

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION
USAID Youth Connect

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This USAID/Sahel Regional Office (SRO) RFI is issued for the purpose of providing stakeholders an opportunity to review, comment, suggest, and enhance areas in the attached draft design document for the new USAID/SRO **Youth Connect activity**.

USAID intends to issue a solicitation for this \$19 million five-year activity in Niger. This Request for Information (RFI) asks interested parties to suggest to USAID any evidence-based activities or interventions that the respondent believes will improve economic opportunities of Nigerien youth in conflict-affected contexts. The Youth Connect activity seeks to equip vulnerable young women and men in Niger with the skills, networks, and capital for increased strategic economic opportunities through the following objectives:

1. Equip youth with market-relevant skills to prepare them for livelihoods
2. Link youth to jobs, market information networks, and business coaching
3. Prepare youth and youth cooperatives to access and manage financial resources
4. Engage youth and youth groups in local governance/community structures that will support their own development needs.

USAID has revised its program cycle guidance to facilitate more adaptive, contextually-driven programming approaches, and the choice of a high-level, objective-oriented design rather than a more prescriptive scope reflects this. USAID/SRO may significantly revise this proposed new activity and planned solicitation resulting from the comments received, and from further stakeholder consultations.

This RFI is issued solely for information and planning purposes and does not constitute a Request for Applications or Proposals (RFA/RFP). Responses to this RFI shall not be portrayed as proposals and will not be accepted by the U.S. Government (USG) to form a binding agreement. This RFI is not to be construed as a commitment by the USG to issue any solicitation or ultimately award of an assistance agreement or contract on the basis of this RFI, or to pay for any information submitted as a result of this request. Responders are solely responsible for all expenses associated with responding to this RFI. USAID reserves the right to modify the scope and scale of the RFI.

It should be noted that responding to or providing comment on this RFI will not give any advantage to any organization in any subsequent procurement. USAID/SRO will not provide answers to any question submitted in response to this request.

By issuing the draft for comment, USAID/SRO aims to consult with a broad community of public and private sector actors. Your comments are requested to help refine the draft design document to ensure clarity, maximum development impact, coordination with existing and planned USAID and other development partner programs, and alignment with the Government of Niger priorities. In particular, USAID welcomes reports or information from your organization that address any or all of the following specific questions¹:

- Are the activity theory of change and objectives clear and realistic?

Livelihoods and Youth:

- What are livelihoods that would be appropriate and accessible for young people in the proposed target regions?
- What training programs/approaches financed by the GON or other donors already exist and can be leveraged, built on, scaled up? What are the pros and cons of the programs/approaches that USAID should learn from?

Gender:

- What are the most viable strategies for strengthening young women's economic opportunities in Niger?

CVE:

¹ Please see Sahel Regional Office key documents page for pertinent studies, including Youth Analysis and Livelihood Diversification Analyses: <https://www.usaid.gov/sahel-regional/newsroom/documents>

- How can the proposed activity target youth in Niger who might be at risk of becoming radicalized? Are young women and young men radicalized in different ways? And what are evidence-based interventions that would be effective?

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

- How can we monitor activities beyond counting the number of youth trained? How should we monitor for outcomes? What approaches have proved successful for perception monitoring of youth? What questions should USAID be evaluating around this approach?
- Recognizing that most transformative change happens over generations, what specific new learning is most critical? What must we learn over the next five years from today's youth to help improve the economic prospects of their younger siblings and children?

Please provide no more than four (4) pages of comments no later than June 20, 2019 via email to sahelregional@usaid.gov. While the limit on the length of submissions is four pages, we value concise, issue-specific comments with reference to page and section numbers in the draft design document. You may receive an electronic confirmation acknowledging receipt of your response.

Unlike previous RFIs issued by this Office, USAID/SRO will not host a pre-solicitation conference for this RFI.

Statement of Objectives

INTRODUCTION

USAID is supporting the five-year Youth Connect activity focused on creating improved skills and economic opportunities for young women and men in Niger. The Youth Connect activity is one of several activities supporting USAID's Bridge project, devoted to addressing the development challenges at the nexus of countering violent extremism and resilience.

