

The Niger food crisis: How has this happened? What should be done to prevent a recurrence?

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Despite all the technical advances in early warning systems, these have failed to prevent a food crisis in Niger. Why? Both government and donors, it seems, are unprepared to act on the warnings the systems deliver, until there are clear signs of distress amongst the population. When that happens emergency actions can save lives, but at great cost. In the meantime it is too late to prevent people slipping into destitution and their children suffering serious malnutrition that affects their growth.

What is needed are safety nets that are already in place and that automatically provide some support for the poor when harvest failures strike and food prices rise. Examples include labour intensive rural works and cash or food transfers to those who cannot be helped through employment. Donor funds would be better spent on such measures than on dramatic, and very expensive air-lifted relief.

How and why?¹

The images of hunger have been on our TV screens and the first bags of grain already loaded on to C130 transport planes. Now emergency operations are underway the actual loss of life attributable to the crisis will probably be minimal. However, the damage will be considerable to the futures of children suffering hunger and acute malnutrition and the livelihoods of families who have been forced into distress sales of livestock. In view of all the efforts over almost 30 years to establish famine early warning systems and improve food security in Sahelian countries such as Niger on the fringes of the Saharan desert, we must ask whilst the crisis has attention, how has this happened? Then, what can be learnt by the international community so as to ensure that this avoidable famine or food crisis will not 'happen again'.²

Many farmers and pastoralists in the Sahel are just above borderline between survival and destitution. In favourable years their crops are adequate and some even have surpluses for sale. The pasture is enough to feed their livestock and numbers even increase. But it doesn't require a major drought, just poorly distributed rainfall or a severe locust attack is enough to tip them into food deficit and distress sales of animals both to buy food and because the range won't support them. That is what happened late last year in Southern Niger. The underlying problem is extreme poverty

and livelihoods that are constantly under threat in a volatile, marginal environment. How can these people in one of the 10 poorest countries be expected to extricate themselves from this poverty trap?³

These problems of poverty and vulnerability are widely recognised – they are all in the Africa Commission report (<http://www.commissionforafrica.org>). After the last great drought in the early 1980s, considerable efforts have gone into building famine early warning systems (EWS) for the Sahel and to promoting food security. So what went wrong?

Early warning systems for the Sahel countries are in place. The FAO has the Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) which monitors the situation through the growing season, and periodically reports through its network to the international community and via the internet to anyone else who wants to listen. But the system works closely with government agencies, and practically finds it difficult to move from providing distant warning signals to red alert unless it has the whole-hearted support of government. The messages of growing concern about southern Niger are all in the reports for 2004. There is the parallel American financed Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) which reflects a lack of confidence in the FAO supported system. FEWSNET second guesses the official system, telling the US Agency for International Development and its partner NGOs when there is a need for US food aid and other complementary emergency assistance. The EU has invested in improving early warning systems including the now sophisticated AGRHYMET regional weather monitoring programme. There are also inter-governmental arrangements for promoting food security in the region. After the 1980s drought, a regional Food Crisis Prevention Network of the Sahel (FCPNS) was established by the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC), a group of OECD donors, jointly with CILSS – the organisation of Sahelian governments committed to combating the problem of drought. This network sought to monitor the food situation and donor and government actions on a yearly basis. In 1990 they agreed the Food Aid Charter, a voluntary code of good conduct for food aid aimed at avoiding damaging practices in the aftermath of the drought.⁴ Responsibility for the network, initially with the SWAC secretariat, has passed to the CILSS countries. While these institutional arrangements did not help to prevent the

Niger crisis, they might now contribute to ensuring an effective response. In reality, the lines of communication between all these networks blur. Furthermore, if the government doesn't recognise the extreme seriousness of the situation, then the messages coming out are muted.

At a regional level there has been considerable progress towards strengthening food security in the Sahel since the last great drought in 1984. Consistently more favourable weather has halted, if not even reversed the downward trend in rainfall of the 1960s and 70s that led to fears of desertification. It has been cautiously suggested that the region might even benefit from global warming pushing climatic zones away from the equator. Some successes are reported in promoting agricultural development. Food markets within the region have become better integrated, partly through unrecorded, cross-border trade. But part of the current problem seems to have been that well integrated markets has

Glossary of Acronyms and Institutions

AGRHYMET: Agricultural, Hydrological and Meteorological programme of CILSS with its regional Centre at Niamey in Niger, providing training and information to development stakeholders and partners in agroecology taken as a whole (agroclimatology, hydrology, crop protection and so forth).

