SAHEL: A PRISONER OF STARVATION?

A Case Study of the 2005 Food Crisis in Niger

Frederic Mousseau with Anuradha Mittal
Afterword by Tania Rose

Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2005, the world rocked to Live Aid concerts and the Make Poverty History Movement celebrated developed countries' fresh commitments towards the International Development Goals (IDG), development assistance, and debt cancellation at the G8 summit in Gleanagles. Some three thousands miles south of this euphoria, a nation witnessed thousands of its children die of hunger. This was summer 2005 in Niger, the poorest country in the world.

Niger, a land-locked country in Central West Africa, borders Algeria and Libya to the north, Benin and Nigeria to the south, Burkina Faso to the southwest, Chad to the east, and Mali to the west. With an estimated population of 12.4 million (in 2005) largely concentrated in a narrow band of arable land along its southern border, Niger is an emerging democracy that transitioned into a democratically elected government in 1999, following almost a decade of political instability. Since 1999, a two-party coalition consisting of the *Mouvement Nigérien pour une Société de Développement* (MNSD) and the *Convention Démocratique Sociale* (CDS) has run the country governed by President Mamadou Tandja of the MNSD.

Rural subsistence agriculture, livestock, uranium-mining, and informal trading activities dominate Niger's economy. Rainfed agriculture contributed 40 percent to Niger's GDP in 2005, while livestock production accounts for about one third of the country's value-added sector.

POVERTY AND HUNGER IN NIGER

A vast but poor country, Niger was ranked last out of 177 countries on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index in 2005.[1] Sixty-three percent of Niger's population is estimated to live on less than a dollar a day and the per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was $280 in 2005. Social indicators are low: the infant mortality rate is 151.8 per 1,000; life expectancy is 44.7 years; the literacy rate is 17 percent; and gross primary school enrollment is 52.4 percent. Even when harvests are good, a shocking 40 percent of children—one million—suffer from chronic malnutrition and Niger's under-five mortality rate is the second highest in the world.[2] A September 2005 nutritional survey conducted by UNICEF, the US Centers for Disease Control, and the Government of Niger confirmed that 15.3 percent of children under five years of age suffer from acute malnutrition.[3]

Niger's poverty and widespread hunger hit the world news in 2005 with the terrible food crisis that affected millions of people and led to widespread child malnutrition. Between January and October 2005 some 230,000 children under the age of five, including 60,000 who were severely malnourished, were treated by NGOs—surpassing past records of relief intervention.[4] Despite this large-scale effort, thousands of children died of hunger-related causes.

2005 CRISIS: A LONE PHENOMENON?

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The 2005 food crisis in Niger has been blamed on locust invasion and drought. Yet Niger did not face an exceptional drop in production in the 2004–2005 agricultural year. Production at the end of 2004 was only 7.5 percent below the national food requirement.[5] In fact, the 2005 crisis cannot be singled out as an isolated episode in Niger's history, as the country faces a chronic nutritional emergency.

According to Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an independent international medical humanitarian organization that delivers emergency aid, malnutrition remains pervasive even in years of bountiful harvests (such as 2001 and 2003) and is most prevalent in the Maradi region, which has been nicknamed the breadbasket of Niger.[6] Acute malnutrition is rampant in Niger and admission to feeding programs in the Maradi region have been increasing year after year, with peak admissions between June and September—just before the harvest.[7] In July 2006 MSF reported that they treated 10,000 to 20,000 children annually in the Maradi region in 2004, but during the first quarter of 2006 they provided treatment to more than 26,000 children suffering from acute malnutrition.[8]

PREVALENCE OF HUNGER IN THE FACE OF INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

According to Action Against Hunger/Action Contre la Faim, another relief organization present in Niger, the country experiences food crises in a cyclical and structural manner with levels of vulnerability and malnutrition increasing year after year.[9]

Niger is not alone. U.N. aid workers estimate West Africa is among the most dangerous places for children, with an estimated 300,000 children under the age of five facing the risk of death from malnutrition every year in the Sahel—which includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso.[10] In 2006 the U.N. agencies forecasted a repeat of the 2005 crisis in the Sahel, with the lean season of food shortages starting earlier than usual, in May.

What is the cause of this chronic emergency, if not a natural disaster? How have several decades of development programs failed to eradicate hunger and malnutrition? And, more importantly, what needs to be done to end this cycle of poverty and famine?

Each Sahelian country has ratified the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which recognizes each person's right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, and housing and the continuous improvement of living conditions.[11] The ICESCR requires States to devote the maximum of their available resources—and make use of international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical support—to make progress toward the full realization of the rights recognized in the Covenant.[12] What does this widespread hunger, year after year, mean in terms of the right to food in the region? What, if any, are the obligations of the international community during these food crises?

These are the key questions that *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation? A Case Study of the 2005 Food Crisis in Niger* intends to answer.

The first section of this report reviews the 2005 food crisis in Niger and assesses the response of the Nigerien government and the international donor community. *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* finds the Nigerien government initially failed to request an adequate level of assistance for a variety of reasons, which range from governmental apathy, to the well-known limitations of what the international donors are willing to pay for, to perhaps wanting to protect Nigerien dignity. Nevertheless, the government failed to fulfill its citizens' right to food.


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Although the terrible images of starvation hit the western world in July 2005, the severity of the food shortage was already known by October 2004, when the Nigerien government and the World Food Programme (WFP) initially appealed for international support. The international community, however, largely ignored the situation. Four months after its first appeal, WFP had received only 10 percent of the required funding, which made the timely purchase of food for distribution impossible. Between November 2004 and June 2005, aid was provided through subsidies that brought the price of staple foods down to half of the market price. However, the discounted price remained beyond the reach of the poor.

Intensive campaigning by international relief organizations focused media attention on the crisis, which finally triggered an international response. The major donors were France, which provided around $12 million; the European Union, which reallocated money and resources earmarked for aid prior to the crisis to deal with the emergency; and the United States, which provided $19 million, of which two thirds ($13 million) was in-kind food aid. This intervention made it possible to replace subsidized sales of food with free distribution of food in July 2005. It was too little, too late compared to the need, however, and by the end of October 2005, the Nigerien government and WFP's subsidized sales and free distribution had covered only 22 percent of the national food deficit. In addition, it took nearly 8 months for the international funding to reach Niger, and most of it went to international relief organizations rather than the existing public system structured to deal with food distribution.

But most importantly, the failure of the international community, especially the donor countries, to respond effectively and in time to avert the crisis demonstrates that developed countries have come to see endemic hunger in poor countries like Niger as inevitable and somewhat "normal."

The second section of the report, "Markets: The Solution to Food Insecurity or the Heart of the Problem?" explores the role markets play in alleviating or aggravating food needs of the population. According to Action Against Hunger/Action Contre la Faim, Niger was affected by a modern crisis: food was present in markets, so it was not a problem of availability but of accessibility.[13]

The regional integration of sixteen West African countries through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an agreement to open up the borders and markets forged in 1975, intended to ensure an adequate food supply in the region. A close examination of ECOWAS reveals that while the agreement ensured economic liberalization of the West African countries, it failed to produce any regulatory mechanism that would ensure the stability of food prices and adequate distribution of food in the region. As a result, countries have come to specialize in certain agricultural products where they enjoy comparative advantage, and use exports earnings to import agricultural products they need. A variety of factors, including high fluctuations in regional food production, exchange rates, government policies, international commodity prices, and regional conflicts, have destabilized the cereal markets in the region, resulting in uncertain availability and access to food in countries like Niger. The removal of state intervention has also resulted in food trade being dominated by a handful of big traders whose interest is to further their profits rather than meet the needs of the community.

In the case of Niger, removal of the 1960 to 1970s policy of government regulation through agencies like the *Office des Produits Vivriers du Niger* (OPVN), which was responsible for regulation of the cereal market, left food shortages to be addressed by market forces, causing high seasonal variations. High food prices have not only made food inaccessible, but have also reduced non-food expenditures on health or education and have led to sale of livestock, capital goods, and land, further jeopardizing the future of the population and driving more people into poverty and landlessness. Farmers growing cash crops, farm workers, and small-scale farmers who are unable to produce enough food to cover the full extent of their food needs have been the most adversely affected by high market prices.

The third section, "Development Policies in Question," examines the outcome of international economic reforms and development policies implemented in Niger during the past 25 years. The report finds that they appear to be driven by ideology instead of by a comprehensive analysis of development issues in the country.

Implementation of policies emanating from the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, withdrew state intervention from social and economic sectors. S*ahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* exposes the failure of these policies over the last two decades and the disastrous impact these changes have had on Niger's economy; they have led to the growth of informal sector, removal of loans in the agricultural sector, and reduction of public support for farmers, which has aggravated poverty and hunger in the country.

Despite the international financial institutions' failed policies, a World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) published in January 2002 does not break with the policy of economic liberalization and continues to promote a minimalist role for the State in the social and economic arena. At the same time, despite Niger being the world's poorest country, it is the 71st recipient of international economic aid. The national system of prevention and mitigation of food crises has been continuously underfunded in recent years, as donors are generally reluctant to replenish the reserve, and financial assistance to Niger has never reached the level required to really fight endemic malnutrition and poverty in the country.

On the basis of this analysis, the last section of *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* recommends strategies that can challenge and eliminate endemic hunger in Niger and the Sahel region.

As a short-term solution, until the structural causes of poverty and hunger are addressed, the report advocates for the maintenance of national food reserves to ensure that the government has adequate access to food to meet the needs during a crisis. Timely interventions to prevent hunger-related deaths and widespread malnutrition are absolutely essential, while the long-term solutions need to address poverty-related malnutrition.

The recent crisis is a case of "free market famine." Niger has paid tremendously for economic liberalization, and it is time for a change. The report advocates for the adoption and implementation of food sovereignty as a policy in Niger and in the Sahel region. This includes the set-up of strong mechanisms of market regulation. Given the regional economic integration and the on-going construction of a common regional market, national food reserves alone are not sufficient and should be complemented by regional mechanisms.

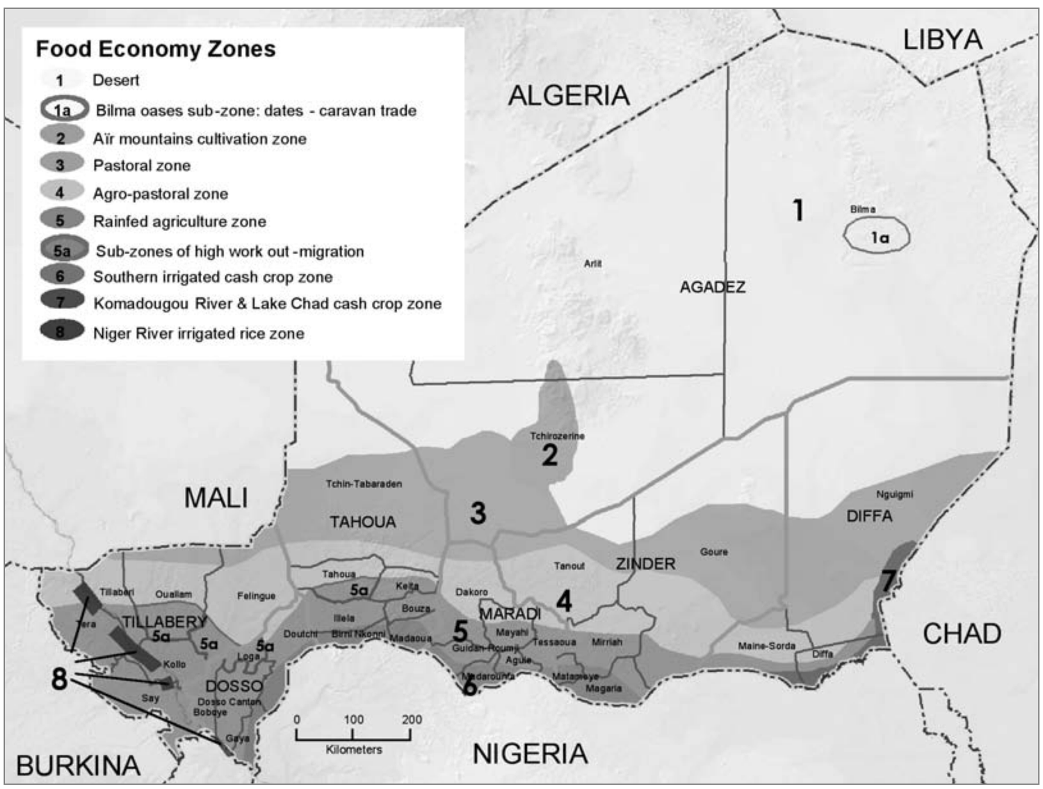
Food sovereignty would entail policies that support family farmers, who account for 80 to 90 percent of Niger's agricultural production. Given that rich countries have developed their agricultural sector by maintaining protective barriers, *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* challenges trade policies that leave African farmers to fend for themselves in the global market. Food security is not a function guaranteed by markets. It is a public service, requiring regulation to protect the domestic market and guarantee prices that provide sufficient income for farmers and are feasible given consumers' low incomes.

Cheap imports of cereals such as wheat and maize, which compete with local crops, have directly affected the income of local producers, resulting in fewer farm improvement investments and limiting access to quality farm inputs. Artificially low prices for farmers also cause loss of productive capital, such as animals or equipment, or the sale of land—a last resort seen often in 2005.

Additionally, the consumption of traditional crops needs to be encouraged through agricultural and economic policies and communication campaigns in order to ensure food sovereignty. The promotion of agro-forestry projects to boost consumption of local food and the use of drought-resistant traditional crops would contribute to a more secure food supply.