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

The goal of the activity is to equip vulnerable young women and men in Niger with technical and life skills, networks, and capital for increased strategic economic opportunities. This objective supports the overall Bridge project purpose, which is to address critical unmet needs that are the main drivers of violent extremist recruitment in the Sahel: poor governance, lack of economic opportunity, and perceived exclusion from the benefits and services provided and facilitated by governments in the region.

Bridge explicitly and intentionally aims programming interventions at the nexus of countering violent extremism and resilience, recognizing that many development challenges serve as 'push' factors potentially driving the most vulnerable towards extremist groups that offer fulfillment of critical unmet needs (e.g. income, justice, identity, purpose, etc.). (See annex 1 for Bridge project results framework).

The Bridge project contributes to the Sahel Development Partnership for Burkina Faso and Niger (SDP), which is an integrated framework that guides multiple interventions to help stabilize focus areas by countering violent extremism and building local communities' resilience. Through SDP, USAID seeks to halt the spread of violent extremist groups, avert costly humanitarian crises, and stem the flow of destabilizing migration. USAID will implement SDP in coordination with the Departments of State, and Defense, and other U.S. Government agencies.

SDP has three flexible implementation arms to enable programming to be adjusted as violent extremist organization (VEO) influence is diminished, security is expanded, and opportunities for longer-term programming are created. This flexibility will also enable intensive countering violent extremism (CVE) programming to deploy elsewhere as conditions in initial areas improve:

- Intensive CVE programming and emergency humanitarian interventions in areas with active conflict or violent attacks (“hot” areas) in Tillaberi, Niger, and the Sahel and Est regions of northern Burkina Faso to address immediate VEO threats
- Transitional livelihood, governance, and CVE programming focused on “warm” areas and former “hot” areas as conditions improve
- Multi-sector resilience and development programming (e.g. RISE II) in more stable “buffer” areas prone to recurrent humanitarian crises with the flexibility to expand into former warm and hot zones as conditions further improve and resources allow.

SDP areas of intervention will likely change based on the dynamic security situation.

The preliminary theory of change for the Youth Connect activity is as follows:

If vulnerable youth have market-demanded technical, social, and emotional skills; access to market information and networks; access to financing; and the capacity to participate in community decision-making,

Then regional economic growth will take place, featuring the enhancement of youth economic opportunities and well-being, and the reduction in the number of youth joining violent extremist organizations.

OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Equip youth with market-relevant skills to prepare them for livelihoods

According to findings from research conducted on Tillaberi youth’s motivations for joining violent extremist groups, more than 85% of youth cited economic reasons as compared with other factors, such as ideological, religious, or corruption. While conclusive evidence about unemployment as a driver for youth extremism is still emerging, income-generation opportunities in Niger are a major priority for youth that should not be undervalued. A core part of ensuring youth have greater economic opportunities is equipping them with skills that are relevant to the local economy and are portable for different livelihoods opportunities. While it is understood that skill building will not alone create economic opportunities for youth and must be paired with demand-oriented interventions to create jobs and business opportunities, the low level of skills among Nigerien youth means they are ill-equipped to take advantage of available work and income-generation activities. The extremely poor state of education in Niger leaves young women and men with very low literacy and numeracy skills as well as few other

foundational or market-relevant skills. Moreover, youth migrating for work need skills and information about how to migrate safely and avoid dangers of traffickers and gangs as well as information about how to manage their earnings.

Interventions under Objective 1 will address the multiple skill needs of youth beneficiaries to prepare them for livelihoods. Targeted youth have diverse needs and profiles and the implementer is encouraged to assess youth's skills and aspirations as part of the early phase of the activity. For example, self-employed youth include both those who rely on subsistence-level self-employment, and those who engage in more productive or transformational entrepreneurship through the micro- or small enterprises they develop. Training should be tailored to these two groups' different needs. Skills-building interventions should focus on skills that are relevant for existing and future job market needs, grounded in strong market analyses. It will be essential to identify the range of skills needed for local markets as well as skills needed for markets outside of the Tillabéri region where youth are migrating. This may include identifying growth sectors that are accessible and attractive to youth, drawing upon existing market analyses and private sector opportunities, and linking with USAID's other investments in private sector development for the country and West Africa region. Conducting a local market analysis tailored to the Tillabéri region with consideration of migrant labor opportunities in Niamey can be considered, as appropriate. Taking a flexible approach to identifying promising sectors that consults with local industries and private sector and updates this analysis periodically is encouraged. Given the perception that young people are not necessarily interested in working on the farm like their parents did, this activity should consider emphasizing off-farm and non-farm sectors. Possible sectors that can be considered for focus include, but are not limited to: rearing of poultry or small ruminants, solar horticulture, transportation services, sewing, and agriculture processing. Activities are not limited to value chains supported by other investments. In cases where there are existing training courses but access is limited due to fees, scholarships for training can be considered as part of the approach.

