FOOD CRISIS IN THE SAHEL

THE CRISIS THAT REFUSES TO GO AWAY

The continued neglect of local agriculture, ongoing chronic poverty, high food prices, the threat of serious drought, conflict, the displacement of people and changing climatic patterns have combined together to create an emerging food crisis across the Sahel Region in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, food insecurity and malnutrition are increasing significantly with more than 18.7 million people directly at risk in 8 countries with Niger being at the forefront of these. It comes as no surprise that the most vulnerable are yet again the poor, the elderly and the very young.

This crisis is but the latest in an ongoing series of crises that have affected the region since the 1970’s with the last occurring in late 2004 and 2005. The forces and trends that have combined together to create this looming crisis have, once again, highlighted deep-seated problems and vulnerabilities.

Abdou Garba, a farmer from Tarna, a small village in the Maradi region of South-Central Niger explains the realities behind the cold statistics: ‘Now, we eat once a day rather than having three meals’. Tarna’s Chief, Ali Galadima adds to the story – ‘We are hungry and our animals are hungry: the crisis of 2005 is repeating itself.’ The basic grains in the village (millet and corn) began to grow well but ‘... then the rain came to a brutal stop for two months and the heat burnt everything.’

‘...it will not change until the underlying causes of cyclical food security crises are fully addressed.’

This has resulted in the harvest now being about one-third what it should have been and many farmers have been unable to harvest anything of significance. One farmer, Mamane Garba paints the stark reality - ‘... during the previous season, I harvested 30 bundles of millet versus only 11 this time, and our reserves are already exhausted’.

The crisis has now reached severe proportions and all major aid and development agencies in the region have appealed for an international emergency response. The situation was described by the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres in the following terms – ‘...we badly need to put this crisis on the map because its humanitarian dimension is becoming extremely, extremely dramatic...’

UNICEF has reported that at least 1 million – and possibly up to 1.5 million – children in the region face acute, severe malnutrition, putting them at risk of death from starvation or disease. Of these, about 330,000 children are in Niger,
The Sahel is a defined ecological geographic region (and zone of transition) that lies between the Sahara Desert in the North and the less arid Savannah further south. The Arabic word sāḥil literally means ‘shore or coast’ and is used to describe the appearance of the vegetation in the region. The region primarily covers parts of (from West to East) Senegal, Mauritania, northern Senegal and northern Cameroon, don’t even include Sudan or South Sudan, where ongoing conflicts are also fuelling the humanitarian crisis.

Alongside the endemic poverty and vulnerability that affects people in the region, the other immediate challenges in the eight countries most affected are summarised below:

**NIGER**

Even before the current crisis, malnutrition rates were high – 20% Global Acute Malnutrition rate among children under two last year; poor and erratic rains and infestations of pests have badly damaged harvests especially in the central and western regions. As a result, prices for all cereals are well above the seasonal average for the past five years. Today, the estimate of those immediately at risk stands at eight million.

**MAURITANIA**

Patchy rainfall, a reduction in pasture for livestock and poor harvests alongside high food prices are all combining together to create significant negative impact. About 25% of households are now ‘food insecure’ (amounting to some 700,000 people). Eastern and Southern regions are the most affected and it is estimated that the 2011 crop yield was some 34% down on the average for the past five years.

**CHAD**

Pastures are now extremely dry in the...
Sahelian parts of Chad as the rains have been poor leading to a decrease of some 50% in cereal production in 2011 when compared to 2010. Over one million people are now ‘severely food insecure’ and a further 1.5 million are also at risk. In addition, the fact that Chad is a landlocked country makes the logistical challenges of ensuring food security all the more difficult. Today, it is estimated that some 1.6 million people are immediately affected.

MALI
Late rains have led to a poor harvest, which the government estimates is 25% down on 2010 and as a result the price for staples such as sorghum and millet are very high. An estimated 1.7 million people are at risk of hunger. The situation has been seriously complicated by a rebel uprising in the North and some 320,000 people have fled fighting, some into neighbouring countries.

BURKINA FASO
Crop failures have been reported in about 40% of the country, with a 16% decline in grain production compared to 2010. Close to 1.7 million people are estimated to be at risk of going hungry. Food prices are very high and the government has declared a food and nutrition crisis, calling for national and international support.

SENEGAL
More than 1 million people are estimated to be at risk of hunger; households have begun to reduce the number of their meals and to sell their livestock in the worst-affected regions. In addition to poor harvests, food prices are also high and the ‘lean season’ (where food insecurity normally increases) has started early.