Food insecurity in Niger is a complex issue, but our recommendations are based on the hope that the government, in cooperation with the international community, can soon make hunger in Niger a thing of the past. While this report examines the prevalence of hunger in Niger, we offer valuable insight into the crisis affecting the whole Sahel region, along with solutions that we believe will help break this cycle. One thing is certain: ending chronic hunger will require a new way of thinking and political will from the international community to implement a "Marshall Plan for Africa." A Marshall Plan that is non-conditional and non-paternalistic. A plan free of failed economic reforms and one that implements unconditional debt cancellation and boosts Western assistance to Africa. A plan that focuses on food security, improving the livelihoods of small farmers, and the lives of hungry children as the goals that it seeks to further. The threat of communism triggered the Marshall Plan in Europe. Commitment to the human right to food and human dignity must drive this Marshall Plan for Africa.

Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation? is the second report published by the Oakland Institute's Aid Watch, a research center, information clearing house, and early warning system for activists, educators, journalists, policy makers, and the general public on humanitarian crises and international aid operations. It is our hope that it will break through the rhetoric on the hunger crisis in the Sahel region and help mobilize global leadership to take action to eradicate pervasive starvation and hunger. *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* proves that eliminating hunger in Niger, and throughout Africa, is possible.



Source: CILSS

PART I:
THE 2005 FOOD CRISIS

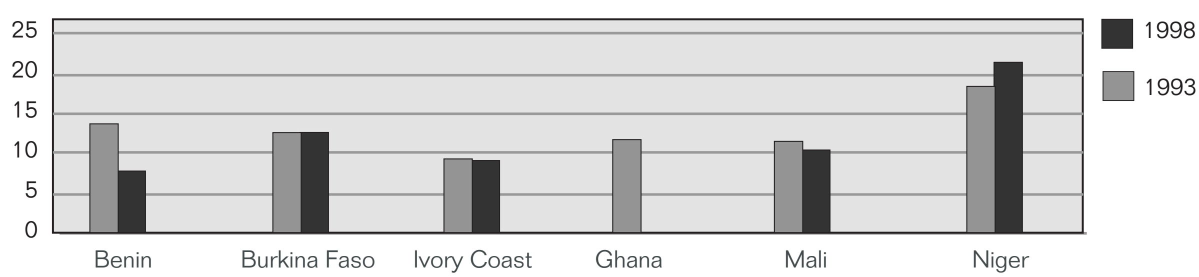
THE POOREST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

Niger is ranked by the United Nations as the poorest country in the world and has the lowest Human Development Index.[14] It is a landlocked Sahelian nation, whose economy is largely agrarian and subsistence-based. Though it is considered as a Sub-Saharan country, 65 percent of Niger is actually covered by the sands of the Sahara desert.[15]

Nearly half of the government's budget is derived from foreign donor resources;[16] other key resources for the country include a few exportable crops, livestock, and some of the world's largest uranium deposits. Drought cycles, desertification, a high population growth rate, and the drop in world demand for uranium have undercut the economy in the recent decades. Formal employment is decreasing, resulting in an increasingly unstable informal economy.[17] The country's real GDP per capita shrank by 1.4 percent per year between 1990 and 2000.[18] Today, 63 percent of the population of Niger is poor, and 34 percent live in extreme poverty.[19]

In terms of health and nutrition, Niger is in an extremely precarious situation: the life expectancy at birth is only 44.7 years[20] and the child mortality rate is 28 percent—one of the highest in the world—indicating that one out of four children never reaches the age of five. The health system in Niger is in dismal shape, with insufficient infrastructure, lack of skilled personnel, and overall poor access to health services and drugs.

CHART 1: ACCUTE MALNUTRITION (WEIGHT/HEIGHT) AMONG CHILDREN UNDER 3 (%)



source: 5ème Rapport National sur le Développement Humain, Niger 2004, page 68

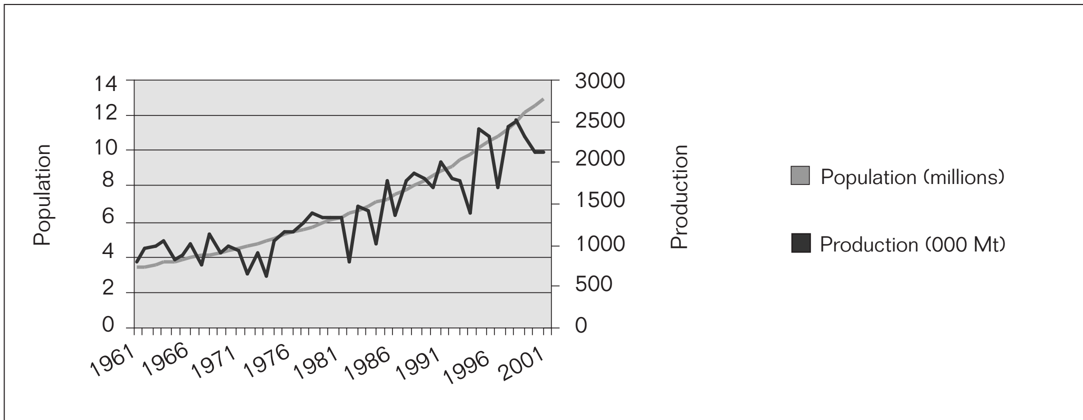
Recent surveys show that 14 percent of children under five[21] and more than 20 percent of children under three suffer from acute malnutrition.[22] These rates are not only high, but are increasing, as illustrated in chart 1. This malnutrition is among the worst in the world, with rates comparable to those found in countries experiencing acute food shortages due to war and displacement such as Sudan or Sierra Leone.[23] But Niger is at peace, therefore the causes of malnutrition require further investigation.

DEMOGRAPHY, POVERTY, AND FOOD DEFICITS

Growing enough food to feed the Nigerien population has been a challenge for several decades. The population growth—3.3 percent per year between 1988 and 2001—is one of the highest in the world. The country's population and its food needs double every 20 years. The population has ballooned from around 2.5 million in 1950 to 11 million people today, and current projections based on the recent growth rate estimate the population will exceed 15 million by the year 2010 and will be more than 53 million in 2050, amounting to a twentyfold increase in one century.[24] With approximately 70 percent of the population younger than 25, Niger's age structure is one of the youngest in the world. According to the World Bank, "such a young population, combined with high fertility, leads to a high birth rate thus creating a demographic growth spiral."[25]

The extremely high demographic growth poses tremendous challenges to the country. Just to keep pace with its burgeoning population, all sectors of the country need to grow too, including the capacity of health services and education and, of course, agriculture. In 2005 alone, the demographic growth resulted in an additional food requirement of 100,000 tons of cereals. Between 2005 and 2010, the annual food needs will have increased by nearly 25 percent, or 800,000 tons.[26]

CHART 2: MILLET PRODUCTION COMPARED TO POPULATION, 1961-2005

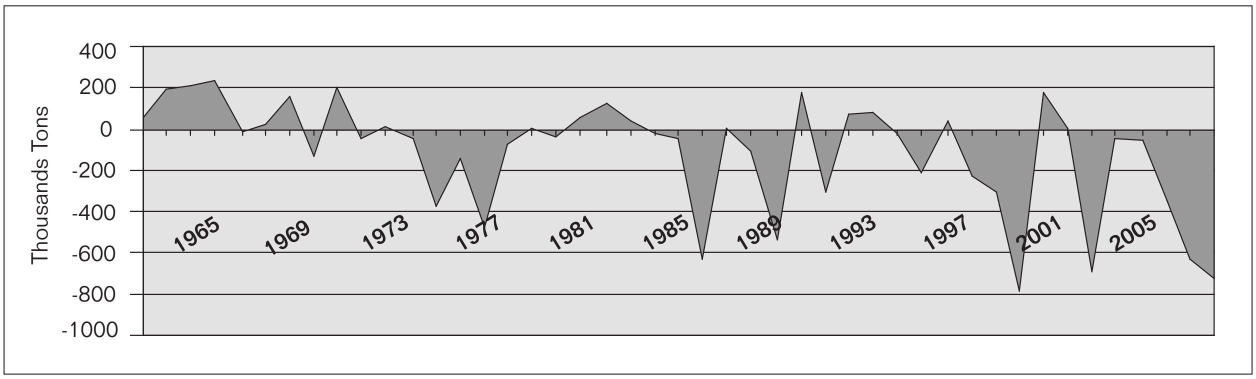


As illustrated in chart 2, millet production, the main staple food in Niger, had kept pace with demographic growth until recently. However, the 2 percent average annual increase in food production remains below the demographic growth of 3.2 percent. As a result, Niger—which used to enjoy significant food surpluses up to the end of 1960s—now experiences a food deficit every other year with food production per capita shrinking by 1.3 percent per year.[27] The underlying gap between production and requirement is currently 400,000 tons, or about 15 percent of basic needs.[28]

Additionally, the growth in food production in recent decades is a result of increasing the amount of land used for agricultural production, rather than gains in productivity. The consequence has been the overexploitation of land; reduction of fallow land and the degradation of soil fertility; and, ultimately, a decrease in agricultural productivity. In the past three decades the amount of land with soil suitable for rain-fed agriculture has actually been reduced by half, while the country's population has increased threefold.

The southern part of the country, where the climate is more hospitable for agricultural activities, is the most populated and in certain districts has a density exceeding 100 inhabitants per kilometer. Demographic growth in these regions results in dividing up agricultural parcels, which reduces the size of individual crops and affects soil fertility because the land is overused. In Zinder and Maradi, the most populated regions, the average size of family parcels does not exceed 0.5 hectares, which does not allow a family to grow enough food to last more than a few months.

CHART 3: CEREAL DEFICIT OR SURPLUS 1961-2005



This has impacted the population's ability to feed itself and has driven many into poverty. Malnutrition is caused by inadequate food consumption, both in quantity and quality, and is impacted by the deterioration of the social environment including reduced access to health and social services, education, and reduction of family and community solidarity systems. In addition to malnutrition, poverty and food insecurity are driving people into irreversible patterns of migration and sale of land or capital goods.

The situation in Niger is very alarming as current trends indicate the country is heading toward more severe food deficits in the future. The world's poorest country does not earn much from exports apart from a few agricultural commodities and uranium, which has been facing declining international prices over the years. Yet Niger has to finance increasing amounts of food imports and must continuously adapt the capacity of its social services to accommodate its growing population.

FOOD DEFICIT AND FOOD INSECURITY IN 2005

In December 2004, a joint FAO/WFP/ Comité Inter-Etats pour la Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel (CILSS: Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control) mission assessing the food situation in Niger estimated national food production would be 2,651,571 tons against a requirement of 3,156,660 tons for national consumption, which left a deficit of 505,000 tons. The mission foresaw that 227,000 tons would be covered by commercial imports, but that would leave a deficit of 278,000 tons,[29] representing 7.5 percent of the country's food needs. The mission report observed that "although the deficit does not seem enormous at the national level, this should not obscure the fact that more than 3 million people in some 3,000 villages, located mainly in the agri-pastoral zone in the centre and north of the country, are now extremely vulnerable to food insecurity."

In March 2005, the Government of Niger confirmed the initial diagnosis: "The food situation in certain zones is very worrying and the coping strategies are overstretched. We can observe in certain zones the consumption of scarcity food products (tree leaves), the search of anthills, and cases of displacement of entire families. Pervasive poverty has accentuated people's vulnerability."[30]

To complicate matters, cereal prices skyrocketed in 2005. The price of a bag of 100 kilograms of millet, the main staple food, increased from XOF* 12,000 at the time of the harvest to more than XOF 30,000 between July and August 2005, peaking at XOF 40,000 in some parts of the country. Although 63 percent of the Nigerien population lives on less than $1 a day, in July 2005 a Nigerien farmer paid more for a kilogram of millet at the local market than a European or an American consumer paid for a kilogram of rice in the supermarket. Olivier Longué, Director General of Action Against Hunger, (Action Contre La Faim/ACF) an international humanitarian agency, remarked, "We're facing a modern crisis. Whereas during a traditional crisis the problem is the absence of food, here and now we are in a country where there is food in the markets, but the people cannot afford to buy it."

The dramatic increase in prices made food even more inaccessible for the poorest households, who then had to cut back their food consumption; reduce their non-food expenditures (for health or education, for example); increase their consumption of wild plants; and sell their livestock, capital goods, or land. Migration, for a season or permanently, also occurred extensively throughout the course of the year. The rise in child malnutrition was, however, the most visible consequence.

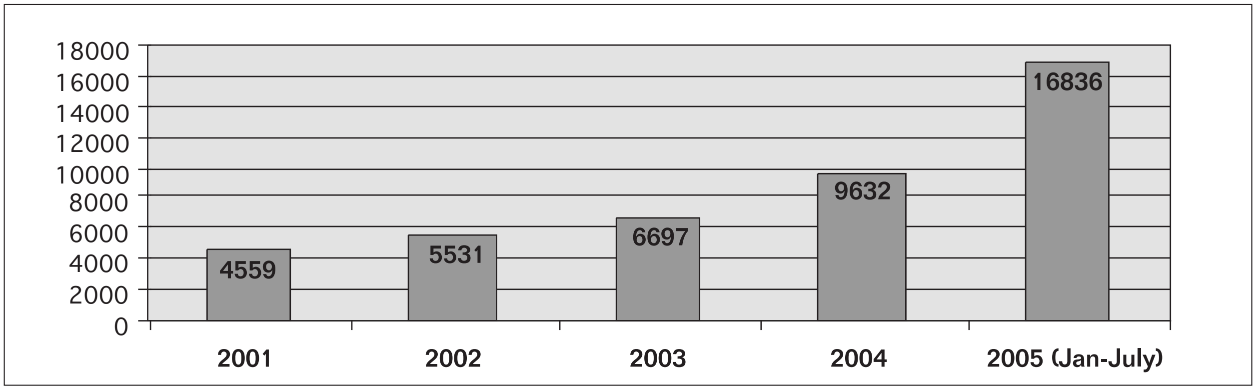
IN ANY CONTEXT, RAPID DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH, LACK OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES, AND POVERTY WOULD MAKE THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS—ESPECIALLY THOSE RELATED TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT—EXTREMELY DIFFICULT. IN NIGER'S CASE, GEOGRAPHIC CIRCUMSTANCES AND A HIGHLY UNFAVORABLE CLIMATE MAKE THE SITUATION EVEN MORE ACUTE.