There are select skills that have been proven to have a direct impact on earnings and livelihoods and should be considered a core part of training as well as secondary skills that enable youth to best take advantage of earnings. Growing evidence suggests that "soft skills" are highly correlated with youth work and entrepreneurship success. Moreover, there is growing evidence that soft skills may be more important to success in business and in the workplace than vocational or traditional business skills, such as accounting or marketing. Soft skills like "self-starting behavior, innovation, identifying and exploiting new opportunities, goal-setting, and overcoming obstacles" may be more impactful on income and business performance. There is also evidence that many of these skills are also correlated with positive outcomes in the area of violence prevention. Given this evidence, this activity will lead to measurable learning outcomes in relevant soft skills for targeted youth.

There is wide consensus that literacy and numeracy are essential foundational skills for youth's access to greater income and ability to make informed decisions for themselves and their families. The activity will deliver measurable learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy for youth who are not able to meet minimum levels of proficiency at the outset of their participation in the activity. Evidence shows that literacy and numeracy programs are most effective when they are integrated into a package of skills training for youth and are linked to future job opportunities or sectors. The activity will inventory existing youth-focused literacy and numeracy materials and instructional models in Niger, and then build on or adapt existing effective or certified program models and materials for delivery. This program should create linkages with established accelerated learning programs that offer youth an alternative path for receiving a formal education degree. Other secondary skills to be considered include financial literacy and reproductive health.

Best practices in youth programming suggest that offering an integrated package of skills training including different sectors, such as health and civic education and engagement, may respond more effectively to youth's multiple skill needs. Approaches should consider both the value-add along with the cost when proposing to offer a holistic training package. Short courses may be considered, which may be more accessible for young women and men whose household responsibilities and schedules may not allow enrollment in longer duration training or to allow for flexibility around the harvest season and migration by youth. Consideration of multiple-round refresher trainings to help participants revisit what they have learned is also encouraged. Additionally, multiple channels for delivering training should be considered in order to reach diverse youth, including young women and youth in remote areas who are not able to access training centers and to accommodate limited mobility due to security, gender norms or household responsibilities. Potential modes for delivering training include mobile phones, training centers, use of "safe spaces", community radio, and delivery of sector-specific training through private sector producer groups. Building on lessons learned and successes from USAID's REGIS- AG and ER activities is highly desirable.

Objective 2 - Link youth to jobs, market information, networks, finance and business coaching

Two of the constraints that youth in Tillabéri face in their ability to earn income or improve their earnings are accessing reliable job information and market networks, and lack of business support to guide their launch of or strengthen existing businesses. Youth lack information on a range of topics such as viable yet safe ways to earn money, how to improve one's business, where to find skills training, and how to access financing. For those who have existing

income-generating activities, they lack linkages to suppliers of inputs and buyers and producers to access markets that can help improve their earnings. Young women and men's channels are further constrained by the deteriorating security in the region which limits their ability to travel to markets, attend trainings outside of their communities, or find work. Large percentages of youth from Tillabéri migrate to Niamey and beyond during the lean season and yet even if they have the requisite skills, youth are ill-informed of strategic and safe work opportunities. Youth also have perceptions about certain types of work and sectors which deters them from pursuing these- some cultural, some based on perceived risk, and some based on lack of knowledge about opportunities in those sectors.

