Living on the edge – background to the Sahel food crisis

The Sahel, which means ‘edge’ in Arabic, is a transitional area between the Sahara Desert to the north and tropical zones to the south. The area receives precious little rain with an annual rainfall of just 200 millimetres in northern areas, and 800 millimetres in the south.

The region’s people – many of whom are dependent on agriculture and livestock – find themselves living both literally and figuratively on the edge due to harsh and unpredictable climatic conditions, unremitting poverty, poor access to education, and political instability.

For the past century, the Sahelian countries of Africa have experienced recurrent drought and famine. The region witnessed some of its most serious food shortages in the 1970s and 80s, with approximately 250,000 fatalities because of repeated droughts between 1968 and 1973, and again during 1983 and 1984. The droughts of 1974 left about 750,000 people in Mali, Niger and Mauritania totally dependent on food aid.

Since that time, countries such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Mali and Niger have continued to suffer from drought and periodic food crises. Recent studies suggest that the frequency of such droughts is closely linked to climate change. Droughts are known to create severe food crises and famines; and over the past 30 years there have been eight serious droughts in the Sahel. Over the past decade, droughts and crop failures have occurred more frequently – in 2000, 2004 and 2009 – due to erratic rainfall and increased desertification. This has resulted in severe hunger and food shortages between 2004 and 2010 in the Sahel – the situation is still ongoing – with Niger and Chad the worst-affected countries.

Niger key facts

- Niger is a landlocked country located in West Africa with a general population of 15.1 million inhabitants.
- The country is listed among the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita gross national income (GNI) of 675 US dollars. An estimated 85 per cent of the population lives on an average of 1.25 US dollars a day and life expectancy at birth is 52.5 years (Source: UNDP, 2010).

1 Aker, Jenny C. Droughts, Grain Markets and Food Crisis in Niger. University of California, 3 May 2008.
2 Africa Environment Outlook: Past, present and future perspectives. UNEP, 2002

Batterbury, S. The Sahel region: assessing progress 25 years after the great drought.
Brooks, N. Climate change, drought and pastoralism in the Sahel. 2006.
The human development index (HDI) represents a push for a broader definition of well-being and provides a composite measure of three basic dimensions of human development: health, education and income. The country is ranked 167 out of 169 countries with comparable data (Source: UNDP HDI, 2010).

The HDI of sub-Saharan Africa as a region increased from 0.293 in 1980 to 0.389 today, placing Niger below the regional average.

Rainfall – or the lack of it – is the most important dimension of weather variation in Niger.

Precipitation varies substantially across both the country and the region in any given year and also over the medium term.

As previously highlighted, Niger and the rest of the Sahel region suffer increasingly frequent droughts, which are partly due to climate change. Such droughts are strongly linked to crop failure and an increase in the price of staple food crops – millet, sorghum and fonio\(^4\) – and cash crops – like cowpeas, peanuts, cotton and sesame. This drives people further and further below the poverty line.

**The 2010 food crisis**

In 2010, more than 10 million people, mainly women and children, fell victim to the Sahel food crisis, with about 7.4 million in Niger (nearly half of the general population), 1.7 million in Chad, 600,000 in Mali, and over 300,000 people in Mauritania severely affected.

Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM)\(^5\) rates were as high as 26 per cent in some regions in Chad (the World Food Programme (WFP) categorizes rates of 15 per cent and above as "critical" or at "emergency levels"). Overall, between January and November 2010, about 500,000 severely malnourished children were admitted to nutritional centres for care across the region in Niger, Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso.

Research by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) in September 2010 revealed that in Niger as much as 20 per cent of the pastoral population lost 80–100 per cent of its livestock due to successive shocks – first, the drought conditions that led to a food crisis early this year and then the heavy rains and floods in July and August. Between February and June, poor pastoral households sold half of their animals at low prices to provide themselves with something to eat. They then lost an additional 20–30 per cent of their animals between May and June due to thirst and starvation.

Humanitarian organizations, which were present during this year’s crisis, only managed to cover 14 per cent of requirements for animal

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\(^4\) Fonio, or *digitaria exilis*, is the smallest of all the millet species that has been grown in Africa for centuries and has a great nutritional potential. *Lost Crops of Africa: Volume 1, 1996.*

\(^5\) GAM is the term used to include all malnourished children whether they have moderate wasting, severe wasting, oedema or a combination of these conditions.
feed, and only 21 per cent of livestock destocking that resulted from a lack of cattle feed. Heavy rain and floods in July and August led to a 30–40 per cent mortality rate from hypothermia among remaining animals, affecting both rich and poor alike.

Hunger and the gender factor

Existing gender inequalities and vulnerabilities mean that it is often more difficult for women to cope with food price shocks, irrespective of whether they are in a male or female-headed household. Within the household, it is often women who act as a buffer against any crisis. To cope with the situation, thousands of families were forced to reduce their daily meals to one a day, whilst others resorted to eating leaves and berries from trees, and tiny grains of cereals and seeds they found by searching ant hills.

Thousands of families have adopted extreme coping strategies that include selling assets or migrating. Depending on the size of the family, between two and five family members may be forced to migrate to cities or neighbouring countries in the hope of finding work in order to support their families.

This situation may seem exceptional, but for the people of the Sahel it has become the norm. Every year, about 20 per cent of the region’s population suffers from hunger. Hundreds of thousands of families are facing the effects of climate change – scarce rain leads to poor harvests and, therefore, virtually no income to buy food. During the lean period of the year between May and September, just before the harvest, when families' stocks are at their lowest, life in the Sahel is reduced to a struggle against illness, chronic hunger and poverty.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent in the Sahel

Since 2005, the IFRC – together with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, Ireland, France, Spain and Qatar – have been working to help Sahelian families regain their dignity by providing them with humanitarian services such as water and sanitation, food assistance, agricultural projects, nutrition centres and healthcare.

6 Destocking is a way to exchange animals for money, thereby giving pastoralists the money they need to buy food, access services they want, whilst maintaining a core herd.
In 2010, the worst was avoided – mainly thanks to humanitarian intervention – but the situation remains precarious and too many people continue to suffer. Food distributions are just a short-term solution – hunger has become the norm for the people of the Sahel. A chronic situation, like that of Niger, where half its children suffer from chronic malnutrition cannot be allowed to continue.

Attention is often focused on the latest sudden earthquake or tsunami, but the world too needs to remain engaged in the Sahel, and the problems caused by recurrent drought and degraded lands. The combination of general poverty and human vulnerability could result in a breakdown of peace and security in an already insecure region, which may reverse the few development gains that have been made.

And, as in previous crises, it’s not just about food. It’s about endemic and relentless poverty. This crisis needs to be firmly on the agenda of governmental and humanitarian agencies whose combined actions really can make a difference. We know that the problems are large and complex, but we also have the solutions:

- Effective screening and referral to programmes that provide therapeutic feeding and food assistance for malnourished children and their families;

- Community-based nutrition promotion to support behaviour change campaigns to improve infant and young child feeding practices, and support dietary diversity;

- Long-term efforts to improve food security for vulnerable households: improving farming practices, diversifying livelihoods, and improving access to local and regional markets;

- Equitable access to basic health services.

Niger’s crisis goes far beyond what is considered a ‘normal’ humanitarian situation. What is required is a strong political will and long-term commitment to reverse the norm of hunger in the Sahel.