

Niger's hunger crisis: a legacy of lessons unlearned

Months of appeals to the international community for help fell on deaf ears, leaving Niger facing the all too familiar spectre of a major hunger crisis. Samuel Loewenberg reports.

Niger is facing a catastrophic hunger crisis as aid agencies scramble to secure funding to feed more than half of the country's 8 million people. Small children are suffering the worst; nearly 1 million children younger than 5 years have acute malnutrition. Aid agencies on the ground told *The Lancet* that the widespread hunger could have been significantly reduced if international donors had heeded their warnings about the imminent crisis. "Donors could have given early and in larger amounts, and the crisis would not have reached such a severe level as it has reached now", said Guido Cornale, the head of the UNICEF mission to Niger. "We knew from October that there was going to be a problem", said Mbacké Niang, the Niger Country Director for Oxfam. "They should have listened to us from the beginning. If they had listened to us early on and given money appropriately, maybe we could have saved a lot of animals and avoided a lot of malnutrition cases."

Unlike the crises from Africa that normally dominate the headlines—war, pandemics, corruption or natural disaster—the millions suffering in Niger are the victims of a less dramatic but far more pervasive plight: chronic, widespread poverty, made worse by climate change, high food prices, and political apathy. Hunger is a chronic problem in Niger, one of the world's poorest countries. The yearly lean season began even earlier than usual this year, and admissions to emergency feeding clinics for severely malnourished children spiked in mid-May. In some areas of the country, the acute malnutrition rate for infants is more than 20%. Since June, 133 288 children had been treated for severe malnutrition, and 15 000 had been hospitalised, according to UNICEF.

The scenes at malnutrition clinics follow a grim kind of accounting ritual: mothers walk hours, and sometimes days, through the harsh desert landscape, cramming into makeshift village clinics with their children, many of whom have bloated bellies, lolling heads, and skeletal frames, where they are taken one by one and placed in a halter attached to a handheld scale. Those with the strength usually shriek in fright and discomfort. They are then stretched out on a simple wooden measuring device, and health workers assess whether their height-to-weight ratio qualifies them for emergency rations. In the worst cases the children are taken to therapeutic feeding centres, where they will spend weeks being brought back to a functional state.

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An average of 7000 children are being brought to therapeutic feeding centres each week, up from 3000 a week a few months ago. For those who do not succumb to the lack of food, the long-term effects of malnutrition include impaired brain development, loss of future earning power, and weakened immune systems. Even when they are released, many might return—if not this year, then the next, and if not them, then their younger siblings.

Niger's neighbours are also facing severe hunger crises, with 1.6 million people facing hunger in Chad, 600 000 in Mali, and 300 000 in Mauritania. Food assistance given to those countries is even worse than that given to Niger, according

to Oxfam. As in Niger, the hardest hit are small children. In Niger alone, more than 300 000 children younger than 5 years are approaching starvation, a stage classified as severe acute malnutrition. The UN estimates that 15% of them, more than 45 000, will develop medical complications that could lead to death. The starving infants are highly susceptible to malaria, which peaks with the rainy season from June to September, and which is already the leading cause of mortality for small children in Niger. The World Bank puts the mortality rate for Niger's infants in 2009—which was not thought to be a crisis year—at 78.7 deaths per 1000 births.

The emergency in Niger and its neighbours could have been prevented or curtailed if more money had been received earlier from rich countries and international institutions, say aid agencies on the ground, but the cycle of chronic poverty and malnutrition remains off the political radar screen until the crisis peaks—as it has begun to now. If donors had been more forthcoming earlier, say aid workers, distributions of cash and supplementary food could have supported subsistence farmers and pastoralists to help them through the poor rains and high food prices that precipitated the crisis.

Although authorities have yet to officially designate this a famine, it is far more widespread than the hunger crisis of 2005, which brought recriminations from all sides for the slow reaction of donors until the crisis had peaked in the summer. This time, many of the same dynamics are in play. "Donors have reacted too slowly. Donors don't give to prevent. Donors wait to give until the disaster is already evident", said

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Children are weighed to determine whether they qualify for emergency food rations

Cornale, who added that aid agencies should have received most of their funding by April to support farmers and hungry families.

Niger's internal politics also played a part in the slow response. Under the previous government, hunger had been a taboo topic because of fears it would cause political instability, to the point that an aid agency was actually evicted from the country in 2008. But a coup in February put a new government in place that was willing to openly deal with the problem. This bolstered the cries for help, but by then the process of decay for farming households had already begun.

The longer the crisis was left to fester, the more people were affected and the greater the need for help became. The initial call for US\$190 million in funding had only been 60% achieved by June, meaning that aid agencies could not engage in the widespread preventive actions that would have helped prevent the crisis from getting worse. Now, aid agencies say they need \$371 million to feed 8 million people, including 925,000 acutely malnourished infants. So far, only \$142 million has been received.

The lack of funding follows a grimly familiar pattern. Just as in the famine of 2005, the hunger crisis this year has received almost no media coverage: one article in *The New York Times*

focused on the coup, one report in *The Independent* on the UN's expanded appeal, and a 96-word mention in *The Guardian*. The lack of media attention is directly related to the amount of focus, and funds, that rich governments put towards a crisis, say aid agencies, who term it "the CNN effect". In 2005, the food emergency was virtually ignored until it reached a peak in July as children began starving to death. After footage from the BBC was broadcast in the UK and the USA, millions of dollars began streaming in. Until then, despite more than 6 months of appeals, the only aid was a small grant from Luxembourg.