Interventions under Objective 2 are envisioned to provide youth with business development services, equip them with information on available work opportunities, income-generation opportunities, business resources and value-chain partnerships and place them in jobs or start up income generation activities. The emphasis should be on offering services through existing local entities and structures (including commune leaders and governance structures) as much as possible in order to foster greater sustainability. Applicants are encouraged to consider working through informal youth networks, such as fadas, youth associations, and youth centers. Use of WhatsApp groups and caravans are a potential approach for disseminating information. Use of peer to peer approaches can be considered such as strategies that connect emerging entrepreneurs in Niamey as employers, business coaches or mentors for more vulnerable youth. Working through established entrepreneurs to offer mentoring and business coaching to more vulnerable youth has shown to be effective in other contexts for building youth's capacity and connecting broader networks of youth businesses. Leveraging youth leaders through YALI-Niger and other entrepreneurship networks can be considered.

As discussed under Objective 1, the approach should be informed by existing market analyses that identify growth sectors and private sector investment opportunities , such as USAID's West Africa Trade and Investment Hub activity. The activity can consider conducting new labor market assessments, as appropriate, to identify economic opportunities for youth that are accessible and attractive to youth in the region of Tillabéri, including migrant labor opportunities outside of the region. Interventions can include mobile-based job matching platforms, business development support.

Objective 3 - Prepare youth and youth cooperatives to access and manage financial resources

Self-employment is the most likely area for economic opportunity for youth both in Tillabéri and for those who migrate out of the region. While lack of skills and access to networks are among the top barriers for starting or expanding businesses, insufficient access to credit or capital is the other major barrier. Youth are particularly more limited in their ability to meet collateral requirements to obtain a loan, even from NGOs, so youth rely on community loan groups or family and friends to lend them small amounts of cash when needed, enabling them to keep small business activities going, but not to expand. If they do qualify for loans from MFIs, youth lack information on loan repayment and need substantial guidance.

USAID will have a separate access to finance activity with which the successful applicant will be required to coordinate. Applicants can consider various strategies to train youth on financial literacy, financial management, how to apply for a loan, and loan repayment. Interventions should strongly consider targeting youth cooperatives as opposed to individuals, and promote group lending techniques in which at least one member is literate. Applicants should also consider working with mobile network operators to promote mobile money utilization potentially in conjunction with banks. Orange Money has launched an e-credit collaboration with several banks in Niger which allows customers to repay loans via virtual wallet. The applicant should consider this type of modalities during implementation.

In addition, the activity should consider other financial services, such as savings or insurance, that are equally as or more important than credit to vulnerable youth. Qualified youth may be consumers as well as purveyors of financial services, depending on their capacity.

Building on existing groups such as local development committees at the commune level are encouraged. These interventions are envisioned to be closely linked to the trainings and other services described under Objectives One and Two.

Objective 4: Engage youth and youth groups in local governance structures that will contribute to their own development needs

Objective 4 will support interventions that help youth participate more effectively in village and commune governance as well as informal networks and groups in order to increase their role in shaping community activities that respond to their needs and interests and that benefit the community as a whole. Approaches that incorporate PYD principles and strategies are strongly encouraged, including focusing on building youth's ability for meaningful contribution and engagement.

In addition to unemployment being the largest concern for youth in Tillabéri, youth seek a greater voice in their communities and would benefit from more involvement in their communities. There are youth networks and associations in the region of Tillabéri which are mostly active at the commune level - however, they are nascent and need capacity building to be able to more robustly participate in and contribute to local governance. There are existing women's groups in Tillabéri but young women are less active in these areas and need skills and confidence to participate. Most young women are expected to stay in and around the home, and are not given the opportunity to contribute to community decision-making until later on in life. However the reverse is true of some older women in Niger who are given a special social prestige. Respected women leaders should thus be considered as a convening entity, and included in the planning and execution of engagement of girls.

At the same time, community elders and local leaders may need greater awareness of youth's potential to contribute and may need stronger skills themselves to better work with youth. USAID and other donors are investing in building capacity of local government in villages and communes as well as improving traditional and formal justice systems. However, young people have not been central to these initiatives, so there are huge opportunities to include them in a more meaningful way. Approaches that leverage traditional cultural practices to effect positive change is encouraged.

Several existing studies highlight weak governance and the lack of services in developing countries as the critical element that allows VEOs to develop and grow, and largely suggest that perceived inequalities, including wealth distribution and availability of employment, are points of galvanization. As income inequality increases, and the lack of services continues, whether regionally or between ethnicities or other group identities, there is evidence that insurgent violence increases. It is not clear whether livelihoods and income levels are the principal factors, or whether relative deprivation and inequity felt by particular marginalized groups are stronger factors. Unequal access to the few services that are present also exacerbate perceived grievances against other groups.