CAMEROON
The Sahel drought has particularly affected the North and Far North regions of the country; cereal production is well below the levels of 2010 and now the rates of Global Acute Malnutrition have risen above the 10% ‘serious’ threshold and stunting is above 40%. The situation will deteriorate in the ‘lean season’ if effective action is not taken quickly.

THE GAMBIA
Overall crop production is estimated to have dropped by 62% compared to 2010 and by 50% compared to the five-year average; an estimated 600,000 people are now directly vulnerable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>Burkina Faso</th>
<th>Cameroon</th>
<th>Gambia</th>
<th>Mali</th>
<th>Mauritania</th>
<th>Niger</th>
<th>Senegal</th>
<th>Chad</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons in food insecurity</td>
<td>2,060,000</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>241,000</td>
<td>4,600,000</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>6,400,000</td>
<td>739,251</td>
<td>3,622,200</td>
<td>18,690,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total number of persons affected by the Sahel crisis</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As % of population</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2012
The box on page 2 has already outlined some of the immediate reasons for the current crisis and has shown how these reveal and deepen more basic underlying causes among the poor in this region, one of the poorest in the world. There is no one cause behind the crisis but a series of causes that combine together over many years and in different combinations to make the poor generally vulnerable and where any significant disruption, change of series of events can trigger a major crisis.

Poverty
For individual households, poverty is still the key driver of food insecurity and of hunger; lack of money limits people's ability to purchase basic foodstuffs no matter how plentiful they might be locally. Lack of access to land, livestock or resources significantly reduces the options of the poor. A 2011 UN report on the Millennium Development Goals confessed bewilderment that world hunger increased between 2005 and 2007 during a period of strong economic growth, overall reductions in poverty and rising food production.

The United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report for 2011 highlighted the percentage of people ‘in severe poverty’ in the region, for example, 82% in Niger, 68% in Mali, and 44% in Chad. Simply stated, if the poor don’t have money to buy food, no amount of increased production is going to help them.

Gender and Land
Insecure tenure on the land is a key obstacle for the majority of poor farmers; it is estimated that less than 10% of the land in the region is covered by title documents, thus increasing vulnerability to eviction by state, private or corporate interests. This situation has become all the more pronounced as agriculture has become ‘feminised’ as women work the fields while men go in search of work in the towns and urban centres.

Women now produce 60%-80% of food in developing countries, despite owning only 10%-20% of the farms and they continue to experience discrimination in availability to credit and in support from advisory services.

Conflict
The 2010 report on The State of Food Insecurity in the World drew attention to the concentration of about 20% of the world’s hunger in just 22 countries described as being in ‘protracted crisis’ attributable in large measure to local or national conflict. Conflict (such as that currently being experienced in parts of Mali) causes local people to flee (thus creating a refugee and humanitarian crisis) as well as disrupting normal agricultural activity reinforcing poverty, vulnerability and hunger.

Environmental Degradation
Recent decades have witnessed increased commercialisation of agriculture which has contributed to pressure on the environment due to increased inputs of chemicals and water. The industrialised agriculture that was promoted washed the soil (leading to greater soil erosion, the use of pesticides and chemical fertiliser) and disrupted the balance of traditional systems of production and the generation of income from access to local markets. Food aid replaced agriculture and Africa’s hungry became dependent on agricultural surpluses from Europe, the US and elsewhere. As a result, since 1980 sub-Saharan Africa has been the only region of the world where average per capita food production has continued to decline over the last 40 years.

Political Neglect
Until very recently, state intervention in food production and marketing was discouraged by the international financial institutions that advise poor countries. In support of this view the
percentage of foreign aid allocated to agriculture fell from 18% in 1979 to 4% in 2009. Only eight governments in sub-Saharan Africa have achieved the 2003 target which called for 10% of national budgets to be dedicated to agriculture. The result is inadequate infrastructure for rural economies; only 7% of productive land in sub-Saharan Africa is irrigated whilst poor roads and storage facilities exacerbate the situation.

In addition to the above ‘local factors’, there are a number of increasingly important ‘international’ factors that contribute to the crisis.

**WORLD FOOD PRICES**

World food prices are essentially controlled by international commodity market traders and are strongly influenced by a range of factors of which the most important is the price of oil as many key inputs and operations in modern farming are highly dependent on oil products. The needs and situation of poor farmers in regions such as the Sahel are not a matter of priority for such traders. The outcome of this process impacts directly on over 75 developing countries which are net importers of food and most of the countries in the region fall into this category as Least Developed Countries.