MALNUTRITION ON THE RISE

The alarming rise in malnutrition was first observed in the region of Maradi, located in the south of the country close to Nigeria's border, where Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) observed an "epidemic of acute malnutrition." In early 2005, MSF, which had been operating in Maradi for several years, started to witness a clear deterioration in the nutritional situation in the region. Between January and April 2005, more than 2,700 severely malnourished children were admitted to MSF's nutritional centers in Maradi, compared to 1,200 in the same period during the previous year. By the start of the lean season in July 2005, nearly 17,000 severely malnourished children had been admitted in nutritional centers—nearly twice as many as the number admitted in the entire previous year (see chart 4, following page). Several nutritional surveys conducted early 2005[31] confirmed the gravity of the situation with reports of more than 20 percent Global Acute Malnutrition, which greatly exceeds the internationally accepted emergency threshold of 10 percent.[32] Such high rates are comparable to those encountered in countries at war, and demonstrate an acute emergency. This prompted MSF to call for emergency food distributions for the affected population.[33]

* XOF: The Franc Communauté Financière Africaine (FCFA), whose currency is internationally abbreviated XOF, includes 8 West African nations: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Sénégal, and Togo.

CHART 4: ADMISSIONS OF SEVERELY MALNOURISHED UNDER 5 CHILDREN IN MARADI



LATE AND INADEQUATE INTERVENTION

Following the 1984 1985 famine in Niger, a national system of prevention and response to food crises has operated under the auspices of the Office of the Prime Minister. Although the national reserve minimum to be prepared for a food crisis was 110,000 tons of food, in November 2004 the Government had only 20,000 tons of cereals and financial reserves for an additional 20,000 tons at its disposal. This was far from sufficient, given the deficit of 505,000 tons and a national monthly requirement of 260,000 tons.

In November 2004, the Nigerien government requested 32.7 million Euros (around $42 million) in additional support from donor countries to finance the procurement of 78,000 tons of food, the provision of agricultural assistance to farmers and herders, and to assist 3.2 million people affected by the food crisis. The government's response strategy included cereal banks, subsidized sales of food, food for work and cash for work programs, fodder banks, and free food distributions in localized areas. The World Food Programme (WFP) initially planned only a marginal complementary intervention, aiming to assist 400,000 people with 6,562 tons of food.

For several months, donors' response to both calls remained limited. Less than 10 percent of the requested funds had been received by July 2005. This delay created a hunger gap, because funds should have been received long before the lean season in order to proceed with food purchases and to allow time for transportation of food to the areas in need.

Between November 2004 and June 2005, only 32,000 tons of cereals were sold at subsidized prices by the national system.[34] An additional 30,000 tons sought by the government could not be found domestically between April and May 2005, which required that the government resort to international markets. Niger then had to purchase food from India and faced several months of delivery delays. As a result, at the beginning of the lean season in July 2005, the national system had no more food to distribute. During the same period, only 10,000 tons of food had been distributed by the WFP and NGOs.[35]

MSF judged the response inadequate compared to people's means because the poorest people could not afford to pay the price of subsidized food, the main form of aid from the international community and the Nigerien government. Staple food was sold at half of the market price—XOF 10,000 for a 100 kilogram bag of millet—but this was too expensive for the poorest households. MSF observed that the small quantity of food available for subsidized sale and the limited geographical coverage of the interventions were not sufficient to check the on-going epidemic of malnutrition. In June 2005, MSF started voicing strong criticism of the international response, which they deemed inappropriate and insufficient to tackle the scale and severity of the food needs. MSF was still witnessing a sharp and continuous rise in malnutrition despite the food interventions by the government and its international partners—all before the start of the annual hunger gap period in July.

MSF's emergency campaign, echoed by shocking reports by the BBC and other Western media, started bringing world attention on Niger during June and July 2005 and triggered a change of attitude among most international aid organizations and donors. The WFP revised its appeal and significantly increased its funding requirement from $1.4 million to $57.6 million, and its food requirement from 6,562 to 72,931 tons. This fresh appeal at last received significant international funding—though donations still fell far short of the amount of the appeal. From July onward, international funding started to pour into Niger, bolstering international NGOs and UN agencies with extra human and financial resources. The national strategy of subsidized food sales was abandoned and replaced by free food distributions, which was more appropriate given the severity of the situation.

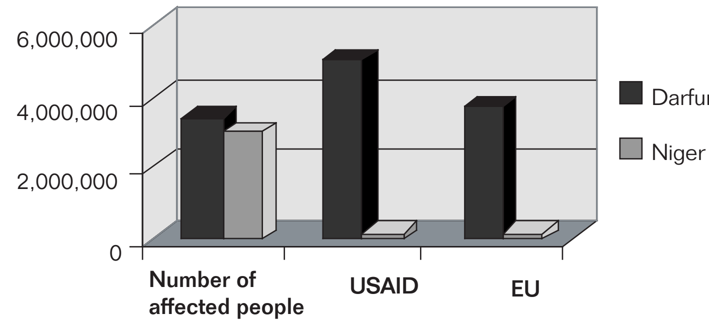
By the end of October 2005, the Nigerien government and the WFP had sold or distributed a total of 110,000 tons of food, including some 60,000 tons through free handouts. A report by a French senatorial commission concluded that this amount would cover half of the national food deficit.[36] However, this amount covered only 22 percent of the national food deficit. The 3.2 million people targeted by food distributions received an average of 34 kilograms of food, enough to cover about 1.5 months of food needs. This was clearly not enough to avoid widespread malnutrition. Funding for food relief was both late and limited compared to the needs of Nigeriens.

In the face of this mounting crisis, international NGOs raced to set up a huge intervention in order to treat 230,000 malnourished children under five—an astonishing number, far higher than any previous relief intervention. France responded promptly to the crisis, providing more than 10 million Euros (around $12 million), mainly to the governmental system (in several installments), starting in early 2005.[37] The EU's involvement was relatively modest in comparison; without allocating any new money, it merely reoriented $21 million that was allocated to Niger prior to the crisis. Similarly, the US did not respond very actively to this crisis: funding for Niger remained marginal compared to other crises and did not exceed $19 million, of which two thirds ($13 million) was given as in-kind food aid (20,000 tons). It is worth noting that while the bulk of the assistance was provided by France, the EU, and the US, the Nigerien government also received assistance from a number of smaller donor countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Libya, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Gabon, Nigeria, Monaco, Switzerland, and Egypt.

Most donors' contributions started to reach Niger 8 months after the government's initial request. According to the UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jan Egeland, at the onset of the crisis in October 2004, $1 per day per child was necessary to save lives, whereas $80 per day was required in July 2005.[38] Moreover, once the money started to pour into Niger, most went to international relief organizations, including a number of newcomers, rather than to the public system—even though the latter was already structured to distribute food assistance. The government received only 3.3 million Euros ($4 million) from its appeal, and contributed 27 million Euros (around $34 million) from the national response system.[39] In contrast, by the end of October 2005, the UN appeal was covered at 75 percent, with 47 million Euros (around $59 million) received by the various agencies.

CHART 5: COMPARISON OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO DARFUR AND NIGER, 2005 (HUNDREDS $)

	Darfur	Niger
Number of affected people	3,4000,000	3,200,000
USAID ($)	507,150,000	19,000,000
Per capita assistance ($)	149	6
EU ($)	371,000,000	21,094,519
Per Capita assistance ($)	109	7



NIGER - DARFUR[40]

In 2005, the US Government provided $507 million in humanitarian assistance for the emergency in Darfur (as of 23 October 2005) and only $19 million to Niger. Yet, the number of affected people is quite similar: 3.4 million in Darfur and 3.2 million in Niger. With $149 spent per affected individual in Darfur against only $6 in Niger, people in Darfur received 25 times more of US assistance than Nigerians in 2005. It is similar for the European Union, which has provided $109 per affected person in Darfur against $7 in Niger (15 times more).

SPECIAL TREATMENT FOR NIGER

Why was the poorest country in the world, with one of the highest levels of malnutrition, so unsuccessful in attracting donors' interest in 2005? The responsibility lies first with the government, which failed to request an adequate level of assistance. While the cereal deficit was estimated at 505,000 tons, the first call for assistance by the government in October 2004 was only for the provision of 78,000 tons of food. In March 2005, the emergency unit of the Prime Minister's office reiterated its call for donors' assistance, but again for a minimalist intervention plan, designed to address only 20 percent of the actual deficit.

The second request understated the country's needs considering the joint FAO/WFP/CILSS mission[41] expected the difference would be covered by commercial imports. The low request is surprising given that it is hard to predict commercial imports, which are subject to many different factors. Even if the Nigerien government's call was fully supported by donors, who was expected to pay for the rest?

Niger's budget is very dependent on donor countries and the country's food crises unit, the Cellule des Crises Alimentaires (CCA) is managed jointly by the Nigerien government and representatives from the main donor countries. Thus, the estimate of food needs and the size of the planned intervention may have been influenced by what donors involved in the planning were willing to pay. The limited request to the international community could have also been driven by concerns of maintaining national dignity. In fact, in September 2005, the Prime Minister justified the interruption of food aid out of concern for Nigerien dignity saying, "Our dignity suffered. And we've seen how people exploit images to pledge aid that never arrives to those who really need it."[42]

Regardless of the reasons underlying this choice, it violates the Nigerien government's responsibility to ensure its citizens' right to food. Since 1986, Niger has been a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which enshrines the right to food and the right to be free from hunger in Article 11. This means that the Nigerien government has committed itself to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food for its population; this includes a formal commitment to call for the necessary assistance to fight hunger and malnutrition.

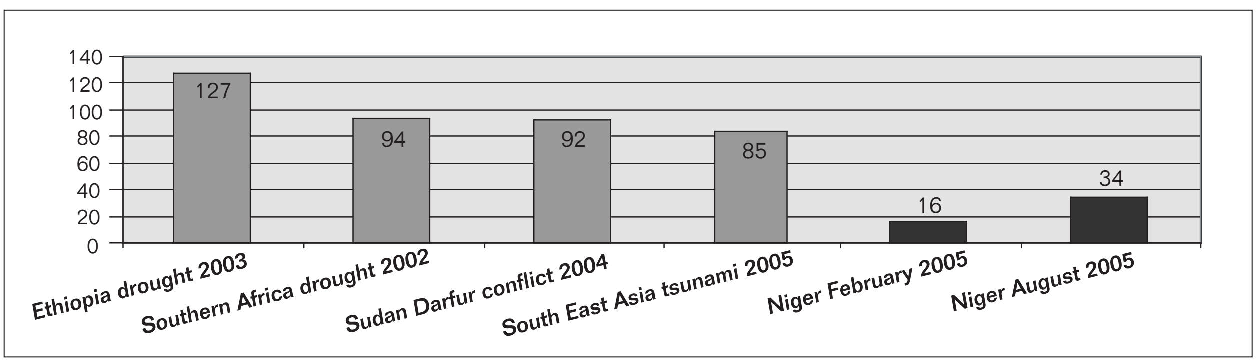
The attitude of the WFP and the UN system also raises some questions. The WFP did not initially plan any specific response to the crisis. In February 2005 the WFP launched the first Emergency Operation (EMOP), aiming to assist 400,000 Nigeriens with 6,562 tons of food. Yet this contribution was insufficient compared to the need the UN system had estimated four months before: a deficit of 505,000 tons and 3.8 million people in need. Why such a timid move by the WFP and the UN?

The UN initially left the responsibility to respond to the food crisis to the structure already in place: the Nigerien national system under the joint management of donor countries and the Office of the Prime Minister. This policy choice is confirmed by the UN Flash Appeal sent in May 2005, which did not increase the WFP budget but instead channeled funds through the UNDP and the FAO ($4.9 million through UNDP for food and $4 million through FAO for support to herders) to government services. This UN appeal received very poor support from donors, just as the initial request by the government was all but ignored.

It was only in July 2005 that a revised UN appeal drastically increased the requirement for the WFP: the budget rose from $1.4 million to $57.6 million, and the food requirement from 6,562 to 72,931 tons. The new WFP strategy intended to assist 2.5 million people instead of 400,000 as initially planned, and placed the WFP and international NGOs as direct operators whereas previous plans gave a central role to the Nigerien Government. Thanks to media attention, this fresh appeal received significant international funding, though donations were still insufficient (at the end of September, only around 50 percent of the EMOP had been funded). Revision of the UN appeal in July was late, however, as the harvest was not expected until October and food assistance takes several weeks or several months to reach those who need it, due to varying international procurement, transportation, and distribution times.

Chart 6 illustrates the difference in the WFP's treatment of the Niger crisis compared to recent crises:

CHART 6: COMPARISON OF THE WFP'S ESTIMATED FOOD REQUIREMENT PER CAPITA IN THE RECENT FOOD EMERGENCIES (KG)



Sources[43]

Half of the Nigerien national budget, and almost 100 percent of the government's food aid system, is dependant on international donors. The UN's appeal mechanism for emergency assistance is also dependent on voluntary funding from donor countries. At the end of the day, it is the goodwill of these donor states that determines the level and the form of assistance to be provided. Given that the main donors minimized and even denied the severity of the crisis, one may conclude that this good will might have been lacking in the case of Niger.

