical treatment. The option of animals for work was suggested in Dakoro, a strong nomadic region. The request for distributions directly by Oxfam staff themselves is of concern, though has been raised by the same communities who were not very appreciative with the overall programme, due to complications with the traders/village committee and lack of choice.

The perception of **women and men working together** at the same sites and in cooperation was very different. In Mali, the majority was positive and explicitly stated that they re-discovered their women and realised that their work and capacity is indeed complementary. The areas with negative answer towards mixed working places, Dakoro and Bourem, mentioned mainly due to religious and cultural aspects. Both areas are more remote, conservative and less educated areas. A trend was realised by community leaders, who mentioned that it is time to change and be open for new approaches.

Votes against **equal payments** were again in the same areas in both countries, which were reasoned with the superiority of men and the different type of work done by women, which would not be comparable. It was clear that men are entitled to have higher salaries. In the same areas it was reported as well, that some women had worked though men were on the distribution list and received.

'Women should not get the same salary as they have less responsibility than man. Men need to be superior!'

The impact on the **migration** patterns is very important. Only explicit statement on which impact the programme had were counted. The reduced departure of especially men has been highlighted as very positive outcome of the programme. Families have been able to stay together in times of need. Those groups who have reported the increased numbers of people have arrived were very split between the interpretations of the arrival.

In general it was mentioned that more women than men arrived especially for the programme in the working sites. In Niger, the perception was rather positive and without problems for the sites. In Mali, it was rather negatively received to have outsiders and strangers at the working sites. One case was reported in Mali, where a person from Algeria arrived to participate in the work, though was not staying due to too low enumeration. Probably, the person did not specially arrive for the programme, but maybe was on the way travelling and wanted to benefit on the way. It is important to realise an magnetic effect of this kind of working programme. Natural resources, e.g. water at the sites, are very restricted in some areas, and it needs to be avoided to create additional pressure on existing resources. Especially in Tillaberi it was mentioned that migration will commence when the programme is ending and harvest is finished.

'The programme has given stability to the households cause the men didn't need to leave the villages and we didn't needed to take debts for food items. In additions, we can store our new harvest cause we still have some foods from the programme.'

Questions for a **change of mentality** due to the programme were difficult to analyse. Only if explicit positive statements were made, it was counted as a change. For the analysis according to the sub-aspects, only the total of the positive answers (36 for Mali and 106 for Niger) were taken into consideration. Many groups stated that a dynamic to change had already existed but through programme activities this has been reinforced and will continue to develop.

The **natural resource management** was especially high in Niger, though equally distributed within the geographical areas. This might be due to low level of education and lack of awareness. In Mali, the majority of the responses for improved resource management are from the area of Ansongo and much less from Bourem. This can be explained with higher awareness on natural resources in Bourem due to extreme problems with desertification and lack of water. Main aspects mentioned were the importance of planting trees and not cutting firewood, protecting pasture, water retention and cleanliness in villages for better health in the communities. On sideline, it was mentioned, that, thanks to the programme there was no need yet to consume the new harvest, as food has been available on household level. The new harvest will be stored and used to encash to buy other items needed by the families now or later in the season.

The **System of solidarity** is a traditional system, which should and cannot be changed by Oxfam. The system as such needs to be appreciated, as it is a coping strategy of the most needy and vulnerable. Nearly all respondents mentioned a positive impact on the solidarity system in the communities. Though mentioned as well that they have been sharing with those who were not targeted beneficiaries and therefore did not receive any food items. In some communities it was even reported that the targeting, created a split in the villages and enforced disparity amongst the different groups.

It is to be encouraged to revive the system as it can ensure the support to those remaining vulnerable and dependent. On the other hand, the main objective of the targeting of the most vulnerable households, tries to ensure the minimum benefit given to the households and wishes to ensure that the ration really reaches these households.

If, due to sharing traditions that cannot be ensured, a system needs to be developed which considers the solidarity but still enables the most vulnerable to benefit sufficiently. The following suggestions can be thought of:

- Refrain from targeting in an acute emergency and select later in process when situation has improved (as discussed in the target section above)
- 110% of a calculated ration can be given to the most vulnerable households in villages, assuming they will share the 10% and remain with the 100% needed to support the households.
- The villages will be classified in three groups of households. According to their vulnerability they will receive food items, e.g. 100%, 60% or 30% of the total calculated ration this will ensure that everybody receives and the households do not need to share, while acknowledging the difference of status amongst the families in the village.

The programme has reinforced and revived our unity. Together we will be strong in the coming times! The traditional system of sharing and solidarity is working much better again after the crisis we had and nothing was left with the households to share!