There is evidence from youth programming in other conflict-affected contexts that suggests that youth's desire to be valued and respected in their communities is perhaps an even stronger motivator away from extremism than employment. Community engagement interventions also complement skill building for livelihoods because they help youth to develop critical thinking, team work, and communication skills, reinforcing the skills aiming to prepare them for work or self-employment. Evidence from USAID's Positive Youth Development (PYD) research points to the value of engaging youth as development partners and including them in decision-making as it leads to more positive development outcomes.

As already emphasized in this procurement, throughout this activity, approaches should work through existing community organizations and structures as much as possible, such as commune local development committees, fadas, youth councils, or market management committees. Mayor's councils and village councils typically include youth representatives, but the effectiveness and strength of their voices is not well understood. This activity will also ensure that these representatives have an effective voice, and will reinforce their ability to appropriately represent their youth constituency. These youth representatives will need to learn how to represent the interests of youth of the other gender as well.

Interventions that could be considered include small grants for youth groups, capacity building of youth associations and youth representatives in commune governance structures, creation of youth councils, youth tea debates, and training youth and youth groups on advocacy, conflict management, non-violent communications, and leadership. Interventions that sensitize or train non-youth leaders and structures on how to effectively dialogue with youth can also be considered. Strategies such as youth-led community service projects, youth mapping, youth-led local labor market assessments, that build youth's relevant skills while also engaging them to analyze their communities' assets and challenges are highly encouraged. Approaches should build on or link to USAID's current and past investments in Tillaberi such as YALI, PRGPA and OTI's activities to engage youth in community governance and better involve youth as decision-makers not just as beneficiaries of services. Applicants are encouraged to consider community radio and mobile interactive voice response (IVR) as platforms, as appropriate, for disseminating information and training to youth and facilitating dialogue with and between youth and other community stakeholders. Approaches to engaging youth in local governance will also need to consider migration patterns and seasonal impact on youth's availability.

Cross-Cutting: Engaging Youth as Stewards of Water Resources

Lack of access to safe water is a potential push factor, exacerbating grievances around both economic opportunities and government legitimacy. Increased access to safe water has the potential to be a positive pull factor for preventing violent extremism, by helping people meet their material needs, creating direct and indirect economic opportunities, enhancing tangible government service provision, and reducing conflict over natural resources. This activity will be required to consult with the Water Security and Resilience (WSR) activity and other stakeholders on this issue, as the body of work on water resources management in Niger is robust.

Interventions across each of the objectives under the Youth Connect activity should include opportunities for youth to support water and sanitation programming. Possible strategies include

engaging local youth and social entrepreneurs to establish water service provider networks and enhance access to sanitation services and products; training youth on business and technical training or water pricing, payment systems and water source management to make them stewards of local water resources and establish them as positive contributors within and among their communities.

Collaborative Implementation Approach

The Youth Connect activity will execute collaboratively with multiple USAID Implementing Partners contributing in complementary ways to shared high-level goals. The most prominent collaboration will be with USAID's regional Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE II) initiative, which also contributes to the Sahel Development Partnership.

RISE II addresses the intertwined challenges of chronic food insecurity, poor health status, persistent poverty, weak governance, high population growth rates, and recurrent climate shocks, which together may drive vulnerable communities into crisis, conflict and violent extremism. RISE II will be implementing programs in the Tillaberi region that are focused on increasing and sustaining economic well-being, and improving health, family planning, and nutrition outcomes: This activity will also be in partnership with the following other USAID activities:

Finance activities

USAID's Development Credit Authority loan guarantees in Niger have ended and a decision has not been reached about whether new ones will be granted. USAID is designing new programming for both Burkina Faso and Niger to enhance the availability of finance to beneficiaries through incentive grants and technical assistance to financial institutions.

Public-Private Partnerships

USAID will be partnering with the private sector to create jobs and bring services to populations in the targeted regions.

Agricultural research programs

USAID supports a wide range of agricultural research and technology development partnerships active in the Sahel. These include the Sustainable Intensification Innovation Lab, the Livestock Innovation Lab, the Sorghum Millet Innovation Lab, the Soils Consortium, and possibly others

in the future. USAID also funds Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) member organization research in the Sahel.

