



*Photo Credit: Corinna Robbins for Mercy Corps*

# **MERCY CORPS NIGERIA'S INTEGRATED PROTECTION APPROACH**

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## Protection Situation in Nigeria

In northern Nigeria, displaced, returnee, and host populations constantly face challenges to their safety and dignity. Years of insurgency and military operations have put real strains on access to essential services, especially for people who regularly face obstacles like people with disabilities and the elderly. It has exacerbated existing practices that marginalize population segments such as females, young people, and children, as well as different ethnic groups and religions. Access to livelihoods, government social services, and local social networks and safety-nets that people rely on to mitigate shocks and stresses in their lives have been weakened. Limited movement and access to livelihood opportunities with an increase in household expenses such as a dependency to rent shelter and a reliance on private water delivery services, increase situations where the risk of exploitation flourishes. As time stretches on, people and families turn to negative coping mechanism such as child labor, early marriage and survival sex.

Issues of safety, dignity and inclusion have had adverse effects on different populations; disrupting their ability to fully manage their daily activities and contribution to their household and community development. For adolescent girls and young women, fears of abductions, sexual violence, and harassment, as well as pre-existing social norms, have restricted their mobility, access to social networks, and opportunities. Adolescent boys and young men are routinely questioned and are susceptible to detention by the authorities and abduction and recruitment by insurgents and vigilante groups. As a result, young men are often viewed as problem makers, not as contributors to a better future. Additional strains on resource poor support systems for people with disabilities, severe and chronic illnesses, the elderly and the people who support their care has been making it difficult for people with special needs to access even the most basic services and facilities.



**Ultimately, the lack of security and limited mobility has touched off a food crisis that pits areas in northern Nigeria on the brink of famine; a situation in which children under five are already severely affected.**

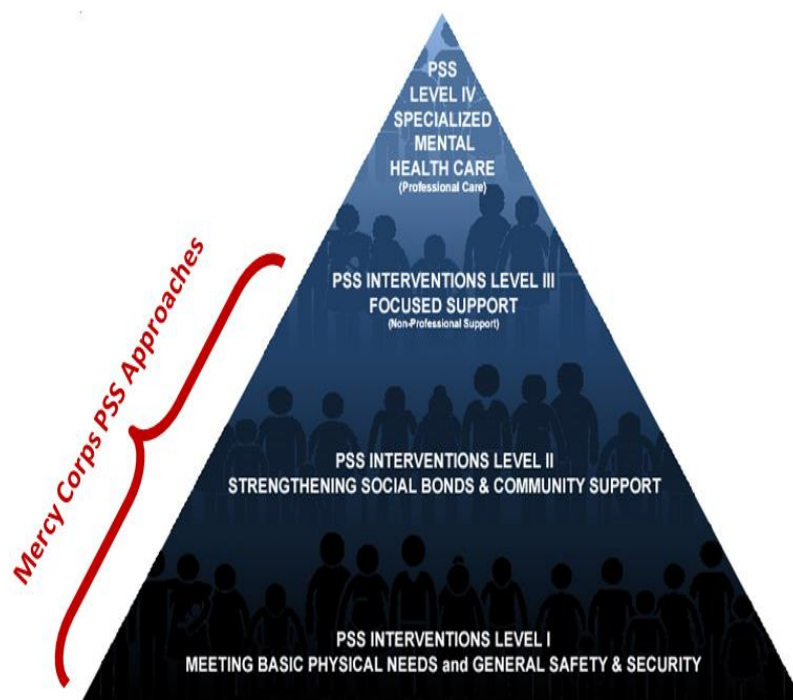
Conflict and the resulting displacement has separated families. There is an increase in single headed households, often without the traditional breadwinner. Despite the shocks to their livelihoods and wellbeing, many families are caring for relatives' and neighbors' children, as well as unaccompanied minors. At the same time, many children and adolescents fend for themselves; putting them at risk of exploitation and using negative coping mechanisms.

Nigerians have always had to play a delicate dance to mitigate tensions between different ethnic groups, religious groups, as well as between pastoral, agricultural, and urban based populations. These long-lying issues have become more complicated as a result of the conflict and often contribute to the underlying issues of the crisis.

## Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Response: The Centrality of Protection

Working in some of the toughest challenges across the globe, Mercy Corps works with communities to be more resilient and cope with the shocks and stresses that accompany conflict and displacement. First and foremost, we work directly with different segments of communities – men, women, boys, and girls as well as people with special needs and marginalized populations – to identify opportunities for support but also to understand the barriers, challenges and risks that can hinder support and their ability to be resilient. Mercy Corps incorporates protection through a mixture of sector mainstreaming best practices, integrating protection outcomes in our different sector work and, where we add value, in the establishment of specialized protection programming.