A CRISIS DENIED BY DONORS

Shocking images of starvation in Niger were broadcasted in July 2005, just after the much publicized worldwide Live Aid concerts, an international mobilization against poverty, and the G8 summit in Gleneagles all trumpeted "making poverty history." The G8 leaders who had just made commitments to end hunger and poverty suddenly came under intense media and NGO criticism for letting this disaster happen. Almost nothing had been done in the previous eight months to prevent the Nigerien crisis, which raised serious questions about the sincerity of donors' publicized announcements.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This might explain why, after July 2005, the main donor countries joined their voices in justifying their poor reaction to the crisis and published several reports minimizing or denying the severity of the crisis. Some accused NGOs and the media of exaggerating the severity of the crisis. For example, a French parliamentary mission reported in September 2005 that NGOs got carried away, and suggested that the real reason behind the public attention on Niger was that NGOs had to spend the excess funds received after the tsunami in Southeast Asia. The report even asserted that instead of the thousands of threatened children mentioned by press agencies, only two died every day in the MSF's nutritional centers it had visited.[44]

In the same vein, Fewsnet, a USAID affiliated organization, regretted in August 2005 "the sensationalist information emanating from certain NGOs and from certain press outlets mentioning cases of famine."[45] Fewsnet also questioned the press reports that mentioned 150,000 children threatened by starvation, saying: "There is no basis to expect that starvation is a likely outcome for these numbers of infants."[46] Yet, as mentioned earlier, between January and October 2005, approximately 230,000 children suffering from acute malnutrition were assisted by NGOs, including about 60,000 children under five years old who were severely malnourished. In spite of efforts to minimize the severity of the crisis, it was difficult to refute the reports and medical data from respected NGOs and UN agencies on the ground. Without any doubt, these figures reflect the gravity and the exceptional nature of the situation in Niger and the fact that the relief effort had reached a historic level, assisting far more people than past interventions. It is clear from these statistics that without emergency nutrition intervention thousands more children would be dead today.

As irrefutable evidence of the crisis mounted, donors put forward another argument to justify their inaction: a misunderstanding of the nature of the crisis. Fewsnet observed in July 2005 that the crisis was "the predictable and inevitable result of inadequately-addressed chronic poverty in the world's second poorest country [...] Of those who will likely die from malnourishment, a substantial proportion is probably dying from conditions related to poor water quality, or other non-food related problems."[47] The EU declared that the food crisis should be differentiated from the nutritional crisis: "donors have lumped together the food crisis due to the lack of cereals and the crisis related to malnutrition, hiding the chronic nature of malnutrition."[48] The former would be a problem of access and availability of food (which could be therefore addressed through emergency interventions), whereas the latter would be principally due to cultural practices of the population.

This distinction suggests that high levels of malnutrition and infant mortality were somehow "normal" in Niger. It attributes malnutrition to an endemic situation, primarily due to environmental, cultural, and behavioral factors (problems of breastfeeding and weaning and distribution of the food within households, among others). Within this interpretation of the situation, malnutrition would be chronic—and therefore unavoidable in the short run—and could be addressed only through long term interventions geared toward education and sensitization of the population. Thus, this understanding leads to the conclusion that emergency interventions are inappropriate, because the problem in this framework is primarily the way people make use of food, not an outright lack of food.

Yet this thesis is contradicted by the facts. Several key details show that malnutrition in Niger was not a result of cultural practices and that the crisis was avoidable: the high seasonal variation of malnutrition resulting in a sharp increase during the lean season, the abnormally sharp increase in malnutrition in the first months of 2005, and, lastly, the perfect correlation between the trends in malnutrition and the rise in food prices. Ultimately, the argument that emergency intervention would not help the victims of Niger's food crisis negates the fact that, as the senior manager of an international NGO said, "even if the lack of food is not the unique cause of malnutrition, an improved food intake is the only solution to save the life of a malnourished child"[50]

Insisting that the problem was actually cultural factors, not food supply, was likely a way to justify the late and insufficient assistance to the country in 2005. More broadly, it is part of an effort to protect development policies, such as those discussed later in this report, whose design silently accepted the sacrifice of a whole segment of the country's population—primarily young children from the poorest families.

IT IS OFTEN HEARD IN EMBASSIES AND AMONG REPRESENTATIVES OF U.N. ORGANIZATIONS THAT MALNUTRITION HAS A CULTURAL CAUSE: IN NIGER, CHILDREN DO NOT COUNT, THEY ARE NEGLECTED, SO MALNUTRITION IS PREVALENT. TO SEE PROOF TO THE CONTRARY, ONE HAS ONLY TO VISIT THE CRENI (INTENSIVE THERAPEUTIC FEEDING CENTER) IN MARADI AND OBSERVE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN. IN LIGHT OF HOW THE FOOD SECURITY SITUATION IS APPROACHED BY INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES AND BY THE GOVERNMENT, ONE WONDERS WHO IS REALLY NEGLECTING THE FATE OF NIGERIEN CHILDREN. [49]

Overall, between January and October 2005, 230,000 malnourished children were assisted by NGOs, including around 60,000 severely malnourished children. Early and appropriate interventions would have prevented malnutrition on such a massive scale. These figures reveal a failure that must be acknowledged so that future policy can prevent crises like the 2005 food shortage from recurring.

PART II:
Markets: The Solution To Food Insecurity or The Heart of The Problem?

In March 2005, at the opening session of the regional conference on the food and agricultural situation in the Sahel, the Executive Secretary of the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), an intergovernmental organization composed of nine Sahelian member countries (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Chad), explained, "one must admit that the capacity of our States is limited. Apart from emergency measures, the State must let market forces, based on the law of supply and demand, deal with the situation."[51] In the absence of sufficient public resources, governments in the Sahel region have forsaken their responsibility to address the food needs of their citizens, leaving this crucial task to the market. This section of the report examines the market approach to food security and analyses how and why it failed to meet the needs of the Nigerien population.

THE WITHDRAWAL OF STATE INTERVENTION IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND TRADE

Like most countries in the region, confronted with shrinking resources resulting from the decline of its economy and under pressure from donor countries and international financial institutions, in the 1980s Niger's leaders abandoned the self-sufficiency policy that had been in place during the previous two decades. Until then, food security policy for the country had been implemented by the *Office des Produits Vivriers du Niger* (OPVN), a government agency in charge of the regulation of cereal markets. The OPVN intervened in the national market by controlling the price of staple cereals by regulating the market through the purchase, storage, and sale or distribution of food commodities. Its role also included distribution of food from areas of the country with a surplus to those with a deficit of food.

Structural adjustment policies mandated economic liberalization and limited government intervention in markets. Under these terms, the market regulation role of the OPVN was removed and the office was confined to the management of emergency reserves for times of scarcity. This policy shift negated the mentality of self-sufficiency and supply management as a way to secure food supplies and instead aimed to address food deficits through the market and, specifically, through food trade with regional neighbors.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

The economic liberalization implemented in Niger reflects the process that Sahel as a region has undergone since the 1980s. Driven by a vision of regional economic integration, in 1975 sixteen West African countries formed the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which now serves as an umbrella organization for trade liberalization in the region. Countries in the Sahel abandoned the idea of national food self-sufficiency and opened up their borders and markets to international trade in the belief that market forces would ensure an adequate food supply. A major objective of ECOWAS was, and continues to be, the creation of a common market, which is based on the elimination of all trade barriers between member states, adoption of a common external tariff, and a common trade policy vis-à-vis third countries.

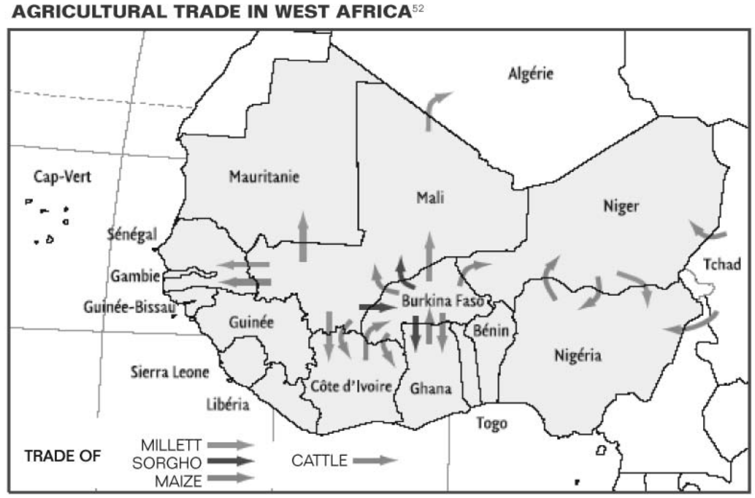
There is a rationale for promoting regional trade and integration in a region like the Sahel. The region has poor transport infrastructure and remote areas are often more easily accessed by crossing through from a neighboring country. One must also remember that borders in the region were drawn in the last century by the British and French colonial powers, with no consideration given to actual territory occupied by ethnic groups, seasonal migration, and trade patterns—nor to the viability of the newborn countries in terms of food self-sufficiency. Thus, it was argued that it would be more logical and cost-effective to develop North-South trade between Sahelian and Coastal countries, rather than create centralized structures to manage agricultural trade within each nation. In the case of Niger, the long border with Nigeria and the strong ethnic and familial ties across the border make it logical to let trade flow between the two countries. The union also made sense because it permits a common regional policy on trade and tariffs. The regional agreement was based on the model of what the European Union had achieved in the 1960s and 1970s, in the hopes that it could protect the regional markets and strengthen agricultural production and productivity.

The integration has come a long way and today Sahelian countries can no longer be considered distinct national markets. This has a direct impact on food availability in any given country, as supply is no longer determined by domestic production but rather by the regional food situation and trade flows. The problem is that these two elements are subject to high fluctuations, which renders the cereal markets in the Sahel very unstable.

INSTABILITY OF THE SAHELIAN CEREAL MARKETS

The Sahelian regional food trade depends on, and is influenced by, many factors:

AGRICULTURAL TRADE IN WEST AFRICA[52]



- Regional food production: production can fluctuate greatly from one year to the next because of various factors including rainfall, locusts, and levels of domestic or international support for production, such as the provision of seeds and fertilizers. Governmental policies such as opening or closing of borders to imports or exports, fiscal policy, and public purchases can vary from country to country, leading to high levels of fluctuation for the whole region.
- Exchange rates: transactions between Niger and Nigeria, for example, are very dependent on the variable exchange rate between the Naira and the CFA franc (XOF). In addition, purchases made outside the region in dollars are affected by the CFA franc being indexed to the euro. National and international prices of cereals: coastal countries in the region are open to both world and

Sahelian markets and import goods from countries outside of ECOWAS, therefore international cereal prices and the decisions of economic actors from different countries influence regional supply and demand.

- Conflict situations: when conflict situations, such as the problems in the Ivory Coast, both production and regional demand is influenced.
- International food aid flows: movement, actual or expected, of international food aid also affects regional availability of food and the decision making of economic actors.

The 2005 crisis in Niger highlighted the tragic limits and shortcomings of regional integration and market-based food security policy. As observed by the *Economist* "markets respond to demand not to needs."[53] Given the dependency of Niger on commercial imports of food, particularly from countries that have a more favorable rainfall pattern, such as Nigeria, it is in a vulnerable position. The closure of borders by Nigeria, following adoption of the policy of "isolating" its market and boosting domestic agriculture to supply the country's food needs, has often been put forward as the reason that prevented interregional trade from playing any role in weakening the food shocks that hit the region in the 2004–2005 season. Fewsnet explained the market mechanisms that led to the Niger crisis thus: "West African grain markets are generally working very well, and perhaps too well. The high cereal price levels found in the Sahel are being driven by strong demand for Sahelian cereal production, and greater purchasing power in coastal West African countries."[54]

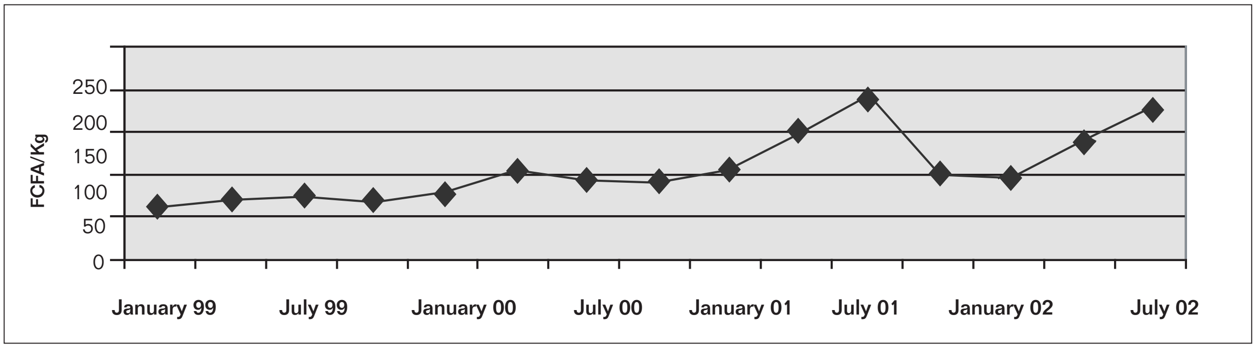
Another contributing factor was that Niger continued food exports in 2005—not only of traditional export commodities (cowpeas, onions, and cattle) but also cereals, such as rice—in spite of its food deficit.[55] The numerous factors influencing regional trade interact unpredictably and create instability in the regional market. This translates into uncertain availability and access to food commodities in Niger. There is actually no reason for regional trade to ensure an adequate supply in a country like Niger: if there is tension in the regional market, the poorest country in the region may not be able to compete with coastal countries that have higher purchasing powers. Furthermore, with Niger being a wide and landlocked country, there may be no incentive for any food dealer to import food if people can't afford to pay for it, especially given the higher price due to transport costs.