Regional agricultural programs

USAID/West Africa supports the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/WE CARD) through the PAIRED agreement to enhance access to high quality seeds. They also support the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) to improve access to fertilizers and soil fertility management technologies.

Breakthrough-ACTION social and behavior change (SBC) activity

USAID accesses cutting-edge SBC expertise through Breakthrough-ACTION and other specialized mechanisms. These activities will develop, pilot, test and scale up SBC approaches and tools in collaboration with other USAID partners and partner governments. They will help the government at national and local levels to design and implement SBC strategies and campaigns to promote high priority behaviors and other supportive behaviors.

Food for Peace Cash Assistance and Resilience to Environmental Shocks (CARES) activity

USAID/Food for Peace is investing to meet the immediate food needs of vulnerable households in Tillabéri by increasing food access through conditional market-based cash assistance, and by improving adaptive capacity to variable stresses through livelihood recovery and restoration activities.

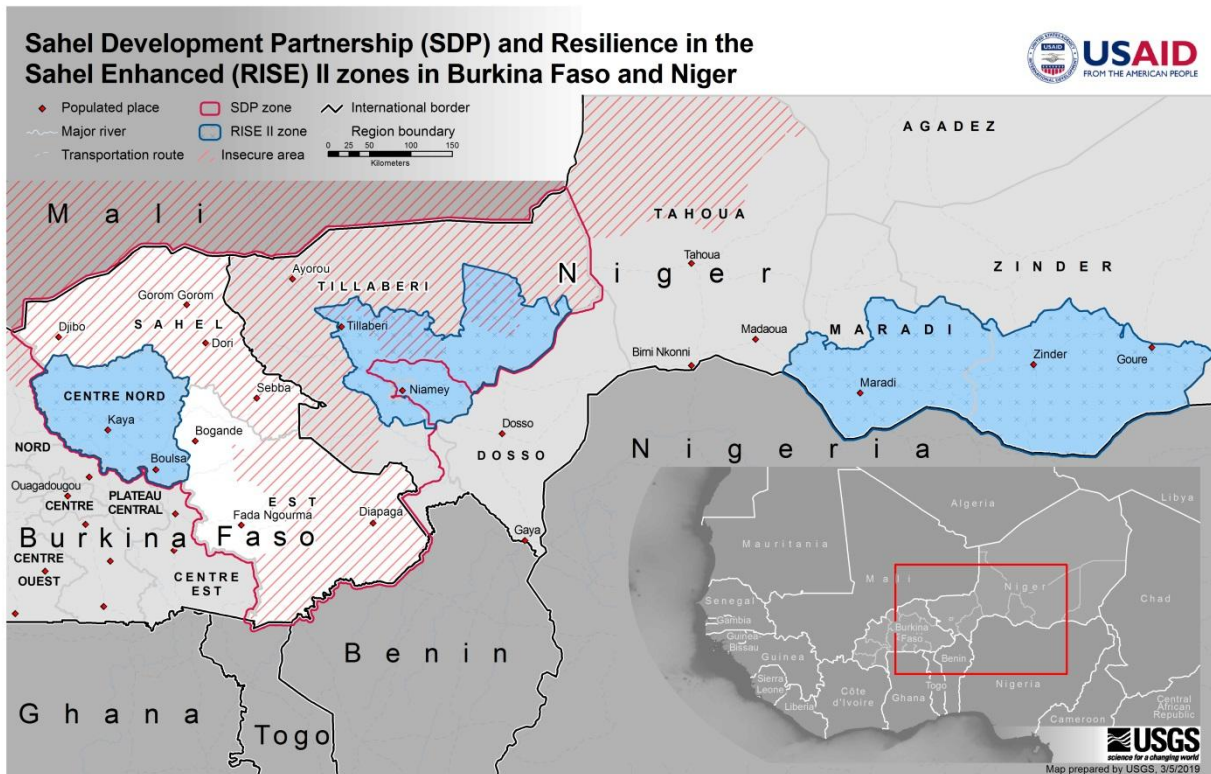
Participatory and Responsive Governance - Principle Activity (PRGPA)

USAID works to increase both citizen participation and Government of Niger (GoN) responsiveness to citizen priorities regarding the delivery of services, particularly in the health, education, and security sectors.