Coping in conflict and with displacement takes a toll on peoples' mental and emotional wellbeing as social systems, safety nets, and protective relationships that they were accustomed to rely on have diminished. Even as they manage their daily tasks to survive and make the best of their new circumstances, they need to reconstruct support systems to help them cope and find new opportunities to thrive. Mercy Corps fits inside its programming the ability to help people manage their basic needs and contribute to their safety. It works with them to establish new social bonds and avenues for community based support. Where necessary, Mercy Corps provides more focused support to individuals to help them breakdown their complex problems to find direct support and strengthen their capacities and pathways to resilience by connecting them to substantive resources and people in the community.



*Levels of Psychosocial Support (PSS)  
Source: IASC Guidelines on MHPSS in Emergency Settings*

## Mercy Corps Nigeria's Approach to Protection

Mercy Corps recognizes that issues of safety, dignity, and inclusion crosscut many of the challenges that Nigerians face in their daily lives as they adjust to the complex emergency around them. Protection is a central theme to their current situation. By addressing protection issues, Mercy Corps' clients are more likely to fully access and use the services and facilities intended to assist their well-being. Most importantly, through its activities, services, and participatory approaches that recognize the unique challenges for different segments of the population, Mercy Corps works with individuals, households and communities from displaced, returnee, and host communities to strengthen their capacities that help them navigate risks and mitigate vulnerabilities.

## Protection Mainstreaming: Delivery of Safe, Dignified, and Inclusive Services

All Mercy Corps interventions mainstream protection best practices, as per guidance from each sector cluster, to ensure our clients have access to safe, dignified, and inclusive services and facilities. Mercy Corps uses data that is disaggregated by sex and age, as well as other key demographic variables, in order to design, implement and adapt its cash support, WASH facilities and services, early economic recovery, conflict mitigation, and adolescent programming to meet the specific challenges of various cohorts in the population such as the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and people with other health related conditions that need extra attention.

### Adapting to Deliver Safe Services

In a community in Southern Borno, to access the market in Biu, families must pass through a military checkpoint where young men and women are questioned and, at times, harassed by the military. Due to long queues, they are also at risk of being targets for abduction by insurgents. This scenario made people reluctant to go to Biu and purchase basic food and materials. Some families resorted to negative coping mechanisms. Rather than have clients from the village pass through the checkpoint to access the markets in Biu, Mercy Corps encouraged merchants from Biu to bring their goods to the village, thus reducing our clients' exposure to various life threatening dangers.

## Integrated Protection Outcomes: Contributing to Safer, More Dignified and Inclusive Experiences

Mercy Corps recognizes that when intentionally designed to do so, various parts of its programming can influence outcomes that contribute to a safer, more dignified, and inclusive experience within the communities it works. Mercy Corps' protection team works with each program sector and project to help



*Community leaders in Nasarawa State participate in a needs assessment to analyze the linkages between a lack of social services and conflict. Mercy Corps then works with conflicting communities to identify shared social service needs and opportunities to collaboratively address shared challenges. Photo Credit: Mercy Corps | December 2016*

the team assess the safety and inclusion issues associated with their programming and how they can integrate protection approaches that help their clients reduce exposure to threats, navigate the risks they face in their daily activities, and strengthen their capacity to mitigate various vulnerabilities. This includes teams assessing people's vulnerabilities and capacities through the use of vulnerability assessment frameworks and asset mapping, as well as facilitating contextual risk and safety analysis for different age and sex segments of the population by using tools like participatory safety mapping and the Cohort Livelihoods and Risk Assessment (CLARA).

Mercy Corps Nigeria, with support of the protection team, deliberately designs interventions that expand individual's social support networks and safety nets by promoting

safe and friendly spaces for group members to assist each other and make connections to other resources in the community. For instance, Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) are not only designed as a way for individuals to have equitable access to savings and loans that benefit their household's purchasing



power, but also to help displaced and marginalized individuals build stronger social support networks. In addition to the adolescent girl safe spaces and adolescent boy safe spaces, Mercy Corps' I-SING adolescent programming purposely includes a mentoring component in its project so that girls and boys can learn from and build relationships with role models in their community. Mercy Corps' conflict mitigation program's Peace Committees under the Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN) project forge a safe and trusting venue for different communities to work out divergent agendas and bond on common causes.

Ultimately, Mercy Corps Nigeria designs projects to help reduce the pool of people at risk of protection issues and strengthen their capacity to navigate the risks they face. Using the "I'm Here Approach," Mercy Corps' adolescent programming seeks out and works with adolescents that are the most marginalized, less likely to have safe, dignified and inclusive access to community assets and available services, and who are at a high risk of using negative coping mechanisms to get by. Tailored interventions are designed to meet specific needs, conjure assets, build relevant knowledge and skills, and enable safe opportunities and support for unique groups of adolescent girls and adolescent boys that help create an enabling environment for them to mitigate the risks of their lives and thrive. Mercy Corps' conflict mitigation team works with diverse communities with different priorities and agendas to find common ground, social cohesion, and to be responsive to flash points that can potentially create tensions between communities and risk the safety of all community members.