The regional integration implemented under ECOWAS has ensured the economic liberalization of the participating countries thus far, but has failed to produce any regulation mechanism that could ensure the stability of food prices and an adequate distribution of food supplies in the region. If the current conditions continue, it is very likely that a crisis similar to that of 2005 will occur again in the near future. Given what we know about demographic growth and increasing food needs in Niger, one can expect that future crises will have more severe consequences for the population.

CEREAL PRICES INCREASINGLY VOLATILE AND RISING IN THE LONG RUN

The instability of the cereal market and the lack of a regional regulation mechanism results in highly volatile food prices. As a matter of fact, cereal prices in Niger have followed the same trends as in most developing countries over the past decades: economic liberalization has resulted in both a long term rise in cereal prices and, as chart 7 illustrates, cereal prices have become excessively volatile.[56] Prices increase in the months following the harvest and often exceed the prices at harvest time by two or three times. The 2005 crisis was, to a large extent, due to high inflation in a relatively bad agricultural year.

CHART 7: MARKET PRICES IN TCHADOUA, 1999-2002



The problem is not solely volatility from season to season; beyond the high seasonal variations, cereal prices have been steadily rising since 1990: prices from 2000 to 2004 were between 90 to 130 percent higher than prices between 1990 and 1994, and 10 to 25 percent higher than prices from 1995 to 1999.[57] This increase follows the international trend of rising cereal prices over the long-term, but is also due to local factors that are specific to the region. The increased specialization of certain countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali, in cotton and other nonfood cash crops has increased tension in the regional cereal market by reducing land availability for cereals and increasing cereal import needs of the concerned countries. Another effect of this cash crop specialization is that it reduces cereal-trading opportunities between neighbors, resulting in an increase of imports from outside the area to meet domestic needs. For a landlocked country like Niger, this leads to higher costs.

High cereal prices are not necessarily bad for a population that is largely involved in agricultural production. One could expect that farmers would directly benefit from price escalation through an increase of their income. Unfortunately, only a minority of farmers actually profit from the price hikes. Two characteristics of Niger explain this pattern: the national markets are dominated by an oligopoly of big traders and poor households in Niger are predominantly net cereal buyers and are therefore adversely affected by inflation. We look at these two features in the following sections.

A FOOD MARKET DOMINATED BY AN OLIGOPOLY OF BIG TRADERS

In 2002, the governments of several Sahelian countries sought to take advantage of good national harvests and a favorable price situation to replenish their national grain reserves.

Unfortunately, none of them was able to rebuild the stocks as planned: Burkina Faso obtained only 4,664 tons out of the planned 21,000; Mali collected only 5,000 tons instead of the 14,000 tons sought; and Niger sought 25,000 tons but no purchases could be made.[58] Similarly, in 2005 the Nigerien government could not find the 30,000 tons of cereals required to replenish the national reserve, although large quantities of food were being kept in private stocks in the country or even exported.[59] It was obviously more profitable for traders to wait a few months in order to sell at high prices—2 or 3 times the purchase price paid to farmers—rather than sell to the government early in the year. As reported by several researchers, "The large traders fix national prices, taking into account the availability or the scarcity in the markets.... Besides, they ensure most of the financing of the marketing of grains and most of the storage. It is therefore at their level that the general orientation of cereal flows is decided, within the country and beyond its borders."

> The big traders in Maradi, the Alhazai, still have dependents in the large rural villages of the district, who buy cereals on their behalf. They also have agents in the bush markets, or purchase directly from the farmers. That is the way the rich alhazai of Maradi, control the market from the city to the most remote bush villages. [...]
>
> The big Nigerien traders are like European or Asian multinational grain trading firms. [...] Certain traders are not just operating in Niger alone, but are also present in other countries to the point that they constitute the West-African grain trading multinationals.[61]

Under the regime of President Kountché, in power from 1974 to 1987, public intervention minimized the speculative behaviors of the large traders. People still recall today how in times of food shortages and inflation, the President would use the national security forces to open traders' warehouses and force them to sell at the prices fixed by the government. With the adoption of economic liberalization policies, traders are now operating freely in a market where they do what they are designed to do: optimize their profits. This affects not only the ability of governments to purchase food and run safety net interventions, but also the income and purchasing power of farmers and food deficit households.

A FREE MARKET FAMINE

The majority of Nigerien households face a chronic cereal deficit and rely on the market for food supplies. Each household, whether composed of small land-holders, pastoralists, or urban populations, suffers when cereal prices rise.

- *Farmers involved in cash cropping, farm workers, and small scale farmers* who are unable to produce enough food to cover their food needs are the most adversely affected by high market prices. The latter usually need to sell a significant part of their production immediately after the harvest in order to pay taxes and to finance various expenses including school, family costs, and repay debt. This early sale of crops leaves them with poor returns because, as mentioned earlier, prices at harvest time can be up to three to four times less than a few months later.

The situation is compounded by the loan repayment system in the southern region: during the lean season, farmers are forced to borrow grain from traders to meet their needs. The loans are monetarily valued at the prevailing market rate at that time, that is, when prices are at their peak. At harvest time, the loans are paid back in-kind, but the grain has a lower market value after the harvest. As a result, farmers may have to repay several times more grain than was originally received, leaving them with ever rising debt.[62]

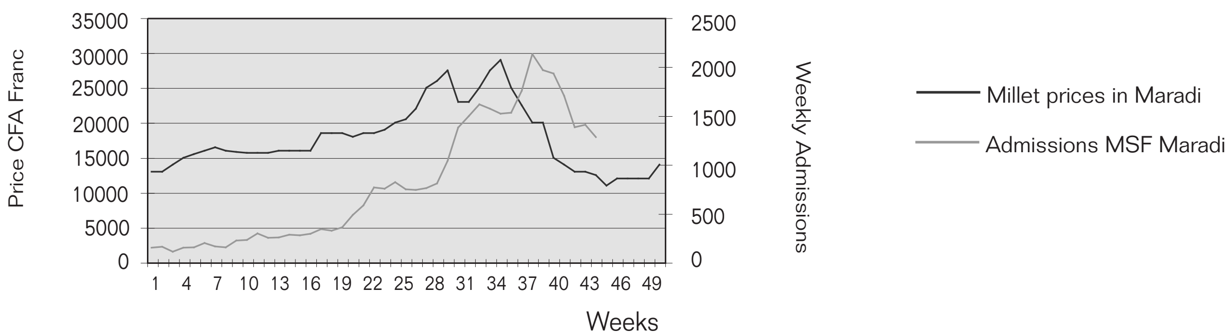
The combination of these two factors—the pressure to sell grain to traders when prices are at their lowest and the need to borrow grain from them when prices are at their highest—explains why the well-watered southern districts, which constitute the breadbasket of the country, suffer the most in terms of malnutrition. The most densely populated districts in Niger are characterized by small landholdings, specialization in cash crops for exports to Nigeria, and the strong presence of traders. Interestingly, for an organization that usually champions the positive role of market forces, USAID sees the market as the main cause of malnutrition: "Curiously, one of the principal reasons may have been the area's cash economy and market orientation, key features of its relative wealth. Many of the poorer farmers cannot compete in this arena, and have had to sell their land and become wage laborers on cash-crop farms." [63]

- *Pastoral and agro-pastoral populations* use income from livestock sales to purchase cereals. They are also vulnerable to high cereal prices because they usually produce limited amounts of cereals and depend largely on the market for their food supplies. High cereal prices mean the degradation of the terms of trade: for example, in the pastoral zone of Dakoro, the price of a cow in 2005 was 40 percent less than it was the previous year. At the same time, cereal prices were more than 45 percent higher than they were in 2004. As a result, by selling one cow pastoral and agro-pastoral households were able to buy only 20 percent of the grain they could obtain a year earlier. In other words, a household would have to sell five cows to get the same amount of cereals that one cow would normally secure. This is beyond the means of the majority of pastoral and agro-pastoral households.[64]

- *Urban consumers* are impacted by price increases because it reduces their purchasing power and heightens food insecurity problems. An indirect effect is the reduction of remittance flows to rural areas from urban residents, who have already been affected by the reduction in public employment. A compounding pressure on urban households came in March 2005 when the IMF and the Nigerien government decided to increase the value added tax (VAT) to 19 percent on basic products such as sugar, flour, and milk as part of on-going efforts to generate income. This measure faced strong public resistance and had to be cancelled later on.

Chart 8 shows the astonishing correlation between levels of malnutrition and food prices. The two graphs are almost identical, five weeks apart. High food prices reduce people's access to food and directly trigger malnutrition and death.

CHART 8: MILLET PRICES AND ADMISSIONS, MARADI



source= MSF France in Humanitarian Exchange, Number 33, March 2006, page 21

Malnutrition leading to death is not the only effect of high food prices. Reduction in non-food expenditures (for example, health and education); migration; and the sale of livestock, capital goods, or land in order to meet food needs also jeopardizes the future of the population and drives more people into poverty and landlessness. According to a WFP study published in October 2005, in the most affected regions such as Tahoua and Maradi, 7 percent and 8 percent of the households, respectively, had to sell their land in the previous six months in order to buy food. The same pattern, found in 3 percent of the households in the other regions, is very alarming because it indicates the path of no return for many small-scale farmers.[66] In this deadly spiral, the landless farmers then have to work for others and depend exclusively on the market for their food supply.

LIMITING RELIEF ASSISTANCE "TO PROTECT MARKETS"

A second insidious impact of liberalization policies relates to the free market spirit that dominates the international relief responses. During the Niger crisis, advocates of neoliberalism supported relief interventions that were limited, in order to protect markets. The argument being that large volumes of "free" food aid would disrupt the natural flow of market forces in the region.

Fewsnet, the USAID funded agency, criticized "the heavy and sensational media attention" on the crisis and warned that "more resources will be made available to treat the problem [which] may actually impede the market in delivering lower cost food to those who need it most."[68]

Certain analysts went further and blamed NGO and media campaigns focusing the world's attention on the Niger food crisis for the rise in prices in 2005. "The media campaign run by MSF had a negative impact on markets by suggesting a serious food crisis. Everybody 'barricaded oneself in' [through closure of borders or hoarding by producers and traders]."[69]

NGOs, specifically MSF, faced severe criticism for their actions in 2005. It's much like shooting the messenger who brings bad news: MSF went public with their call for help because of the sharp rise in malnutrition they witnessed in early 2005, but this was seen by some, including the key donors, as a cause of the crisis. Yet, as seen earlier, not only have market forces proven to be ineffective in addressing food insecurity, but they also play a major role in compounding food problems for the poor. We must recall that without the NGO alert, which triggered an international response, and the massive interventions run by NGOs – a large number of children would not have survived.

IN EARLY JUNE, AT A MEETING OF THE JOINT COMMISSION FOR CONSULTATION––THE DECISION-MAKING BODY WORKING ON AN "ACTION PLAN" THAT INCLUDES REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE AND INSTITUTIONAL DONORS––THE GOVERNMENT OF NIGER DECLARED THAT DESPITE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE FOOD CRISIS, IT WOULD NOT SET UP ANY FREE DISTRIBUTION OPERATIONS. THE ONLY POLITICAL REACTION FROM THE INSTITUTIONAL DONORS CAME FROM THE AMBASSADOR OF FRANCE, WHO WAS GLAD THAT THERE WAS A "POLICY THAT WILL NOT DESTABILIZE THE MARKETS." THE AMBIENCE WAS ALMOST SURREAL: IGNORING THE EMERGENCY FOOD SITUATION, ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS WERE, WITHOUT HESITATION, GIVEN PRIORITY OVER THE FATE OF ENDANGERED PEOPLE.[67]

CAPTIVES OF THE MARKET

Opening up the borders and liberalizing the markets of sixteen West African countries through ECOWAS was intended to ensure an adequate food supply in the region. This close examination finds that while ECOWAS resulted in economic liberalization of the West African countries, it failed to produce a regulatory mechanism that could ensure the stability of food prices and adequate distribution throughout the region. Countries have specialized in certain agricultural products that they can export, and use their export earnings to import agricultural products that they need. However, this reliance on export income to purchase vital, basic goods has left countries like Niger particularly vulnerable to the high fluctuations in regional food production, changing exchange rates, the rising price of cereals, and conflicts that have destabilized the cereal markets in the region. In a market-led system, only those who have adequate purchasing power have access to food. Niger has the least purchasing power of any country in the region, thus, in lean years, there is little incentive for big traders to serve the country's market. This disadvantage is compounded by the fact that with the withdrawal of state intervention control of the food trade has fallen to a handful of big traders whose sole interest is to further their profits.

High food prices have not only put food beyond the reach of the poor, but left few resources for non-food expenditures such as health and education. Resulting sales of livestock, and in some cases, even land, are compounding the problems, and further jeopardize the future of the population.

PART III:
Development Policies in Question

Niger is a classic Least Developed Country (LDC) in that, since the end of formal colonialism, it has been subjected to a parade of development experts, financial advisers, international financial institutions, NGOs, and foreign aid missions. Yet, in spite of all this advice, expertise, and assistance the country continues to suffer from chronic hunger and was plunged into a one of its worst food crisis in 2005.