CILSS: the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel of nine countries – Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

EC: the European Commission through its Directorate General for Development is responsible for an EU programme in support of food security including both food and financial aid (OJ L 166. Brussels, 5 July 1996)

EU: the European Union of 25 member states.

EWS: an early warning system usually focusing in the Sahel region on the risk of famine or food crisis associated climatic variability, especially drought, and other possible threats to food security.

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN.

FCPNS: Food Crisis Prevention Network of the Sahel an annual discussion forum of CILSS and six OECD donors, Canada, the European Economic Community, France, Germany, Netherlands and USA.

FEWSNET: Famine Early Warning System Network, a programme for sub-Saharan Africa funded by USAID. Over time FEWSNET has broadened its objectives to that of strengthening the abilities of African countries and regional organisations to manage risk of food insecurity through the provision of timely and analytical early warning and vulnerability information, but its role in informing the decisions of USAID helps to ensure continuity of funding.

GIEWS: the Global Information and Early Warning System of the FAO, monitors threats to food security.

SWAC: Sahel and West Africa Club – an informal discussion forum linking the countries of the OECD and West Africa in the public and private sectors, with an OECD secretariat. Formerly the Club du Sahel, it was expanded to the whole of West Africa in 2001.

USAID: The United States Agency for International Development.

WFP: World Food Programme of the UN.

meant that because of greater purchasing power food is flowing to wealthier parts of Nigeria from Niger, whilst some other governments in the region are restricting flows. The cumulative effect of uncoordinated interventions has been to increase uncertainty thus raising prices and encouraging speculative stock-holding. There were record grain harvests in 2003. Conflict situations apart, food aid levels had shrank to a trickle of Japanese surplus rice gifted to governments and small imports by US NGOs to sell on local markets to finance their rural development projects because of lack of other funds, both risking market disruption. Other donors such as Germany have been funding local grain purchases. Perhaps there too was a strong sense of success, a certain complacency about food security in the Sahel. After record harvests in 2000, 2002 and again in 2003, cereals output in 2004 was still above and seasonal prices were still below the average of the past five years.

Unfortunately, the government, at least until after the February elections, was focused on political priorities and has continued to play down the scale of the crisis (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4133374.stm>). There are other problems too. The EWS is largely focused on drought and the weather-related threat to the food production 'campaign' from the timing and intensity of rain during the wet season. After the harvest, the production-focused regional FAO system goes more into stand-by mode. The major inter-agency assessment of the regional food situation is in early November and is based on the accumulated data about the main cropping season and other complementary evidence on other risks to food security by governments, the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the FAO and FEWSNET. This is followed by the annual FCPNS meeting. The EC's food security assistance has become more developmental in focus. The US is essentially geared to providing food aid sourced from US farms, processed in its mills and shipped on flag-carrying vessels. So until the problem turns into a crisis, USAID doesn't go to red alert.

Now that the drama has unfolded on 24 hour TV News channels the worst outcome – large-scale loss of life, migration and social breakdown – will almost certainly be avoided. The international community has demonstrated in the past that, unless prevented from gaining access by conflict, it can stop these things happening, but at great cost to the local people in impaired lives and livelihoods, especially in a remote land-locked region of Africa. The slowness of the response means that unnecessary damage will have been done, leaving the affected people poorer and more vulnerable to the next shock. The future of children suffering acute malnutrition will be impaired. Livelihoods will be harmed through the distress sale of assets including livestock to pay for food. Lack of feed also leads to the sale of cattle. There is now a risk that the late arrival of emergency aid will hamper a post-crisis agricultural recovery. The early warning system indicates that early and ample rains in 2005 have provided favourable growing conditions. This combined with the high prices at planting makes possible another bumper crop

similar to 2003. The challenge will be to direct assistance to those who won't directly benefit, without also distorting incentives for local farmers.