Community communication has apparently been impacted in both countries. This was explained with needs to discuss and plan working activities, shared discussions and decision making on village level. Now, ideas and point of views would be exchanged in the community discussion together with young and old, men and women. Again, it was mentioned that an existing trend for increase communication and exchange was reinforced and strengthened.

Decision making in the families has been a hot discussion point. On household level, even management of food, remains with men, which was especially reported in Niger. As in contrary to Mali, where non of the groups stated explicitly that it would be only man who make decisions, but decisions were taken together. The answers seem feasible, based on lack of education, remoteness and conservative attitudes, though need to be taken with caution, as a bias of the interviewers could be possible.

Various statements of men and women (salary, working together, decision making) show that the right of women and equity of both genders are not given in the local societies in Niger. The decision making especially for food items and preparations of foods in the households are given by men, which reduces the influence of women. Tendencies by local leaders have been observed to encourage women and enforce their activities and their economic independence. This phase of change should be used to support especially women with the generation of income especially for those who will be left behind with children and elderly, when men migrate. Income generation and the reduction of time needed for household activities e.g. mills to reduce time from pounding, etc. could significantly make a change for women in the rural areas of Mali and Niger.

Especially with a mainstream of gender and equity, Oxfam teams need to ensure attention and respect to support especially female-headed households and female members of the households to create equal opportunities.

‘C’est toujours la même chose: c’est l’homme qui commande, nous n’avons pas aucun choix, c’est comme ça!

‘Les homes sont privilèges, les femmes restent toujours pauvres, comme avant l’arrivée du programme!’

‘ La femme n’a pas droit a la parole, elle fait ce que nous décisions tant que père ou mari.’

About half of the respondents mentioned an **impact on local trade** due to the programme. The majority mentioned positive issues like opening of shops, creation of new traders, lowering of prices and increased offers and wider variety of items in the shops. In particular, the usage of local traders and transporters in Dakoro has shown a positive impact on the local economy and for the remote areas. Unfortunately, some negative impacts have been reported, particularly from Bourem where the reduction of buyers (due to availability of foods in the households) and at the same time increased prices (due to less bulk storing) for other community members who were in need of buying commodities resulted.

For Bourem remains the question if the local structures have actually been better then initially thought, as the programme had reportedly a negative impact on the local economy. Though, the capacity of these local traders has been a problem in the beginning of the programme, which resulted in the decision of bringing in food from Gao. The request of destocking beneficiaries for cash instead of for vouchers, due to possible local procurement and easier negotiation of better prices for food items needs to be taken serious.

The **overall tendency** for all the beneficiaries in both countries was positive, gratefulness and thanks to Oxfam and partners. It was very clear that the beginning of the programme was considered a bit late, though still had support the population in times of greatest need. In Dakoro, the population reported that this had been the first intervention of its kind since 15 years. All groups interviewed concordantly requested and hoped for a **longer term** support with **sustainable development** on village level like income generating activities, mills, vegetable gardens, micro-credit, cereal banks, water access, etc. Health services and education structures, were especially for the remoter and nomadic areas an important request.

The request for similar programmes, though next time longer for the whole time of lean season to overcome the greatest needs was stated, though with higher beneficiary numbers to ensure that all households in need could be participating. Overall, the groups were all clear that they need a more permanent approach and support to fight against lack of structural development and chronic poverty!

9. Voucher for Work – an option for emergencies?

Lessons can always be learned – as there will always be space for improvement – especially at the end of a programme! Key elements are a good review of previous activities and the initial set up of a programme with sufficient flexibility to change things to adapt to the best ways of working. Often, this needed flexibility is limited by policies and funding issues.

Throughout the report, many ideas and lessons have already been recommended. Therefore, detailed lessons learned shall not be repeated, though a critical question needs to be asked:

Are vouchers for work a realistic option in emergencies?

Remembering the description of various cash/food transfer programme approaches (2.Appropriateness of the programme), the following needs to be recalled:

- **Cash for work**– most flexible, time and cost efficient, but problems with insecurity
- **Food for work**– least flexible, but necessary in areas with problems of access and availability, or unusual high prices
- **Voucher for work**– leaving the choice and flexibility of cash, though trying to maximise security

Each of the systems has certainly its context and minimum needs to ensure maximum output. The voucher system, to be most effective and fulfilling its main objective of giving the **choice** to the beneficiary while transferring cash, needs a local economic structure for integration.

If this is given, e.g. in a one time off distribution of seeds or animals, or in weekly **markets** and local services, nothing can replace the efficiency of the voucher. If this is not given, due to lack of time or organisation to integrate or due to lack of economic structures, the voucher can simply not be the most efficient tool to serve the population in need.

