

SAHEL FOOD CRISIS

Introduction

Almost 12 million people are facing a food and livelihoods crisis in the Sahelian countries of west Africa.¹ A combination of drought-reduced crop yields, high cereal prices, a lack of migrant labour work, and displacement due to regional insecurity has left poor communities facing hunger and malnutrition.

Many vulnerable households in the region have had little time to rebuild their livelihoods, savings and assets, which were lost due to food crises in 2005 and 2010 and the floods across the region in 2010. Christian Aid has been working for many years through partners in the Sahel to strengthen resilience, and initiatives such as community-owned grain banks and wells for small-scale vegetable production have improved the capacity of communities to cope with stresses and shocks.² However this resilience is threatened by the severity of the developing food crisis.

Strategies that pastoralists normally use to get themselves through the final stages of the lean period are already being adopted now, four to five months early. In the affected areas in the far northeast of Burkina Faso, Christian Aid staff and partners report that people are adopting extreme coping mechanisms: eating eat wild roots and fruit; selling livestock at reduced rates; male heads of households are moving away to seek employment; and families are eating only once a day. To add to the many difficulties that arise from not having enough food, a diet based on wild plants provides very poor nutrition and is causing skin problems among children.³

For 2012, UNICEF expects a severe acute malnutrition caseload of as many as 1,024,000 children in the Sahel. This is already close to the level during the 2010 crisis, when the estimated caseload was 1,065,000 children.⁴ This January, some villages in Oudalan province, Burkina Faso, reported cases of child malnutrition that were three times higher than during the same period in 2010.⁵

This means there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to save lives and prevent the loss of livelihoods and assets, as well as to protect development gains. Without a prompt and effective intervention, there is high risk that this will develop into an extreme crisis by June 2012.⁶ The UN estimates that US\$724m is needed to fund an early response to prevent the food crisis from escalating.⁷

The following actions are needed in order to respond effectively to urgent needs, and to prevent greater undermining of resilience in the region.

- **Immediate action and coordination by donors, INGOs and the UN is needed to recognise and reinforce the good steps taken by national governments in declaring an emergency and asking for help. Without immediate support, past improvements to resilience will be wiped out.**
- **Donor countries must provide the US\$460m funding gap to meet the US\$724m needed now to prevent the food crisis. The longer these funds are delayed, the more costly the response effort and the harder the situation for the populations affected.**
- **The current crisis is the result of a failure of livelihoods as well as reduced agricultural production. In this context, a particular priority must be to address market failures and price volatility for cereals and fodder.**
- **Given tensions and insecurity in the region, the emergency response must be conflict-sensitive and must seek to support both displaced and host communities affected by the food crisis.**
- **In addition to immediate action to respond to this emergency, there needs to be a longer-term commitment to address the chronic food insecurity and livelihoods crises in the Sahel. Support for disaster preparedness, and investment in**

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Causes of the crisis

Crop failure

The Sahel region is facing a significant reduction in crop production this season due to poor rains, with cereal outputs down by an average of 25 per cent compared to 2009/10.⁸ In Burkina Faso, the harvest in late 2011 failed in many of the northeastern areas due to drought; rains stopped abruptly, leaving crops to dry in the fields without producing seeds.⁹

In January 2012 the overall cereal deficit in the Sahel was estimated to be 2.6 million tonnes.¹⁰ While production remains adequate in some coastal regions, all the Sahel countries are facing deficits, with Mauritania and Chad hit the worst. Cereal production in Mauritania is down 50 per cent on 2010 levels; in Niger it is down 27 per cent; in Mali, 20 per cent; in Burkina Faso, 16 per cent; and in Senegal, 13 per cent.¹¹

Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities are also being affected by massive deficits in livestock fodder production. In Niger, where they are facing a cereal deficit of 692,000 tonnes, communities are also facing a fodder deficit of more than 10 million tonnes – this represents nine months' worth of food for over 6 million animals.¹² The insufficient pasture and water means that many peoples' livestock assets will be losing value fast.