Geography

This activity will focus on the Tillabéri region of Niger. The constraints of working in this region revolve around security restrictions. The current security picture dictates that development workers generally cannot operate safely between the Niger-Mali border, and the Tillabéri town-Ouallam corridor. The Implementing Partner will work with USAID and other projects to target communes, and also devise strategies to reach populations in unsafe areas.

The following map shows RISE II and SDP areas of concentration.



Budget

The budget for this award is roughly \$19 million, of which \$4 million will be set aside as a crisis modifier.

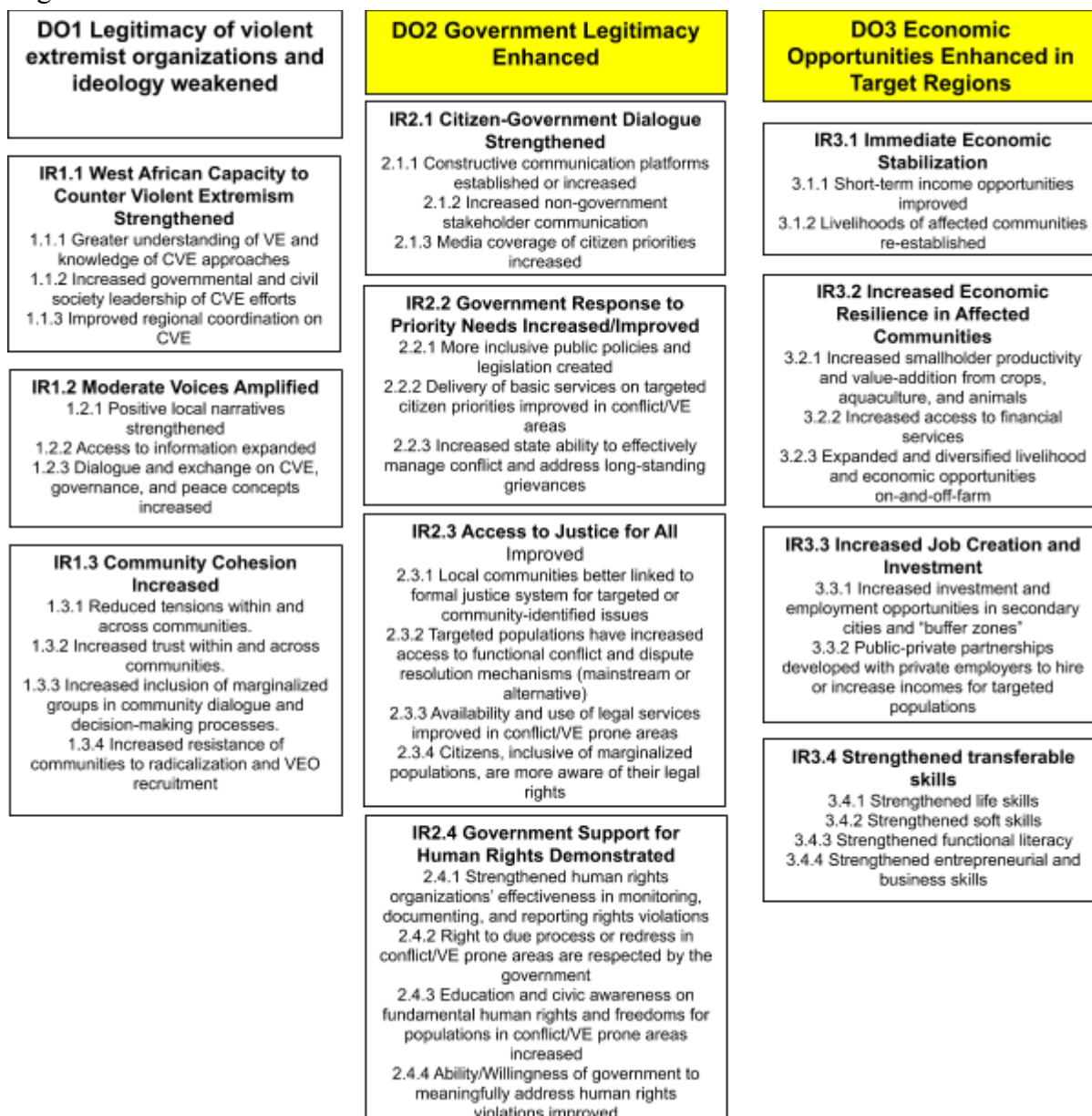
Population Targeting

This activity will focus on the most vulnerable young women and men who comprise the majority of Nigerien. Young men who are unmarried, without a job, and are vulnerable to recruitment from gangs or VE groups who can offer money, status, and a sense of belonging should be a primary focus. Young women who are most vulnerable to early marriage should also be included in activities that might help to delay marriage.