The voucher system, especially during continuous use over weeks/months, poses the highest needs on the administrative side, which again can be acceptable and is a matter of arrangements, if the main objective for the beneficiaries is served. If this is not given, the voucher system increases **time** and, **human resources** and **administrative work** to unacceptable amounts.

The general argument of higher logistical needs and costs involved for a food distribution as compared to a voucher, for procurement and transport of commodities, is certainly a valid point. Though, if the voucher system needs to provide foods and create artificial markets, **logistics** poses an additional burden on top of a general administrative matters of a vouchers. Given the local context in Mali and Niger, with lack of local markets, high food prices and a lack of time to arrange and integrate due to an emergency intervention, the decision for a voucher approach was technically not correct.

The initial idea of cash was probably a good consideration, though given high food prices and far distances beneficiaries would have spend a significant amount of their money on logistical costs and seasonal price variation.

Taking ECHO's and Oxfam's fear of insecurity in the areas into consideration, it is understandable that a decision against direct cash transfer was made. However, this leaves the question why it was acceptable to pay herders in cash for the destocking of their animals in Niger, if at the same time it is rejected to pay workers in cash as well. In other countries, in more instable political contexts cash transferring to the most needy population has been successful.

It is important that **donor policies** or directions shall not force Oxfam to implement a programme in a defined way, which is not feasible for the ground reality. To be able to make a judgement on the most applicable approach, a good understanding and comprehension of the situation context is needed, which should be provided in a good bottom up system, where the field teams can bring about change.

Given the good comprehension of the situation in Mali and the experience of the previous programme in March/April, the request by the donor to implement vouchers should have been better contemplated, and in fact rejected on base of the applicability of the approach.

Given the slow onset emergency for the Sahel and time that was there to prepare and implemented activities, especially in Mali, it is sad to see that the integration of the vouchers in the existing market systems was not better facilitated.

After all, beneficiaries did not have the choice and flexibility, which the voucher system tries to provide. After all, a food distribution was performed with predefined commodities, though with extra administrative burden, using the vouchers. After all, even with higher logistical impacts then a voucher system would foresee.

The reason for Niger to commence the same system was probably a similar approach and mainstreaming the programme activities for the overall Sahel food crisis emergency programme. Lack of markets and high prices, with same impacts for the voucher system and later food distributions, as in Mali occurred. In addition, Niger had even more difficulties due to lack of basic infrastructure and set up, and lack of partner capacity and support.

To stop the voucher utilisation in nearly all parts of Niger and the northern parts of the Malian activities (Bourem), due to unnecessary administrative workload and without the benefits of the voucher system etc., was a sensible decision.

Summing up all the above arguments and issues, voucher programmes in an emergency situation should be implemented, given the objective of replacing cash for insecure areas, while ensuring the choice for beneficiaries, is achievable. This would be recommendable if,

- a) it is a one time off distribution for seeds, animals etc., which is a fair where local traders are invited to present and offer their articles and the choice is with beneficiaries
- b) the local market infrastructure is existing and time and knowledge in the area allows the integration of the voucher into the markets, with acceptance by traders and other services, e.g. health.

The later certainly needs a good comprehension of the area of intervention and good connections with traders and local systems. The integration in the existing markets needs time, which often in an acute emergency is not available, due to pressing needs. In Niger, the integration of the vouchers in the few markets (Ayourou/Quallam) was not possible from the beginning onwards, but only after 3 distributions (6 weeks) due to needs of mobilisation of traders, awareness raising and discussions. Fortunately, the distribution had commenced earlier already, on a food distribution basis.

9.1 And next time?

The implementation of a voucher system in the future is certainly possible. Though the main objective of the programme intervention needs to be assessed and a solution should be found which is the most efficient and easiest way to achieve this objective. Dealing with a food or a cash or a voucher transfer system need to be the question.

With prospects for the coming lean season 2006 in Mali and Niger, and the knowledge of allocations in the current programme proposals for a working programme component to provide households with working opportunities to increase access to food, the following suggestions can be made.

In general, the easiest, most time and cost efficient possibility, giving choice to the beneficiaries, protecting dignity and encouraging economic recovery while empowering the most marginalised members of the community, is cash programming. A good transfer system can be developed to ensure utmost security. This could be developed together with local finance officers, food security monitors, bank representatives etc.

Keeping in mind the lack of markets and infrastructures, hence logistical extra costs and higher prices of the commodities on one hand, and wanting to leave the choice to the beneficiaries on the other hand, the optimum programme activity could be a food and cash programme. This approach would provide a mixture of food and cash to the families.