The Sahel is an ecologically fragile region mainly comprised of arid and semi-arid lands, and changes in climate are affecting the region's normal agro-ecology trends. Agricultural outputs are generally low due to a combination of factors, including flooding, desertification, soil overuse, poor production practices, soil erosion, underinvestment in agriculture, and reduced land availability compared with population.¹³ This makes existing livelihood strategies very vulnerable to drought, pests and other shocks.

High food prices

The poorest communities are often hit hardest by rising food prices. In pastoralist and agro-pastoralist areas it is normally the wealthier households who produce much of their own food through agriculture, whereas poorer people depend on buying grains for food from the local markets.¹⁴ A study has shown that poor rural households in Chad spend about 70 per cent of their income on food.¹⁵ As a result, it is the poorest who are most affected by rises in the prices of staple foods, and they can become excluded from the markets as a result of their low purchasing power.

This year, staple food prices have not decreased as they would normally do after the harvest season. They are unusually high at present, and are set to remain above average into the 2012 lean season. For example, Niger is experiencing price increases of 37 per cent for millet, 17 per cent for maize and 35 per cent for sorghum, compared to January 2011.¹⁶

Coarse grain prices are above the five-year average in all three major west African market basins in the Sahel.¹⁷ In the western basin (Senegal, Mauritania and the west of Mali), where cross-border trade is still working well, imported cereals are replacing the local grains – but even here, prices are up by 25-33 per cent. Prices are up by 20-40 per cent in the eastern basin of Niger and Chad, and are even up by 50-60 per cent in the traditional grain-producing central basin of Burkina Faso and Mali.¹⁸

Even if regional markets function well, moving grain from areas of surplus to areas of deficit, it is predicted that areas in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Mauritania will experience acute food crises during 2012.¹⁹ If the markets do not function well and prices remain high, the food security outcomes could be much worse. There are concerns that restrictions on trade in the region – caused either by insecurity or by governments' efforts to reduce exports and control prices – could interfere in the functioning of markets.²⁰ There is a need for careful monitoring of food prices, food flows and market functioning, in order to respond with well-coordinated and targeted interventions.

Poverty and reduced resilience

Sahelian countries are some of the poorest in the world. Of the 187 countries listed in the UN Human Development Index (HDI), Niger ranks 186, Chad 183, Burkina Faso 181 and Mali 75.²¹ The food emergencies in the Sahel in recent years must therefore be seen as a combination of chronic and acute livelihoods crises affecting areas that already suffer from chronic food insecurity.

Vulnerable households are barely able to cover their nutritional needs even in normal times. Every year, acute child malnutrition rates in the Sahel region are above the accepted emergency threshold of 10 per cent, and 300,000 children below the age of five die of under-nutrition.²² This is an ongoing and widespread problem, not just confined to food insecure areas. With so many children already moderately to acutely malnourished, they are highly susceptible to illness and can easily become 'severely acutely malnourished' (a technical term denoting life-threatening low bodyweight and requiring urgent treatment).

Whilst emergency responses in 2005 and 2010 have been critical for saving the

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lives of those worst-hit by food insecurity, they failed to prevent the massive loss of assets of the most vulnerable households. Since 2010 they have had no time to rebuild savings and assets, repay debts or strengthen their coping mechanisms.²³ As shocks increase in frequency, the resilience of the poorest households in the Sahel is severely undermined.

Investment in building resilient livelihoods through a range of livelihood interventions seems to deliver greater coping strategies in periods of food insecurity. Christian Aid's analysis has identified that where communities have been supported to invest in drought management and resilient livelihood strategies, the benefits are clear to see. There is effective market gardening, livestock are feeding on local grass, women are managing to maintain some income-generating activities, and the cereal banks are operating as a community-owned buffer to provide millet at reasonable prices and help regulate food price in the local markets. In the other villages in the same zone, the picture is worse.²⁴

However, without prompt action to support communities in times of crisis, existing food security work can be undermined. For example, as food prices rise, there is potential for cereal bank committees to be pressured to provide grain at below cost price, risking the long-term viability of these resilience mechanisms.