This, however, should come as no surprise. Fifteen years ago, the French agronomist Marcelle Genné published *Le Niger, Autosuffisance Alimentaire ou Famine en l'An 2000* (Niger: Food self-sufficiency or Famine in 2000).[70] After analyzing demographic and agricultural trends, Genné predicted that Niger's agricultural sector would saturate the land available and would soon be unable to grow enough food for its population. Genné concluded that without drastic policy shifts the population would experience dreadful famines by 2000. The international community was made aware fifteen years ago of the trends that have since precipitated many Nigeriens' descent into poverty, destitution, and hunger. This section examines how development policies have failed to counteract—and in some cases have exacerbated—these trends.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

In the 1960s and 1970s, Niger's public policy was marked by strong State intervention in all sectors of the economy, with the rural sector prioritized in national economic policies. A number of dedicated institutional structures were created for the promotion of the agrarian sector, with the overall objective of achieving national food self-sufficiency. While the country successfully increased food production, the outcome of this policy was mixed, partly because it relied heavily on income from uranium exports, which collapsed in the early 1980s. This recession marked the beginning of a deep economic crisis, which resulted in a significant national deficit and a growing national debt.

Faced with unprecedented levels of poverty and spiraling debt, the government abandoned the principle of national food self-sufficiency and hoped that regional trade and market liberalization would ensure food security. In addition, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs), a principle condition of loans from the World Bank implemented since the early 1980s, mandated the withdrawal of State intervention in all economic and social sectors. The logic being that the private sector would take over the productive sectors, which would in turn boost economic growth, thanks to higher investment and better productivity. The supposition that private sector would yield economic growth that would pull the country out of poverty proved to be a false promise. Between 1975 and 1994, the country's real GDP only grew by 1.7 percent, which, given the demographic growth of 3.3 percent, resulted in a decrease of real GDP per capita by 2.2 percent per year.[71] The acceleration of the privatization program in the 1990s was intended to boost economic growth and economists projected growth rates would reach 4.5 percent. These phenomenal rates did not materialize, however, and growth averaged only 2 percent during the period between 1990 and 2000.[72]

These economic reforms not only failed to achieve economic growth, they also did not deliver the economic benefits that were supposed to bring development and fight poverty. In fact, several United Nations reports highlight how the economic reforms damaged the economy and people's livelihoods. According to the UNDP, the withdrawal of the State from the industrial sector did not lead to the expected take over by private sector companies. Private investments in the industrial sector have remained limited even though all industrial units have been restructured, privatized, or simply liquidated in order to facilitate privatization. Meanwhile, in agriculture, the removal of State intervention has led to the expansion of the informal sector, the removal of agricultural loans, a reduction of public support to farmers, a decrease in the use of agricultural inputs, and consequently a decrease in agricultural yields.[73]

Jean Ziegler, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, detailed the consequences of the privatization on agriculture, trade and social safety nets this way:

> The IMF imposes draconian adjustment in the agricultural sector. Niger has wealth of 20 million head of cattle, sheep, and camels, which are historically much sought after and exported widely. The animals constitute essential revenue for millions of nomads and peasants. But the privatization of the national veterinary office has produced disaster: these people can no longer afford the prices of vaccinations, medicines, and vitamins charged by the commercial traders. Although there are still veterinary assistants, they are far from covering the need in Niger, and people are required to pay not only for their services, but also for their transport, which, given the inadequacies of the transport network in Niger, is extremely costly.
>
> Now, the privatization of the transport section of the OPVN (*Office des Produits Vivriers du Niger*) is slated and may also prove a disaster. OPVN trucks transport emergency food and seeds in times of famine, but after privatization, companies operating under the logic of the market will not venture into the remote areas on bad roads. Result: many villages risk not receiving any help. A final example: under adjustment, there is no longer a central laboratory to issue health certificates for animals as demanded under the rules of the World Trade Organization. Without certificates, buyers force the prices of the animals on the market lower, leaving pastoralists and farmers even poorer.[74]

After 20 years of SAPs, the Nigerien government and the World Bank acknowledged that neoliberal policies failed to prevent the spread of poverty and hunger. A Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) published in January 2002 outlined a new program that was supposed to put a stronger emphasis on the reduction of poverty.[75] This new strategy reshuffled some resources towards health and education, but still did not break away from the baseline policy of economic liberalization. It is important to look at two key aspects of the PRSP strategy: the minimalist State role in the prevention and mitigation of food crises and the prioritization of commercial agriculture.

A MINIMALIST SYSTEM TO PREVENT AND MITIGATE FOOD CRISES

In the early 1980s, the population of Niger was 6 million, half of the current population. At that time, the governmental food reserves oscillated between 100,000 and 160,000 tons.[76] The reserve was used in combination with a policy of price control in order to stabilize the market. Such interventions aimed to guarantee a minimum income for farmers and affordable food prices for consumers.

The purpose of the national reserve has been changed and is now geared toward the mitigation of occasional and localized food insecurity. Although the population has doubled since 1980, the reserve stock is still set at 110,000 tons, barely enough to provide food for 20 percent of the population for 3 months. This amount only represents 14 days of national food consumption, which is insufficient to influence markets.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As mentioned above by Ziegler, the withdrawal of the State from agriculture and industry affected the social safety net and aid systems in Niger. Structural adjustments removed the OPVN's function as a safety net and regulator of the market. Under the SAPs and subsequent minor policy shifts under the PRSP, the office's role was restricted to the management of an emergency reserve that was only to be used to tackle temporary food insecurity in times of scarcity.

Under the Food Aid Charter that sets the terms of food assistance in the Sahel, the Nigerien government made a commitment "to only distribute free food in case of emergency or to assist specific vulnerable groups, and to commercialize food aid in order to not undermine national market prices."[77] Prioritizing the sale (as opposed to free distribution) of food aid recognizes the potentially harmful effect of food aid on farmers' livelihoods. The aid system has been shaped in a way that gives the State and rural communities a key role in the design and management of relief and development activities. This approach promotes the sustainability of the system and supports the country's sovereignty; it uses different tools adapted for different populations and levels of vulnerability: subsidized sales and cereal banks are intended to benefit the whole population in a given community, whereas labor intensive activities are supposed to target the most vulnerable and destitute people.

However, the 2005 food crisis highlighted the limits of the system. The instability of the cereal market, as seen earlier, combined with the fact that there is no longer any mechanism to regulate market forces and stabilize food prices deepened the nature of the disaster. Moreover, serious discrepancies appeared between the limited capacity of the market-oriented system and the actual needs of the population. One must keep in mind that poverty affects more than 63 percent of the population of Niger, and more than 30 percent live in extreme poverty. Given these rates, the food shortages and the high price increases in 2005 affected the majority of the population for a large part of the year, not only 20 percent for three months that the reserves would have covered. Secondly, as argued by MSF in 2005, prioritizing subsidized sales excludes the poorest people—those who cannot afford to buy food, even below the market prices—from receiving assistance. In 2005, food was sold by the Nigerien government at half the market price—XOF 10,000 for a 100 kilogram bag of millet—but this was still above the means of those who were most in need.[78]

Cereal banks and warrantage system constitute an alternative to the safety net role that the OPVN used to play. In theory, they are a decentralized system of food management intended to protect farmers and consumers against market fluctuations. Cereal banks buy grain from farmers at the harvest time, when prices are low and the food is stored until the lean season comes, bringing with it higher prices. The food is then sold below market prices, but with a margin to cover management costs and future purchases. The warrantage system, initiated in 1999 in Niger, provides a similar function but is operated by farmer groups and offers credit to farmers. The farmers sell the food at harvest time which is then kept in storage and sold a few months later, when prices are higher. Farmers then obtain the additional revenue generated. However, these institutions have proven to be fragile and vulnerable to market fluctuations. Their effectiveness is limited by lack of cash flow which has constrained their expansion so far. If this weakness was overcome through a State guarantee or other support mechanisms, a crisis like the one experienced in 2005 could be averted.

Food-for-Work programs are meant to complement the subsidized sales of grain by offering free food or cash to the poorest in exchange for work (for example reforestation and road maintenance projects). However, the participation in these programs is usually very low. For instance, prior to 2005, the WFP country program used 5,500 tons of food per year for 200,000 beneficiaries (that is, 27 kilograms per person, equivalent to one month's food requirement). In 2005, the governmental emergency plan had planned 8,100 tons of food and $810,000 of cash for these programs, which was still far below the requirement necessary to fight malnutrition.

The philosophy of the "market-based" aid system in Niger is far too minimalist to adequately prevent crises. Moreover, the cereal banks, warrantage, and Food-For Work programs are all designed to deal with temporary and localized food insecurity and ignore the fact that the majority of the Nigerien population suffers from long-term, chronic hunger. The UNDP summarizes this discrepancy between the minimalist aid system and the extent of people's needs in Niger thus: "it must be emphasized that the International Development Goals (IDG) are situated within the framework of the market economy, which, by definition, applies the principle of exclusion by price, which means 'who does not pay, does not have.' One may then question whether the fight against poverty is compatible with the growing integration of the Nigerien economy within the international economy?"[79]

COMMERCIAL VERSUS SUBSISTANCE AGRICULTURE

Whereas the SAPs concentrated largely on privatization and reduction of public expenditures, the PRSP focuses on the development of agriculture and trade, with a priority "to seek to minimize if not break with the dependence of rural production [...] on the highly uncertain rainfall cycle."[80] The main areas of intervention include the development of irrigation and transport infrastructures to facilitate access to regional and international markets.

In September 2005, Nigerien Prime Minister Hama Amadou declared that Nigerien farmers had to open themselves to modernity in order to avoid similar food crises in the future: "the rural world must change mentality; we need to stop depending on rain fall. [...] We must modernize agriculture and develop irrigable land." He added that the Niger River offers much irrigable land, which, if exploited, could produce more than 300,000 tons of food every year.[82] Yet 300,000 tons would cover merely the needs of the additional population of Niger over the next three years. Developing irrigation might be necessary, but it is not sufficient to address the problem of recurrent national food deficits. As a matter of fact, given current trends, the country might never again see a food surplus. Given that food deficits are projected to exceed one million tons a few years from now, the development of irrigation constitutes a minor part of the solution.

WORLD BANK INVESTMENT OPERATIONS UNDER IMPLEMENTATION IN 2003

PROJECTS UNDER IMPLEMENTATION	COMMITMENT AMOUNT ($ MILLIONS)	SHARE (PERCENT)
Privatization	18.60	9.13
Transport Infrastructures	28.00	13.75
Urban Infrastructures	20.00	9.82
Health	40.00	19.64
Water	48.00	23.57
Private Irrigation	38.72	19.01
Agro-pastoral Export Promotion	10.35	5.08
Total	**203.67**	**100.00**

As shown in the table World Bank Investment Operations Under Implementation in 2003, the World Bank gives absolute priority in its lending to export-oriented agriculture. This strategy overlooks the rural development and productivity increases that could be gained through the development of agro-forestry and by supporting subsistence farming. The exclusive focus on commercial, export-oriented agriculture—large-scale irrigation projects, for example—primarily benefits a minority of well-off, large-scale farmers located in a narrow strip of irrigable land along the Niger River. It does not bring much hope for the majority of small-scale subsistence farmers who form the majority of Nigeriens and who face shrinking access to land and decreasing soil fertility.

For decades, development specialists have prescribed agro-forestry as an effective way to fight desertification, maintain soil fertility, and provide alternative sources of food and income to people in Sahelian countries like Niger.[83] Agro-forestry and traditional crops can provide year-long access to perennial sources of food and income. The use of drought-tolerant fruit-bearing trees and bushes can constitute a critical component of food security, irrespective of rainfall. As a matter of fact, the Eden Foundation, an NGO involved in agro-forestry in the Southeast and Northern parts of Niger since 1987, reports that while farmers in their projects had a tough year and there was some malnutrition, the difference between 2005 and other years was not dramatic. Child mortality increased slightly, but people were able to obtain food despite the failed millet harvest.[84]

Yet funding for this kind of activity remains limited, for a number of reasons:

- *The need for long-term investment.* Investment in agro-forestry and subsistence farming does not fit into the typical donor funding cycle, the electoral mandate of politicians, nor the placement terms of development workers. For example, trees planted in the Sahel require 10 to 15 years before they can bear fruit.
- *The lack of market-orientation.* Agro-forestry and subsistence farming are based on diversified production and conservation of soil fertility. These activities are not cash- or market-oriented and thus do not fit into the dominant vision of development, which is focused on economic growth and the creation of monetary value.
- *Growing demand for imported products.* Imported crops, especially the main cereals, are often perceived as having higher nutritional and social value, which results in more people cultivating commercial crops that will provide them with the income necessary for the purchase of imported food. Food aid programs and the work of certain development agencies have contributed to spreading this perception and changing food habits.

These factors underlie the lack of investment in development strategies that would support small-scale family farmers in the long-term. Instead, the main lending agencies, and thus the Nigerien government, encourage the development of commercial agriculture that is geared toward the production of marketable crops rather than meeting people's food needs.

DEVELOPMENT FUNDING AS VIEWED BY JOSEF GARVI OF EDEN FOUNDATION, ZINDER, NIGER[85]

All in all, we have noticed the following stumbling blocks when it comes to funding:

Most people do not understand the need for the type of long-term commitment required to work with trees and bushes in drylands. The longest project periods last five years. This is a third of the time needed for some of our species to give their first decent harvests.

You are expected to report tangible results after each year of exercise. The tangible results we register in terms of produce harvests these years are based on foundations laid ten years ago. A growing tree seedling is not a final result; it is only a promise of one.

Donor priorities are very much fashion-based, and very much tied to politics. Thus, even when we do convince a foundation, priorities will be changed before long. Political events create new conditions overnight, and many development policies have a political message that is pushed through.