A cash/food package would have the advantage of ensuring the minimum food needs on household level, without loss for the beneficiaries due to logistical extra costs, while still providing a cash component, which is flexible to be used for other urgent needs. At the same time, the total amount of cash in need to be distributed could be reduced to a minimum. A programme package of 60% food and 40% cash could be facilitated.

As the point in time for the onset of the programme will be known, based on a good and continuous monitoring of the food security situation, and considering the improved familiarity with the areas, food commodities can be procured in good time to relatively low prices. A combined ration of cereals, beans, groundnuts, oil and some condiments, like in Niger should be approached. Exact commodities, should be reassessed with the population. The integration of meat should not be considered if no need for destocking activities is given, due to a lot of extra time and arrangement needs. The beneficiaries can use the cash component for complementary food items e.g. milk, sugar, tea or other non-food needs.

The used system of community based partner volunteers and field based Oxfam staff, like practised in Mali, is certainly the best way to ensure good and ongoing sensibilisation, mobilisation and monitoring possibilities. Field based Oxfam staff would at the same time reduce the need for logistics resources, e.g. vehicles, fuel significantly.

In addition, more focus on the capacity building and reinforcement of the local **village committees** could support, not only the rehabilitation and development programmes, but as well fulfil a good preparedness focus for future crises and emergencies to come.

For the commencement of a similar programme in the region, it could be possible to facilitate an **exchange** amongst partners to support and use experience and capacity from one project area to another. Tassaght and GARI could share lots of experiences with AREN in Niger, and support them in setting up a community-based system.

In addition the following recommendations to the rehabilitation/post-emergency programmes in Mali and Niger can be made:

The Oxfam Humanitarian programme teams have developed many documents, **guidelines and support tools** for programme responses in emergencies. Assessment guidelines, monitoring tools, programme implementation guidelines for cash programming, livestock, gender mainstreaming, HIV/AIDS guidelines and more are available. Unfortunately, none of them were useful in the local offices and available to the national and international staff members and partners, mainly due to one reason: lack of translation into French! Looking at Oxfam's international status and size, this is appalling! Serious efforts have to be made, on headquarter and regional level, to ensure that relevant programme tools and documents are translated.

With regard to overall learning from the voucher system, a separate **evaluation** of the financial **voucher tracing systems** in Mali and Niger should be facilitated. An exchange and discussion with the finance officers in Dakoro, Gao, Niamey and Dakoro, could enable the optimisation of system for future similar programmes. This would as well greatly contribute to Oxfam's approach of becoming the lead agency in cash transfer programming, ensuring the provision of various tools needed for the implementation of voucher programmes.

It is recommended to invite the Gender& Representation, HIV/AIDS and protection advisors for visits, to support the teams on the ground with the inclusion of Oxfam **mainstreams** into the programme activities.

Last but not least, a **better understanding** is needed on how to facilitate good targeting in the Sahel and generally in emergencies, the local debt system, solidarity and social network systems. Possible some research activities in both countries would be useful to be in a better position to respond to needs of the population.

10. Conclusion

If one would give points to evaluate which of the two countries has been more successful with the implementation of the programme and programme results, it will be difficult to allocate values for certain aspects. Certainly, the team in Mali, with excellent capacity on partner and Oxfam level, had important advantages for the implementation. Basic constraints of absence of office, support staff and a capable partner in Niger have certainly had a big impact on the programme. Simply these issues make the direct comparison impossible and therefore a comparative analysis impossible.

Both programmes have shown how important good programme set up preparations on all levels are. Good trainings and briefings for Oxfam and partners staff on programme principles and objectives, and community sensibilisation and mobilisation are key to a successful programme.

Transparency and communication amongst Oxfam and partners, on community level and with other included service providers, increases appreciation for the programme and makes monitoring activities easier.

A good monitoring system is important to enable Oxfam and partners to make decisions and adapt quick changes if needed, in an efficient and transparent manner.

The inclusion and participation of the beneficiaries needs to be the focus in all programme instances, e.g. targeting, work, trader arrangements, distribution, etc to ensure development and sustainability.

And after all, sufficient human resources for programming and support functions are needed to commence an emergency programme, especially without an existing country presence.

Hellas, both countries, against all odds and constraints, managed to support the local population in need and have avoided the further deterioration of the most vulnerable households. In Mali, more on cost, in terms of time and energy, of the partners, in Niger more on Oxfam's cost, the teams were able to implement activities considering SPHERE standards.

It is to be hoped that more lessons will be learned from this crisis intervention and the way forward will be defined, on Oxfam as well as on international level, trying to avoid reoccurrence of food insecurity, enhance development, improve education and equity to make poverty history!