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Although donors did respond earlier this time, it was only a fraction of what was needed and so has hindered the response; particularly the preventive feeding and cash distributions that would have kept the crisis from worsening. Now, the funding needed to contain the catastrophe is nearly double what it was this spring.

The granting of foreign aid is generally a highly political process. Those countries not judged to be strategically important, like Niger

and the Sahel countries, receive little attention. Niger is a landlocked nation located at the southern end of the Sahara desert, above Nigeria, best known for its uranium supplies. The country sits at the very bottom of the UN's human development index of 182 countries, has one of the world's highest birth rates, and two-thirds of the population are living below the poverty line. Even in a normal year, 20% of children die before reaching the age of 5 years. "For the children of Niger, every year is a crisis year, the only thing that varies is how much attention it receives", said Susan Shepard, a nutrition expert with Médecin Sans Frontières (MSF). By the end of June, a survey by UNICEF found that 16.7% of children under 5 years were acutely malnourished, a large increase compared with the rate of 12.3% from the same period the previous year, which itself is a catastrophe by most standards, although it did not receive much attention at the time.

The hunger crisis is not due to a simple lack of food. In many cases there is food in the markets, but many people cannot afford it. The current problems were precipitated by a lack of rains last year, followed by a bad harvest and deterioration in livestock. Climate change, soil erosion, and desertification, caused by climate change, makes things even worse. The global food price increases in 2008 also remain a problem, for which some anti-poverty campaigners blame gambling in commodity futures by financial institutions. Niang of Oxfam calculates that food prices in some regions have risen 50% in the past 6 months. "There is food in the market. If people have money, it is possible to buy food", said Martin Leach, Head of Africa Conflict and Humanitarian Unit at DFID, who visited the worst hit regions Zinder and Maradi in July.

In villages scattered throughout the provinces of Zinder, Maradi, Diffa, and Tahoua, people have been reduced to eating leaves and lizards

as their granaries run empty. Herders have been forced to sell off their animals to survive. The lack of food has meant their animals have wasted away, and so are selling at about a 20th of what they would usually sell for.

That people have been forced to sell off their livestock ensures that the cycle will repeat itself, since the herders no longer have an asset that can appreciate in value and reproduce. "The livestock is their bank, it is their savings", said Leach. "Essentially the bottom has fallen out of their savings bank."

What is so frustrating to aid agencies is that, just as in 2005, they saw the current emergency coming. In February, 2010, FEWSNET, the US-funded food security-monitoring agency, warned that a severe food crisis was imminent. The warning said 2.7 million would be "extremely food insecure", and an additional 5 million would need support to keep them from losing their farms and livestock and falling into hunger. Although the USA has authorised \$50 million in food aid, about a third of it is not even scheduled to reach Niger until this August. The US system of sending over actual food, purchased in its domestic markets, has long been criticised for being a slow and wasteful system. If the USA were to send cash, as most other governments do, aid agencies could use it for purchasing food locally, which would drastically cut the 3–5 months it takes to ship food from the USA. Giving cash instead of shipping food would go twice as far, according to the US Government's own auditors. Since the USA is the world's largest food donor, that change could save millions of lives.

The US Government did not make an official available to discuss its response to the Niger food crisis with *The Lancet*, sending instead a written statement outlining its actions. The UK's DFID gave about \$24 million in assistance for Niger and the other Sahel countries. Aid agencies say the money and food helped, but it was not enough.

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

The loss of livestock means the loss of savings and future earnings

"Every year hundreds of children are losing weight in the hunger gap, and there is no reason to wait until that happens. We need to devise strategies to get food into the mother's hands", said Shepard. In fact, MSF did a study in 2007, distributing fortified food to 60 000 children in the Maradi region of Niger during the hunger gap. The result was the rate of severe malnutrition stayed extremely low.

Although this crisis affects many more people than it did in 2005—when about 5 million people in Niger and neighbouring countries were facing hunger—on the positive side, the aid agencies say they were better funded and coordinated than previously. But with only partial funding and the scope of the crisis so much larger, their response to this year's emerging crisis was constrained. Even now, with more food coming in, the logistics of bringing it into the landlocked country and the coming rains will further complicate emergency food distributions.

The aid agencies are "frustrated, because they're just basically putting a band aid on things", said Bruce Cogbill, an infectious disease expert with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. According to Cogbill and other nutrition experts, improving basic infrastructure like water and sanitation would go a long way towards curbing infant mortality. Yet

these types of long-term investments receive little attention and not enough financial support. "It is much easier for governments to mobilise resources for immediate needs than it is for them to address the grinding poverty that is the underpinning of the annual crisis that we see in countries like Niger", said Cogbill. Of the \$371 million requested to aid the Sahel region, only \$1 million is targeted towards water, sanitation, and hygiene.

Breaking the cycle of hunger will take significant investment in agriculture, family planning, and economic development. "We have strategies but we do not have the investment available", said Mohamed Béavogui, Director of the Western and Central Africa Division of the International Fund for Agricultural Development. "If we [the international community] had done our work as we should, maybe we would not have reached this level [of crisis]", Béavogui told *The Lancet*. DFID's Leach acknowledges that long-term development and agricultural assistance to the Sahel region is still paltry. DFID is now in discussions with other donors about doing more. "That's the best thing that I can say because that's as far as we've got", he said.

Samuel Loewenberg