Parallels with Malawi in 2001/2

In trying to understand how it has happened and what is to be done to prevent a recurrence, it is helpful to recognise uncomfortable parallels with the 2002 food crisis in southern Africa, in particular with the near famine in small, poor and land-locked Malawi. First, voices from the NGO and academic community warning of impending disaster five months before that crisis broke in February–March 2002 were ignored. Again the government and the major donors didn't recognise the severity of the crisis until it was almost too late. The latter were concerned with problems in out of control public finances and improprieties in selling off aid funded grain stocks. In both crises the role of the IMF bears further interrogation: in Niger in pushing for an expansion of VAT and in Malawi for the sale and reduction in level of food reserves when food price movements were already indicating a deteriorating food security situation. When in Malawi excessive rains resulted in both poor maize and tobacco crops, the EWS, geared to anticipate a drought, failed to provide clear and precise indications of the food crisis, until literally after the corn cobs had been counted. The EWS was also systematically over-estimating the availability of tubers and minor food crops providing another argument for donor complacency. Are EWS still too focused on food supply and less effective in not just monitoring but also interpreting the implications of prices? Malawi's links to the sea are still affected by the war damage in Mozambique and now links to South Africa are affected by the crisis in Zimbabwe. Consequently, as the crisis was identified so late, and importing from North America or Europe takes at least 5–6 months, much of the food aid arrived too late, disrupting the market for the next season's better crop. This undermined the recovery by local farmers, favoured with better weather and supported seeds and fertiliser. The late arrival of emergency food aid could become a problem too in Niger.

What is to be done to prevent another Niger type crisis?

Strengthening early warning systems

The institutional arrangements for alerting government and the international community to an impending crisis and then ensuring a rapid and appropriate response have failed, just as they did in Malawi only three years earlier. This is a system failure, not just a technical problem. The current focus on technically improving EWS is necessary with international funding as a regional public good. Data collection can be improved. The more liberal market regime that now prevails also requires real time monitoring of price movements and the development of local interpretative and forecasting skills. But this will not be sufficient to ensure that there will not be a repetition of such crises. It is genuinely difficult to

anticipate a crisis. EWS are being asked to determine when and where problems of chronic poverty and malnutrition that have a strong seasonal dimension are becoming so acute that exceptional emergency measures are required. There is also an issue of responsibility. Better information alone does not ensure a timely or adequate response. More competition is required in the interpretation of evidence. That in turn should encourage greater transparency. Local NGOs and their international partners have to consider carefully whether and how they should collectively ensure that there is a third, independent and parallel strand to monitoring vulnerability and emerging crises in the rural economy and society that complements the official network of government, AGRHYMET, FAO, WFP and FEWSNET.

More donor flexibility

Free food is at best an incomplete response and hindered by inflexibilities. WFP, the main UN relief agency, can only provide food aid. The Immediate Response Account of cash, which it could use to acquire commodities from any source, is usually poorly subscribed to by most donors. The US, still the largest donor, is also largely restricted to offering food that has to be shipped from the States and takes at least 4–5 months to arrive. The EC is flexible on sourcing but has a reputation for being slow to respond, that partly results from its complex procedures for both decision-making and tendering. These shortcomings of emergency response are recognised, but prove difficult to overcome. For example, proposals by the US Administration, learning from events such as recent crises in Southern Africa and Ethiopia to acquire more flexibility in sourcing some of its food aid have been robustly rejected by Congress after intense lobbying by industry pressure groups. The new EU budgetary rules which reflect the priority of ensuring competitive tendering within the single market may make responses more difficult. Other bilateral donors are more flexible, but food security in the Sahel has been a priority only for the other members of the Food Crisis Prevention Network, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and, of course, France.

Maintaining livelihoods

When a crisis breaks, more is needed in terms of livelihood support such as cattle maintenance inputs and organised support sales that would have limited the damage to pastoral livelihoods. There has been a catastrophic decline in the terms of trade between grain and cattle. De-stocking schemes have a dual advantage in giving pastoralists a reasonable price for their cattle and preventing sick and malnourished animals reaching the market, further depressing prices. Smallholders may need micro-credit and access to seeds and other inputs that they can afford. These interventions require cash rather than food aid.