As a secondary strategy, USAID is interested in supporting a multi-tier approach for reaching both low-literate youth and utilizing the capacity of higher educated youth entrepreneurs in Tillaberi and Niamey. USAID is also interested in effectively targeting the youth who migrate out of Tillaberi for the lean season.

Annex

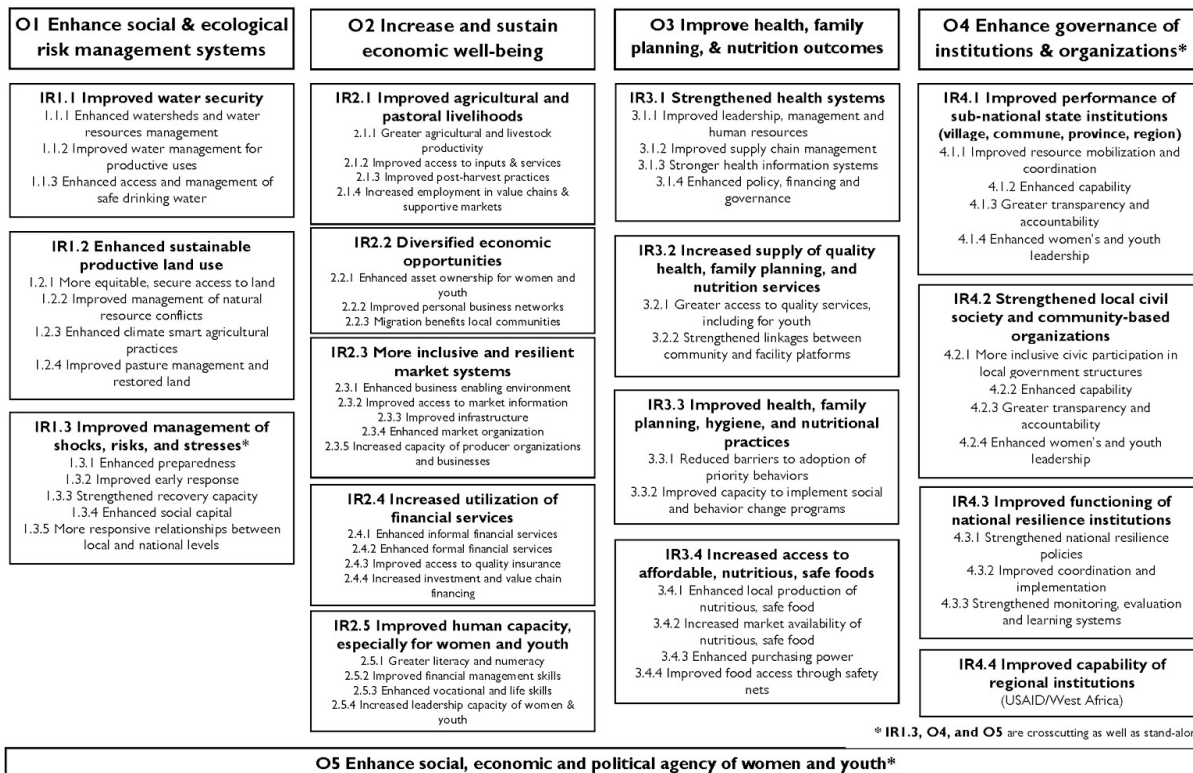
Bridge and RISE II Results Frameworks





RISE II RESULTS FRAMEWORK

Goal: Chronically vulnerable populations in Burkina Faso and Niger, supported by resilient systems, effectively manage shocks and stresses and pursue sustainable pathways out of poverty.



* IRI.3, O4, and O5 are crosscutting as well as stand-alone