Violence and insecurity

Food and livelihood crises in the Sahel are increasingly connected to violence and insecurity. Current food insecurity problems have been exacerbated by general insecurity within and outside the Sahel region. The return of migrants from Cote D'Ivoire and Libya, as a result of fighting in those countries, has placed additional stress on food-insecure areas and has also removed an important source of livelihoods support – namely, remittances. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has estimated that Libyan remittances previously supported a total of 3 million people in the Sahel region.²⁵

Insecurity in the Sahel has also led to population movements within the region. Refugees fleeing the insecurity caused by clashes between Tuareg rebels and soldiers in northern Mali have been arriving in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania in big numbers. It is estimated that 44,000 refugees had already fled the country by mid-February: 18,000 to Niger, 8,000 to Burkina Faso and 18,000 to Mauritania.²⁶ The early return of migratory pastoralist herds, triggered by conflicts in Nigeria and Mali, will also put further strain on depleted water and pasture in Niger and Burkina Faso, and could lead to conflict between different groups.²⁷

The Boko Haram security problems in northern Nigeria have led to the government partially closing the border. This has had the effect of slowing down cross-border cereal flows into Niger, as well as reducing the demand and prices for local livestock and produce normally exported by Nigerian traders.²⁸

The deteriorating security situation also restricts access for aid agencies trying to respond. Challenges include the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya to Mali and Niger, and the inflow of Libyan arms;²⁹ the presence of terrorist groups such as AQMI or Boko Haram; cross-border military activities; conflicts with Tuaregs in Mali; and a growth in illicit trades (such as drugs and weapons) in the region.³⁰

Recommendations

Respond early and effectively

Early responses not only save lives and livelihoods, but are also much better value for money. The UN estimates that in Niger, it costs US\$40-50 to feed a child properly for a month, in contrast with the US\$400 cost of a two-month treatment for acute malnutrition.³¹

Responses to the Sahel food crises in 2010 and 2005 were too little, too late. Compared to this, so far the national and international responses in 2012 have been better. Niger was the first government to announce the development of a food crisis in October 2011. Since then, the five most affected Sahel states have declared a crisis, developed national response plans, and called for international assistance to implement them.³²

Now, immediate action and coordination by donors, INGOs and the UN is needed to recognise and reinforce the good steps taken by national governments in declaring an emergency and asking for help. Without early support, past improvements to resilience will be wiped out.

The UN's regional strategy states that US\$724m is needed to address the food crisis, but by mid-February donor commitments left approximately US\$460m still to raise.³³ All donor countries and institutions must act quickly to fill this funding gap before the needs (and the cost of the response) increase further.

UN leadership is needed alongside national governments and donors, to spearhead global action and coordinated support for affected communities. This has been late in coming, and it must scale up accountable and responsive coordination immediately.

The current crisis is the result of a failure of livelihoods, as well as reduced agricultural production. Early responses must be aimed at saving lives and protecting livelihoods and

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resilience, while interventions should be technically appropriate, targeting the most vulnerable. A particular priority must be to monitor and address market failures and price volatility for cereals and fodder, and to use a range of livelihood support strategies – including cash, livestock destocking and restocking, and the distribution of cereals, fodder and improved seeds.

The emergency response must be accountable to affected local populations and involve them in identifying priorities and appropriate interventions.

Given tensions and insecurity in the region, the emergency response must be conflict-sensitive and must seek to support both displaced and host communities affected by the food crisis.

Invest in long-term resilience

The situation in the Sahel is a vicious cycle of chronic vulnerability, acute livelihoods and food emergencies, triggered by drought, which further undermine resilience. Efforts to increase resilience can buy vulnerable people more time, but when faced with a crisis of this scale, emergency response efforts will still be needed.

Unless the underlying chronic problems are addressed, rather than tolerated, the emergencies will never end. Since 2005,

encouraging investments have been made in disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the Sahel, but there is still a need for improvement. A regional DRR strategy for the Sahel region is needed to help coordinate the efforts of governments, the UN and NGOs.³⁴

Investment is needed in long-term interventions to address the chronic vulnerability in the region. This can be done by boosting rural livelihoods in marginal agricultural areas, through sustainable intensification of food production using agro-ecological techniques, and also in pastoral areas, through support for animal health, production and marketing.³⁵

Support for disaster preparedness, and investment in agriculture and livelihoods, will help increase resilience to future shocks.

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Endnotes

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