People living on the edge need safety nets to prevent them falling into a crisis

Extreme deprivation is the norm for the poorest households and communities in the Sahel. Setting aside fears of creating dependency, support mechanisms are required that will

prevent an insidious slide into crisis. If safety nets were in place this would considerably reduce the need for cobbling together a crisis response. One size will not fit all cases. Safety nets have to be tailor-made to local conditions and not to the convenience of donors who might prefer a set of 'international best practice' programmes. In most years there is enough food in the region to meet nutritional requirements and market demand for local staple foods. People need to have assured access to food, feed for their livestock and some additional funds to allow them to improve their livelihood prospects. Smallholders and pastoralists need micro-credit and markets. Employment creation schemes have a role, but cash wages are much more flexible to organise than food-for-work and create extra demand in the local market. If people cannot work or have too little time because of family responsibilities, they need some assistance such as cash, vouchers, supplementary feeding programmes directed to the needs of mothers and children. Assistance with school fees as well as school meals could have a role. Returning to the critical role of local markets, the unavoidable cyclical element in a rain-fed semi-arid rural economy needs to be built into safety nets design. These should be organised to encourage local trading, processing, storage and stock-holding, as well as intra-regional trade between economies artificially separated by borders drawn by colonial map-makers. Some cyclical increase and de-stocking of livestock is inevitable. But pastoralists need to be enabled to manage these cycles without crisis-forced sales that leave many destitute and forced into the towns or so impoverished that they are unable to restock. The successful management of crises will require regional cooperation in managing extreme market conditions rather than the unilateral panic reaction of governments to restrict the legal outflow of food. If local safety nets were in place, it could be easier for governments to avoid uncoordinated, beggar-my-neighbour crisis measures. The poor would also be less vulnerable to the sometimes unavoidable measures to prevent budgetary chaos that may pose a threat after an economic shock such as the 2005 oil price hike.

The donor community and NGOs have a responsibility to support and ensure the sustainability of safety nets that are appropriate to local circumstances

Providing emergency aid in response to a crisis is easier than organising locally relevant safety nets. There is too great a reliance on food aid. WFP is restricted to providing support to programmes that directly distribute food. Some NGOs are too reliant on US food aid which they have been importing to sell on local markets to provide the cash for food security programmes (so-called monetisation). Such actions either displace and distort trade including intra-regional trade (to the extent that they substitute for commercial imports) or compete with local farmers and processors (to the extent that they increase short-term supply). Other donors such

as the EC and European governments who provide cash have been uncomfortable in supporting safety nets because these potentially entail indefinite, recurrent budgetary commitments. The World Bank and the African Development Bank provide soft loans not grant funding. In reality these loans transmogrify into grant aid through debt cancellation and refinancing. But recurrent funding of safety nets, organised in whatever is the most appropriate way for vulnerable people and their communities in southern Niger or Malawi, and thinking more broadly in many other African states is exactly what is needed, at least in the medium term. This will provide the breathing space in which people can free themselves from poverty.

The issue of famine prevention and providing food security for the vulnerable in the very poorest, disaster prone countries has to be approached openly and realistically. 'Doing things better', the conventional agenda of refining the existing relief system, through improving crop assessment, removing some of the inefficiencies from relief aid and better targeting of assistance through better needs assessment, which has been tried for twenty years, will not prevent another crisis in Niger or some other very poor country. It cannot be presumed that governments or donors will always respond to technically sound information of impending crisis in a timely and adequate way.

Notes

1. The emergence of the crisis and implications for effective humanitarian responses are discussed more fully in HPG Briefing Note 4, 'Humanitarian Issues in Niger' <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/HPGBriefingNote4.pdf>
2. Food security experts disagree about how to classify this crisis. Is this a famine, as for example Devereux suggests? (<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/news/devereux-niger.html>). Or, has southern Niger only experienced a severe but localised food crisis, as according to the FEWSNET? (<http://www.fews.net/special/index.aspx?f=al&pageID=specialDoc&g=100757>)
3. Landlocked Niger is amongst the ten poorest countries with a per capita GNI of \$180, a poverty head count of 63% in 2002 and 34% of its people suffering undernourishment (insufficient calorie intake) during 1999-2001 (FAO, 2005, State of Food and Agriculture, 2003-2004. Rome: FAO).
4. Jackson, Robin, 'Developing Codes of Conduct for Food Aid: Experience from the Sahel' in Clay, Edward J. and Stokke, Olav (eds.) (2000) Food Aid and Human Security. London: Frank Cass. It also includes the text of the charter as an annex, and in April 2005 FEWSNET reappraised the role of the charter in policy – <http://www.fews.net/centers/innerSections.aspx?f=r1&m=1001611&pageID=monthliesDoc>

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