The trends and types of work are often decided in donors' offices high up and far away.

Most UN and national donors think in similar ways as Western Governments: industrialized agriculture. There is little real understanding for the importance of working with natural methods, without irrigation and without fertilizers. Agriculture is often seen as a separate issue from environmental concerns, whilst we believe they are intrinsically linked.

Niger has always been a country that received little international attention and assistance.

Today, we are funded exclusively by private donors. Certainly, better funding could make important improvements in the impact of our work, both by scaling up our research and our extension work.

We were very disappointed by the conclusions drawn after Kofi Annan's visit to Zinder. The UN recognized the need for long-term work, but could only suggest industrialized farming as solution (irrigation, machines, and so on). In a country where the Niger River is shrinking, the Chad Sea has all but disappeared, and the abundant ground water (the water that doesn't dry out in the dry season) is not very accessible—and above all, nonrenewable—the question is, how long is industrial agriculture sustainable, and what additional environmental disasters will it bring? Maybe we will achieve the millennium development goals only to have a total collapse a decade later. Niger's last hundred years are already a huge environmental tragedy, and we need to develop the country without aggravating the crisis.

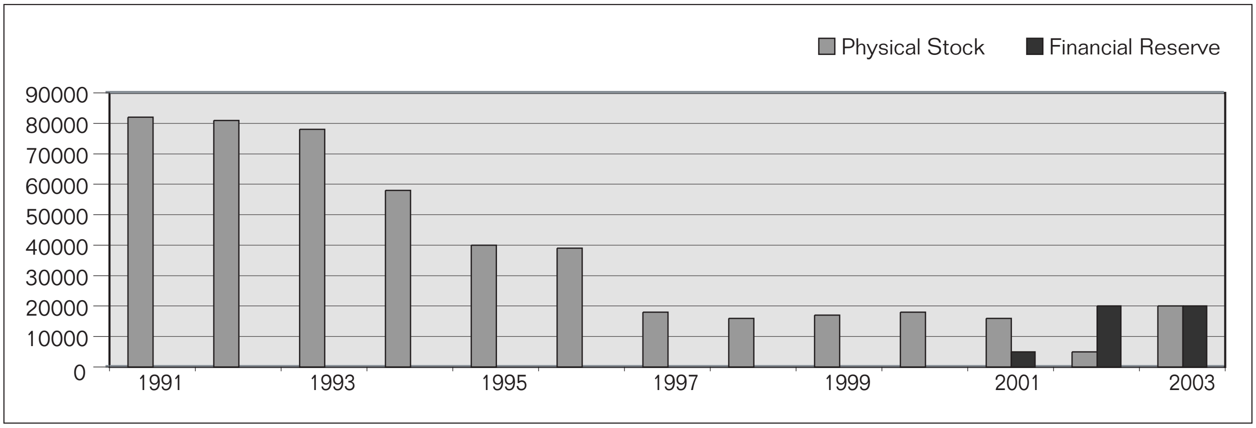
FALLING SHORT ON RESOURCES

Niger is 177th out of 177 countries ranked by the UN poverty index. In a consistent and rational system of international development assistance, Niger should be among the top recipients of international aid. This is far from the case; despite a per capita income of $28.04 per year, it is the 71st recipient in terms of international economic aid.[86] This places Niger far behind the first recipient, the Marshall Islands, whose population receives $16,928.80 per person (600 times more than Niger), or Iraq, with $1,265.58 per person (45 times more).

The national system of prevention and mitigation of food crises has been continuously underfunded in the past years, with donors generally reluctant to replenish the food reserve. Contrary to common sense, Niger does not receive resources to purchase food for the reserve in times of good harvest when prices are low and quantities are available. The country has to wait for a bad year, and must wait until several months after the harvest, to purchase the commodities in an already tense market. Consequently, purchases are not only made when prices are high but also compound the tension in the market by contributing to price increases.

The national reserve is supposed to be 110,000 tons (which is insufficient to meet the needs of the country), but over the past eight years actual stocks have never exceeded 20,000 tons. Whether this is due to insufficient funding or inadequate allocation of development assistance is debatable: the government of the poorest country in the world, which depends on external funding for more than 50 percent of its revenue, must obviously manage scarcity and prioritize the limited funding received in one way or another.

CHART 9: NATIONAL FOOD RESERVE SINCE 1991-2003 [87]



According to international standards,[88] even in a "normal" year, the food and nutrition situation in Niger is so serious that it should justify massive assistance. This assistance was justified before 2005, and according to current demographic, economic, and agricultural trends, it will become more and more necessary in the years to come. Unfortunately, despite the country's complete dependence on foreign assistance, aid to Niger has never reached the level required to really fight malnutrition and poverty in a systemic way. According to the Nigerien Prime Minister, Niger would need four times more international assistance to achieve the International Development Goals. Given that the country already depends on donors' funding for more than half of its national budget, such an increase would mean that donors would be contributing some 80 percent of the budget requirement.

Even though the PRSP was supposed to have a stronger focus on health than the SAPs, the lack of adequate resources continues to limit access to health care. The World Bank has helped finance the construction of health centers but only on the condition of a cost recovery system, which makes access to health services unaffordable to the poorest. The problem is obviously more acute in a period of high food prices, when poor households have to choose between food and health care.

In spite of endemic high levels of malnutrition, the Ministry of Health's budget does not make any provision for the treatment of malnutrition and the national plan for health 2006-2008 only allocated 1.4 million Euros (some $1.7 million) per year to nutrition. This amount only allows for surveillance activities and preventive measures such as education. Yet, there are at least 350,000 children under five suffering from acute malnutrition and requiring specific nutritional assistance in Niger.[90] MSF alone spent more than 20 million Euros (over $25 million) treating around 170,000 malnourished children in 2005.[91]

The way the international community dealt with the 2005 food crisis in Niger highlights the prevailing tendency towards inconsistent and short-sighted attention to issues of hunger and poverty. It is only when the media

"I have no money," said [the] young mother, Rabi, adding that even if she could manage the XOF 700 (about $1.50) it costs just to enter a health center, she could never afford the additional fees for a consultation and medicines. Predictably, Aboubakar's condition worsened, and he slipped into a state of severe malnutrition. When he arrived at the MSF feeding center in nearby Aguile in early August, he was on the brink of death. [89]

focused world attention on the starving children in Niger that most international donors began to show interest—ten months after the government's first calls for assistance. Taking advantage of this dramatic moment, many world leaders seized the opportunity to highlight their response to the emergency as an example of how they are truly tackling problems of hunger and poverty.[92] Yet, as we have seen, what Niger actually needed then and still needs is not one-time emergency funding, but continued support to develop systemic solutions to chronic poverty.

BLIND "DEVELOPMENT" POLICIES

A review of the history of development in Niger reads much like a series of repeated mistakes, raising questions not only about the planning of the programs, but about their management. As illustrated by their exclusive focus on commercial farming and irrigation, the design of SAPs and programs under the PRSP appear to be driven more by "one-size-fits-all" ideology than by a comprehensive analysis of development issues in Niger. For example, in spite of the failure of the SAPs to generate GDP growth, the 2002 PRSP's baseline scenario was again ambitious, foreseeing an average growth rate of 4 percent a year for real GDP for 2001 through 2005.[93] For the period between 2001 and 2004, the real GDP growth rate was again below the declared ambitions of the reforms, reaching 3 percent on average.[94] In spite of this recent failure to achieve the economic goals, international financial institutions continue with the same projections. In September 2005 the African Development Bank made a fresh loan through the 5th Structural Adjustment Program for Niger, indicating that the new reforms will "consolidate the macro-economic stability," and allow a GDP growth rate of 4.2 percent.[95]

> MALNUTRITION WAS CONSIDERED "NORMAL" IN NIGER, TO THE EXTENT THAT NO ONE BOTHERED TO COUNT THE VICTIMS.[99]

Even with these ambitious objectives, the targets of the PRSP are below the International Development Goals (IDGs) set for 2015. The reduction of income poverty incidence, for example, is limited to 20 percent by 2015 in the best scenario, compared to the IDG target of 50 percent reduction. The World Bank interprets this as the Nigerien government's pragmatism of taking into account "Niger's very limited human and natural resources, the inertia in population growth, and the uncertainties surrounding economic growth prospects."[96] In the best-case scenario, which is very unlikely given past records, poverty in Niger would go down from 63 percent in 1994 to 48 percent in 2015. According to the UNDP, the 4 percent growth rate in the PRSP "cannot ensure the desired increase of per capita income. In this regard, the rate should be at least 7 percent in order to resolutely engage the country in the path of poverty reduction."[97] We already know that this plan cannot reverse the tide of impoverishment and hunger.

The control of public expenditures, a fundamental policy that has characterized all of Niger's development policies over the past decades, must be considered in light of the fact that nearly half of the governments' budget is paid for by international donors who also dictate its development policies. Consequently, public expenditures—including those related to nutrition, health, and food security—depend to a great extent on donors' good will. As indicated earlier, despite 350,000 malnourished children under five in need of specific nutritional care, the national health plan for 2003 to 2006 was designed without any provision for nutritional treatment. By international standards, 2005 was an emergency situation, requiring massive assistance for millions of Nigeriens.[98] This need remains the case even today, with nearly 4 million living in extreme poverty.

The fact that treating malnourished children was not included in the budget actually helps clarify the confusing debate around the nature and the severity of the 2005 crisis that was described earlier. The so-called development policies implemented under SAPs and the PRSP and approved by the Nigerien government, donors, and international financial institutions accept as a given fact that millions of people will die of disease and starvation in the course of the implementation of these programs. This may explain why most donors were late to intervene and only reluctantly acted once pressure from NGOs, the media, and public outcry brought attention to the crisis in 2005. "This is normal for Niger" was actually often heard in debates around the 2005 food crisis. Yes, a choice has been made in Niger: in the all-important name of fiscal responsibility, the country manages its limited resources and controls public spending—even if it cost the life of tens of thousands of children every year. Why would it have been different in 2005?

PRESCRIBED FAILURE

Policies based on the ideology of economic liberalization forged by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, have forced Niger to withdraw state intervention from social and economic sectors. Over the last two decades these "development" policies have had a disastrous impact on Niger's industrial and agricultural sector and have led to the growth of the informal sector, removal of loans in the agricultural sector, and a decrease in public support available for farmers. Ignoring the reality on the ground, these policies have aggravated poverty and hunger in the country and have failed to benefit the Nigerien population.

Despite their failure, prescriptions for economic recovery continue to be tied to economic liberalization and withdrawal of state intervention in the social and economic arena, leaving the food supply in the hands of big traders and the free market. At the same time, despite being the world's poorest country, Niger receives minimal international economic aid. The national system created to prevent and mitigate food crises has been continuously underfunded and the country's health budget cannot meet the needs of the people. In fact, assistance to Niger has never reached the level required to fight endemic malnutrition and poverty in the country in a systemic and lasting way, leading one to believe that the international community has accepted the death of millions as the price to be paid for development policies.

THE SO-CALLED DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IMPLEMENTED UNDER SAPS AND THE PRSP AND APPROVED BY THE NIGERIEN GOVERNMENT, DONORS, AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS ACCEPT AS A GIVEN FACT THAT MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WILL DIE OF DISEASE AND STARVATION IN THE COURSE OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THESE PROGRAMS.

PART IV:
WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Various solutions to Niger's food insecurity have been proposed in the aftermath of the 2005 crisis. Some suggest that better early warning systems are the key to timely management of food shortages. Others propose that some form of government-led market regulation is the only systemic way address Niger's chronic poverty and food insecurity. This section examines both of these ideas in light of the current situation in the country and suggests ways forward.

IMPROVING EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS (EWS)?

Following the 2005 crisis, a number of analysts concluded that the early warning systems (EWS) needed to be upgraded and expanded at the national to regional level in order to avert another similar disaster. Their reasonable argument was that surveillance systems monitoring food production at a national level did not make sense anymore, given the current market mechanisms and the ubiquity of regional trade. However, given the number of factors at play in regional markets that are increasingly open and integrated, it is virtually impossible for any surveillance system to forecast national deficits by monitoring trade flows alone. Better forecasts only do so much good when, even in surplus years, inflation makes it impossible for the poorest households to buy food. The 2005 crisis, announced months in advance, showed that the problem was not the "alert" capacity but rather the prevention and response mechanisms.

The recent crisis has been described as a case of "free market famine."[100] The population of Niger is paying a tremendous cost for the economic liberalization of their country. The relationship between food prices and malnutrition, the effects of exports of food commodities in a deficit year, and speculation by a handful of traders dominating the national market are various facets of a crisis, which cannot be attributed to a single cause such as a drought or locust invasion. In this context, improving EWS seems derisory and absurd. The present national EWS was adapted to a closed economy. Given that West Africa has become a regional open market, the relevance and usefulness of this instrument deserves closer scrutiny.

MARKETS NEED REGULATION

There is a growing consensus that market mechanisms do not guarantee food security. As pointed out earlier, even the USAID, a strong promoter of free trade policies, has acknowledged in several publications the devastating impact of free market forces in Niger.[101] Having studied the functioning of markets in the Sahel, a number of renowned development specialists have reached the same conclusion as well, and recommend regulation of the markets: "[It is important] to not consider food security as strictly market related, but rather as a public good requiring—as the case may be—arbitration by the collectivity (the State) in the name of the public good. This arbitration must notably be sought out for the purpose of defining a range of "compromise prices" which serve as sufficient incentives for producers to consider cereals as "cash crops" and choose to invest in them over the long term, but not so much that it impedes answering the food needs of those households who rely on the market."[102]

Many analysts agree upon the need for a mechanism that would regulate the market, but what is lacking is the vision of how this system would be structured. The 2005 crisis illustrates how relief interventions can lessen the adverse effects of market mechanisms. But is this a role to be played by relief agencies and NGOs? If not, should the OPVN be given back its regulation role? Reinstating the OPVN's regulatory role raises a number of questions. The first centers on resources: Niger's budget would need a huge increase in order to maintain an infrastructure with staff, trucks, storage, and proper administration—far more than the government purchase of cereals. Recent years have showed donors' reluctance to finance public services. Structural adjustments illustrate how key donors actually promote the withdrawal of the State and free trade policies. Before addressing the issue of resources, an essential first step would be for financial institutions and key donors to acknowledge this need for regulation.