Food prices are critical in poor countries because the poorest people typically spend 50%-70% of their income on food. They have no mechanism to cope with rising prices other than to reduce the volume or nutritional quality of their consumption. This situation is made all the more difficult when they have been encouraged to buy expensive imported foodstuffs in place of local, traditional foods; this has been the case in most countries in the region where people have been encouraged to adopt ‘modern’ diets and lifestyles.

**WORLD TRADE RULES**

The recent succession of price hikes in global food markets is evidence that the current world trade regime in agriculture does not work. It significantly fails by any measure of justice as regards rich and poor countries. Attempts by poorer countries to copy the dominant model of commercialised farming adopted in the United States and Europe based on generous subsidies and protective tariffs remain impossible. This is largely because they are now bound by an international system of ‘open market’ rules adopted by the World Trade Organization in 1995 while, at the same time, richer countries refused to unravel their own protectionist model.

In addition, developing countries find their own domestic markets undercut by subsidised food products ‘dumped’ by western countries making it virtually impossible for local, poorer farmers to compete.

According to an OECD study the total support paid to their agriculture producers in 2009 totalled $253 billion. This is more than six times the UN’s estimate of the annual cost of eradicating hunger by 2025. This international food regime hypocrisy remains a fundamental barrier to development and food security and contributes significantly to the vulnerability of the poor.

**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Climate models predict that richer countries in temperate zones will benefit from higher crop yields within the two degree temperature rise envisaged in international climate change negotiations. By contrast, crop yields and grazing quality in tropical regions are already at their limit of temperature sensitivity. Higher temperatures will shorten the growing seasons of staple crops while temperatures in Africa are projected to rise faster than the global average.

**BIOFUELS**

In recent years, fuelled by the need for lower dependence on fossil fuels, the US and the European Union have along with other developed countries provided state incentives for production of biofuels with ambitious agreed targets and global subsidies of US$20 billion in 2009 (more than double the amount of foreign aid available for agriculture in developing countries). For 2011, 40% of the US corn (maize) crop was earmarked for ethanol, representing 15% of projected world maize production and enough to feed over 400 million people for a year.

European targets for biofuels require a land area twice the size of Belgium and are increasingly supported by acquiring agricultural land in developing countries, often those struggling with national food insecurity.

**POLITICAL PROMISES**

Political promises to eradicate hunger date back many decades; yet, current global per capita food production exceeds the targeted UN level and still the number of people lacking access to the minimum required diet has risen from 824 million in 1990 to 925 million in 2010. The world has never had more food…and more hunger.
CONCERN’S VIEW OF WHAT Needs TO BE DONE

Concern is a member of the Sahel Working Group and along with other major NGOs working in the Sahel, launched a new piece of research in September 2011: ‘Escaping the Hunger Cycle Pathways to Resilience in the Sahel.’ The recommendations below emerge from that report and from Concern’s experience in dealing with previous emergencies in the Sahel and beyond. They put forward a common sense and cost effective way to address the short and long term impacts of chronic food insecurity in the Sahel.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS MUST GENERATE SWIFT ACTION:

More donors should publicly recognise the severity of the crisis in the Sahel and follow the EU’s lead to allocate resources. National governments, donors and the UN should rapidly make resources available for a coordinated humanitarian response. Support must also be provided to the national emergency response plans for Niger and Chad as well as other affected countries in the Sahel.

PROTECT THE LIVELIHOODS AND ASSETS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE:

National governments, donors, UN and NGOs should use a more diversified approach (beyond food aid) to ensure more rapid, appropriate and cost effective ways to protect against chronic and seasonal food insecurity. Greater use of cash transfers and vouchers should be made when food is available in the markets. Cash gives poor people access to food and simultaneously supports local producers. In addition, the transfer of assets and support should be targeted at individuals, families and communities to protect livelihoods before conditions become critical. Support is also needed after the crisis to facilitate recovery (i.e. seeds, cash, livestock and training).

SUPPORT COORDINATED, INVESTMENTS BY DIFFERENT SECTORS TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE REDUCTION IN CHILD MALNUTRITION:

National governments, donors and the UN must show increased political will and compassion to tackle child malnutrition. Changes to the aid model are required to favour long-term, flexible funding that bridges the humanitarian and development divide. Aid needs to address the multi-dimensional aspects of malnutrition which involves livelihoods promotion, sustainable food production, improved child-care practices, social protection, disaster risk reduction, health, water, hygiene and sanitation.