*An adolescent girl learning to sew from a tailor in her village. Her apprenticeship was the culmination of a nine-month financial literacy course, established by a Mercy Corps program working to empower vulnerable Nigerian girls. Photo Credit: Corinna Robbins for Mercy Corps | March 2016*



**Mercy Corps' activities work with communities to focus and act on early warning signs to intercommunity tensions and prevent conflicts before violence evolves at the earliest stages.**

Under its countering violent extremism (CVE) program in the North East of Nigeria, Mercy Corps is engaging youth in social and economic opportunities through activities that positively influence youth behaviors and decreases their vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups. These include engaging youth in community service initiatives, creating joint livelihood projects, and working with peers and influencers to deliver positive narratives.

## **The Ripple Effect:**

### **Compounding Interventions on Protection Outcomes**

Mercy Corps clients do not live in a bubble. Issues of safety, dignity and inclusion cross through communities and households. Violence and neglect on an individual can negatively affect a family and the community at large. In Nigeria, the situation has forced communities and households to support extended family members, neighbors and even strangers, despite the challenges they face meeting their own basic needs. When different interventions are interconnected for an individual or household, they

can have a compounding and positive ripple effect not only on the individual, but also for other people in their household and community as well. Mercy Corps Nigeria is currently working on how to measure how compounded interventions can have a positive ripple effect throughout a household and community.

### Case study: The ripple effect of protection outcomes

After her husband was killed, Aisha and her children fled their village for Gombe where she managed to find shelter with her husband's distant relatives. In addition to her three children, she is also caring for a separated child of a neighbor and an unaccompanied child that she found along the road while in flight. As a widow and female head of household, her and her children are eligible for humanitarian assistance.

**Protection outcomes through cash transfers to meet basic needs.** Mercy Corps initially provided cash transfers to Aisha that allowed her to meet basic food and material needs for her, her children, and the two additional children under her care. This also had a ripple effect. Not only did Mercy Corps' support ensure that her household had access to basic sustenance, it also freed up time to care for her children – time that she otherwise would have had to spend scraping by enough money to pay for their needs. Potentially, this also helped avoid the need to engage in negative coping mechanisms such as using child labor or survival sex to pay for basic needs. Survival sex and children hawking are real problems facing IDPs in northern Nigeria, which leads to a downward spiral of amplified risks to their safety and dignity.

**Protection outcomes through Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA).** Mercy Corps' support to Aisha did not stop there. She was also eligible to join a village savings and loans association. With loans from the VSLA, she was able to start a small shop to sell basic items her neighbors needed like soap, oil, pencils, and onions. The VSLA also had a social welfare fund to support members facing short-term household shocks. Her small business bolstered her income and also helped her better care for the children with more nutritious meals. She also knew that she could rely on the social welfare fund if there was an unexpected cost, such as an emergency health problem. Her participation in the VSLA also had a ripple effect on her wellbeing. She met new acquaintances in her new community, broadening her social networks. This was not only helpful for her business endeavor, but also provided her with important emotional support. She felt she could trust them and share her feelings relating to the loss of her husband, adjusting to her new home, and the challenges of being a single parent and a care provider to separated and unaccompanied children.

**Protection outcomes through financial loans.** As Aisha's income, confidence, and social networks grew, she felt empowered to request a business grant from Mercy Corps to expand her shop. This allowed her to have more disposable income to support her family's needs, illustrating the ripple effect of the assistance. It allows her to more fully support her children's basic costs to go to school, including support for the separated and unaccompanied children under her care – helping them be less vulnerable and manage the risks that they face. Furthermore, she is applying for a grant to operate a small fish farm to help her sell fish in the market and provide more sustained care for the children in her household.

The story of Aisha is what happens when Mercy Corps Nigeria sees protection as central to its work and takes a holistic approach to protection. All its projects (humanitarian assistance, WASH, early economic recovery, protection, adolescent and peace & conflict programming) mainstream best practices that aim to ensure the delivery of safe, dignified and inclusive facilities, services and support. In addition, Mercy Corps works with the community to assess risks that impede access to basic needs and impact their safety, dignity, and inclusion; keeping in mind that different people have unique needs that often need tailored support. By integrating protection outcomes in its interventions, Mercy Corps contributes to an enabling environment for individuals to find the support they need, open opportunities, and thrive.

## CONTACT

IVETA OUVRY  
Country Director | Mercy Corps Nigeria  
[iouvry@mercycorps.org](mailto:iouvry@mercycorps.org)

KEVIN MCNULTY  
Senior Protection Advisor | Technical Support Unit –  
Youth, Gender and Girls  
[kmcnulty@mercycorps.org](mailto:kmcnulty@mercycorps.org)

### About Mercy Corps

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



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)