The situation

Since the beginning of 2010, the population of Niger has suffered from food shortages, which have led to a nutritional crisis that is particularly severe in children under the age of five.

Nearly half of the population of Niger – a staggering 7.1 million people – were affected in 2010. About 3.3 million people were classified as severely food insecure, meaning they were unable to meet their minimum daily dietary requirements.

The crisis is largely the result of failed rains. The rains arrived too late and ended too early. Approximately 85 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and depends on rain-fed agriculture to meet their food needs. The number of people living below the poverty line is high, with 65 per cent in rural areas and 55 per cent in urban areas.

People have been forced to adopt emergency survival strategies including reducing their meals to one or two a day, leaving their families behind to migrate to the city, selling their livestock or property and, as a last resort, taking out loans – and getting into debt – for their expected, or hoped for, harvest.

The IFRC launched an emergency appeal for almost 1 million Swiss francs to fund a response to the crisis. The appeal is just 57 per cent funded, which limits what can be done to help the people of Niger.

The response

The Niger Red Cross responded to the disaster with a range of activities. Eroded land was reclaimed through a cash-for-work programme, there was a distribution of free and improved seeds for farming, food was distributed in partnership with the World Food Programme, and there was a nutrition programme mainly focusing on children under the age of five and breastfeeding women.

The response in numbers:

- 65 tonnes of seed distributed to 30,000 people in 119 villages
- 11,000 households employed to rehabilitate eroded land, creating an area to farm and receiving cash to buy food
- 132 hectares of land recovered and restored to good farming use
- 4,600 households employed in farming recovered land

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2,000 tonnes of food from the World Food Programme distributed by Red Cross volunteers to 131,000 people

123,126 children under the age of 5 screened and 19,098 malnourished children referred for medical care

950 volunteers trained in malnutrition, screening, nutrition, and mother and child health

The future

The 2010 food crisis in Niger had a devastating effect on the lives of its people. Millions saw their livelihoods disappear and, as a result, many were forced into debt, increasing their vulnerability. In several regions, floods aggravated the problem, decimating livestock, destroying crops and houses.

We are now in 2011 and the food crisis is far from over. Without medium- and long-term support to reduce people’s vulnerability, the risk of a new crises remains high.

What can be done?

Niger is a country that finds itself in a vicious circle of repetitive food crises. Just as people start to recover from one crisis, they are faced with another.

The Niger Red Cross and its partners know that a focus on long-term integrated programmes for the most vulnerable is the best way to break this cycle. The outcomes mean that people are healthier, have food to eat and are more aware of how environmental factors affect their livelihoods.

The programmes can increase food security through activities such as market gardening, stockbreeding, nursery development, agricultural product processing and handicraft development – all building community resilience.

However, to implement these programmes fully, we need donors to provide sustainable, predictable and flexible funding so that we can help the people of Niger establish long-term food security, development their livelihoods, and have better healthcare and nutrition.

Without donor support, the people of Niger will find it difficult to break this cycle of food insecurity and vulnerability.