ADDRESS MARKET FAILURES AND PRICE VOLATILITY:

National governments should introduce appropriate regulations of markets to enhance food security. All actors should support the expansion of existing mechanisms for food security stocks at the village level, particularly in geographical areas prone to chronic food insecurity. The EU, through its facility for rapid response to food price volatility, should consider financing the establishment of food reserves at regional level to balance out situations where surpluses and shortages co-exist within the same region, and to act when the market fails, or a fragile state does not respond.

INVEST IN LONGER-TERM INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE CHRONIC VULNERABILITY TO FUTURE CRISES:

All actors should strengthen communities’ resilience through investment in sustainable agriculture and livestock production, disaster risk reduction (DRR) including building the capacity of national institutions, civil society and communities to implement DRR, natural resource management and long-term safety net and social protection measures. The EU, as the largest donor in the Sahel, urgently needs to develop a common voice on DRR, guided by a strategic framework and policy. The EU should promote the integration of DRR in national policies with Sahelian governments and scale up funding for DRR and nutrition using the full range of funding instruments.
In response to the early warning signs of crisis, Concern implemented a short-term emergency response programme funded by the European Union and the United Nations’ World Food Programme to give the most vulnerable people access to cash in order to buy food. This included cash-for-work projects for over 3,000 people where they are paid to prepare the land for the next agricultural season as well as cash transfers for 6,350 extremely poor households. Concern also provided seeds to the most vulnerable households. A second monthly cash-transfer programme was then implemented in order to reach 45,500 people between June and September 2012.

A nutrition programme in two of the most affected regions in Niger – Tahoua and Illéla, is focused on 24 health centres and 25 health posts in order to ensure that child nutrition services are available in an effective way. This system has been in place since the previous emergency situation in 2010. The overall aim of the 2012 programme is to contribute to minimising the acute malnutrition and mortality rate of children under 5 years by taking direct action on nutrition and food security

‘The right to food is a human right. It protects the right of all human beings to live in dignity, free from hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. The right to food is not about charity, but about ensuring that all people have the capacity to feed themselves in dignity.’

Jean Ziegler, the first UN Special Rapporteur on Food

(Above) Idi Zaharia stands in front of his empty food loft in Tahoua region of Niger, May 2012: Concern Worldwide

(Right) Village of Sansawatan, Niger, abandoned by its inhabitants for lack of water. May 2012: Concern Worldwide

Source: OCHA
FROM HUNGER TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In 2012, the United Nations Development programme published its first comprehensive human development report for Africa in which it outlined and analysed the issue of hunger and its impact on human development and sketched out the priorities for the years ahead. The report paints a shocking picture of the reality today and its human consequences but it also highlights what could be done to tackle this reality if ‘courageous citizens and dedicated leaders’ take decisive steps and bold decisions.

The Report makes a series of telling points, all directly relevant to the situation in the Sahel region as described on previous pages.

- For many decades, the dominant image of sub-Saharan Africa has been one of dehumanising hunger where more than 1 in 4 Africans are undernourished and where food insecurity is widespread and consistent. Famine, which has virtually disappeared elsewhere in the world, continues to haunt parts of sub-Saharan Africa: ‘Famines grab headlines, but chronic food insecurity and malnutrition are more insidious, often silent, daily calamities for millions of Africans’.

- Yet sub-Saharan Africa has ample agricultural land, plenty of water and a generally favourable climate for growing food; in the last 10 years many African countries recorded world-beating economic growth rates and became among the fastest movers on the Human Development Index.

- Africans, including those in the Sahel, are not condemned to a lifetime of hunger and food insecurity. The knowledge, technology and resources for closing the food security deficit are available today but there is no ‘one’ simple solution. Economic growth alone will not solve the problem; interventions in agriculture, health, education and nutrition to research, support services, sanitation, local government, commerce and transport are also required.

- Building a ‘food secure continent’ will require very substantial change that will be most effective if accompanied by a shift of resources, capacities and decisions to smallholder farmers, poor communities and women. ‘When women and other vulnerable groups gain a voice in the decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods, their capacity to produce, trade and use food is materially enhanced’.

- For decades the policies of national governments and international institutions neglected sub-Saharan Africa’s rural and agricultural development in favour of urban populations and now population change, environmental pressure, and global and local climate change are hugely influencing the region’s development options. Development strategies promoted ‘self-defeating policies that put guns before bread, cities before farms and fatty foods before nutrition’.

- Building food security for all Africans requires focus and action in a number of critical areas from increasing the productivity of smallholder farmers to improving nutrition among children, building increasingly shock-resistant communities and sustainable food systems and, in particular empowering women and the rural poor. Many of these most critical and cost-effective nutrition interventions are not expensive.

Many of these are priority areas in which Concern is already active and engaged.

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