The other critical question is whether a national institution can be given a regulatory role in an open regional market. The European Common Agricultural Policy that supported and protected farmers was the uniting force used in the early stages of the union. This strong interventionist policy is still in place today, forty years after it was launched, and still protects the internal market and guarantees prices and farmers' incomes. However, economic liberalization was allowed to run amok in West Africa without any such system. The development of a regional agricultural market took place amid weak states and institutions, with an oligopoly of traders gaining control of the regional production and trade. Agribusinesses from industrialized countries also have a strong presence and interest in the West African market and influence the decision-making in that field. So, if regulation is not at the national level, is it possible through regional institutions?

IN APRIL 2006, THE ROPPA[104] CONGRESS "EXPRESSED ITS DEEP CONCERN WITH REGARD TO THE EXCESSIVE RUSH AND THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT NEGOTIATIONS. THE PROVISIONS UNDER DISCUSSION AT PRESENT BETWEEN THE EOWAS AND THE EU, BESIDES BEING IN CONTRADICTION WITH ECOWAP OBJECTIVES, EITHER FALL SHORT OF WTO RULES (ON RECIPROCITY) OR RADICALLY SURPASS THE LIBERALIZATION MEASURES INITIATED BY THE WTO AND THE MULTILATERAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN DEVELOPMENT."[105]

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN WEST AFRICA

Regional economic union makes sense given the particularities of West Africa: the borders that were designed by colonial powers are often inconsistent with seasonal migrations of pastoral herders, trade routes, and connections. Furthermore, in a globalized world dominated by a few economic superpowers, an economic union can strengthen the bargaining power of West African countries. Tariffs on imports from outside the region, support to regional agricultural production and regional preference for agricultural products can strengthen local production as happened in the 1960s with the Common Agricultural Policy in Europe.

Early in 2005, local farmer groups around the Sahel region celebrated the adoption of the principle of food sovereignty by West Africa within a common agricultural policy. The ECOWAS regional agricultural policy (ECOWAP) stated that its primary objective was to "guarantee food security in the West African rural and urban population ... in the context of an approach guaranteeing the food sovereignty of the region."[103] The policy was set to gradually rule out imports of food stuffs in favor of domestic products. Yet, one year later, in January 2006, these same groups received the news that a very liberal common external customs tariff (CCT) had been adopted for West Africa by ECOWAS. The CCT adopted in 2006 gives no protection to farmers and none of its import duties go beyond 20 percent (as compared to Japan which taxes imported rice at 500 percent, and Nigeria which taxes 100 percent). No industrialized country has been capable of developing its agriculture without protective barriers. However, African farmers have been left with no such protection.

Surprisingly, the West African heads of state decided not to use protective options offered by current WTO regulations on customs tariffs and special treatment measures for Least Developed Countries. The measures taken in early 2006 contradict the principle of food sovereignty adopted a year earlier and surpass the liberalization measures initiated by the WTO and the multilateral financial institutions.

The high level of dependency of countries like Niger on donors' support might partly explain this decision. For example, although France is not a coffee growing country, it is the primary supplier of coffee to Niger, and the second largest supplier of mineral water. Ivory Coast is France's main competitor for both commodities on the Nigerien market. Would France support an increase in tariffs, which is likely to result in the loss of its dominant business position?

As Maurice Oudet of the société des Missionnaires d'Afrique, has argued "Strong mobilization of farmers' organizations will definitely be necessary to give hope for a reversal of this situation!"[106] Achieving food sovereignty in West Africa requires real democracy allowing the voices of the poor to be heard. On the other hand, commitment and support from western donor countries—even at the expense of their own economic self-interest—is essential if the poor farmers of the Sahel are to have a chance at survival.

HOW TO BETTER PREVENT AND RESPOND TO FOOD CRISES

As long as no mechanism for market regulation is in place, the national system of prevention and mitigation of food crises will remain undersized and inappropriate. In the short term, its capacity could be greatly enhanced if it could simply maintain adequate quantities of food in reserve. This entails the cost of maintaining rolling stocks but is essential for the smooth running of the system. Logically, in order to address the 2005 crisis, the Nigerien government should have been able to purchase cereals during the 2003 harvest—when there was a 500,000 tons surplus—not at the end of 2004, a year of deficit. This did not happen, and, as a result, in early 2005 national reserves were not there to start the required interventions in a timely manner.

The way resources were used in Niger during the 2005 crisis also raises some serious concerns about the consistency and cost-effectiveness of the relief efforts. It took nearly 10 months for the international community to mobilize to assist Niger. Similar to what happens in many food crises situations (it was the case for Malawi in 2001-2002), most donors ignored the early call from the government; then, when they eventually decided to intervene, they did not channel their funding through the government but through UN agencies and international NGOs. Two parallel distribution systems, one governmental, mainly supported by France and the EU, the other international, supported by most of the other donors including the USA, were then put in place, raising obvious concerns of cost-effectiveness and duplication of efforts.

The late mobilization of donor countries and the change of strategy during the course of the crisis, compounded by the creation of two parallel delivery systems, indicate divergence within the international community with regard to which mode of response to prioritize. France and the EU were the chief architects, and remain ardent supporters, of the national system. Their approach is laudable in the sense that it tends to leave the responsibility of prevention and management of food crises to Nigeriens and intends to limit imported food aid, which can flood the market and adversely impact local agriculture. But these good intentions have proven to be far from sufficient in the face of the severity of a crisis of the magnitude experienced in 2005. The government response did not avert widespread malnutrition, illustrating the limits of a minimalist and underfunded system.

Malnutrition has long been considered endemic to the Sahel region and in this report we have seen that, for many, endemic means that malnutrition in this part of the world is unavoidable. Ten years before the 2015 target date, we saw that the joint donors and Nigerien government's plans did not expect to achieve the International Development Goals for nutrition. The governments' budget and policy strategy do not even include the treatment of malnutrition as a budget item.

Yet, the 2005 crisis has shown that large numbers of malnourished children can be saved by timely interventions. Never in any other famine or food crisis have anywhere close to this many malnourished children been treated and saved. Similar to what has happened in the past decade with the evolution of Anti-Retroviral (ARV) treatments and protocols for HIV/AIDS, the recent development of special therapeutic food and the evolution of nutritional protocols that allow take-home rations have shown that the treatment of malnutrition on a large scale is possible in the Sahel. It is also very clear that this is neither sustainable nor the best long-term solution for children affected primarily by poverty and an ill-conceived economic system. It does demonstrate, however, that malnutrition and child mortality are not inevitable in the short run just because they require long-term solutions. Both short-term and long-term solutions exist and could be implemented if there was sufficient political will in Niger and among donor countries.

SUPPORTING FAMILY FARMS AND ENHANCING THE CONSUMPTION OF LOCAL FOOD

Family farmers should be the priority in policymaking—they are responsible

"WE HAVE NOTICED WITH REGRET INCREASED IMPORTS OF FOOD PRODUCTS FROM OUTSIDE THE REGION WHICH CONTINUE TO ACCELERATE THE TRANSFORMATION OF OUR FOOD HABITS. UNFORTUNATELY, OUR COUNTRIES ARE NEITHER CAPABLE TODAY NOR TOMORROW TO PRODUCE FOOD SUCH AS WHEAT, SOYA, OR SUNFLOWER. IT IS AT THE EXPENSE OF OUR TRADITIONAL CROPS THAT, YEAR AFTER YEAR, THE CONSUMPTION OF LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTS IS DECREASING. EVEN FARMERS ARE STARTING TO CHANGE THEIR FOOD HABITS. IN THE MOST REMOTE VILLAGES, YOU WILL FIND POWDERED MILK AND BREAD. IT IS A REAL DANGER. AS A RESULT, UNEMPLOYMENT INCREASES BECAUSE IF WE PRODUCE COMMODITIES WE CAN'T SELL, THE TRADITIONAL FARMERS HAVE TO STOP THEIR ACTIVITY. WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WHEN OUR FOOD SUPPLY DEPENDS ON OUTSIDE SOURCES, WHEREAS MOST OF THE POPULATION IN OUR COUNTRIES LIVES IN RURAL AREAS, THREATENED BY GROWING UNEMPLOYMENT."[108]

for 80 to 90 percent of the agricultural production in Niger. For several years, farmer groups in the region have campaigned for governments to increase their support to small-scale farmers. According to ROPPA, a West African network of farmer and producers' organizations (Le Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest), public policies in the region should be geared toward technical support to agriculture, fisheries, and agro-forestry. Farmers' needs include better access to quality agricultural inputs, storage infrastructure and support for conservation and marketing of farm products.[107] As seen with the example of agro-forestry discussed earlier, diversification and use of local crops are essential to enhance food security, but their effectiveness hinges on support for small farmers.

Increasing food deficits imply an increased dependence on food imports. But Niger's growing dependence on food imports is also due to cheap imports of non-native cereals from outside the region that contribute to changes in food habits and directly affect farmers' incomes.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Especially in periods of low international cereal prices, cheap imports of cereals such as wheat and maize compete with local crops and directly affect the income of local producers. In a country where most farmers live on the razor's edge, a drop in income may result in less investment and limited access to quality farm inputs. It can also end up in loss of productive capital such as animals and equipment or, as a last resort seen in 2005, in the sale of land. Imports of non-traditional cereals catalyze a vicious cycle of imports bringing about more imports.

As advocated by ROPPA, the consumption of traditional crops should be encouraged through agricultural and economic policies and a communications strategy. The promotion of agro-forestry would also encourage the consumption of local food and help secure the food supply with the use of drought-resistant crops.

AGRO-FORESTRY MUST BE A PRIORITY OF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

As pointed out earlier, agro-forestry is one of the most promising models for fighting desertification, maintaining soil fertility, and providing alternative sources of food and income to people. Yet it remains largely unexplored as a solution to Niger's chronic food problems, largely due to its lack of immediate returns, which is unattractive to international donors. Ensuring that people have alternative sources of income and food during poor harvest years is key to any national food policy because Niger is prone to irregular rainfall patterns and mainly relies on rain-fed agriculture.

The promoters of agro-forestry base their recommendations on local knowledge of traditional perennial crops and on an analysis of current agricultural patterns. Current patterns born out of the focus on commercial and large-scale agriculture cannot ensure food security for all, particularly given the overexploitation of land and decreasing soil fertility. Unfortunately, agro-forestry experts are not the ones in charge of designing development policies, which have generally been geared toward short-term achievements and results.

These policies prioritize the development of irrigation and cash crops, which provide swift incomes but cause overall food insecurity, poverty, and deterioration of soil fertility.

THE ROLE OF NGOS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Without MSF's advocacy and campaign that broke the silence about Niger in 2005, it is very likely that the nutritional crisis would have raged on without receiving any worldwide attention at all. The critical role played by a single NGO in the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in Niger must be acknowledged and praised. However it is of great concern that despite decades of investment by national governments, donors, and international institutions, it is up to a nongovernmental organization to raise the issue, and, to a large extent, to deal with it.

Beyond the problem of addressing malnutrition, a few organizations such as ROPPA have been active in raising the voices of the rural population. However, as seen earlier with ECOWAP, although the regional agricultural policy affects more than 80 percent of the population, farmers—especially the rural poor and landless—are generally not heard.

The way the national policies have been designed in Niger reflects this lack of rural engagement in decision-making. Despite the much-publicized participative approach used in the design of the PRSP,[109] the skewed nature of this strategy raises serious questions about the nature of the representation. It seems unlikely that the voices of the landless and small-scale farmers were heard in the PRSP process, given that the resulting strategy prioritizes commercial agriculture and free trade.

THE UNITED NATIONS CENTRAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE FUND (CERF)

Following the Niger crisis, there was a call for the creation of a UN emergency fund that would allow for a more rapid response to this kind of emergency.[110] This fund was created in 2006 and used for the first time in March for the Horn of Africa.[111]

It is certainly a good idea to maintain a fund that is free from donor-imposed conditionality, and is available to be used in a swifter and more flexible way. A number of NGOs, including the Oakland Institute, have advocated for this in the past as a way to untangle international assistance from donors' interests (for example, the disposal of Northern countries' food surplus as food aid).[112]

However, while this fund might be appropriate for true one-time emergencies, the systemic nature of the crisis in Niger is well known: malnutrition is due to a combination of deep structural problems and poorly conceived economic policies. According to all international standards of health and nutrition, Niger can be considered to be in a permanent state of emergency and this situation continues to deteriorate year after year. One serious-

"Too often, aid resembles a lottery in which a few win but most lose based on considerations other than need. We must move from lottery to predictability so all those who suffer receive aid," said Jan Egeland, United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator on 10th March 2006.

The CERF will save lives by providing quick initial funding for life-saving assistance and rapid response in sudden onset emergencies, rapid deteriorations, and neglected emergencies. It will thereby help rectify the existing imbalance in global aid distribution, as a result of which millions of people in so-called neglected or forgotten crises remain in need, while others benefit from better funded programs.[113]

ly wonders how much will change for Niger's children as a result of this international emergency fund, as this is not an emergency that can be addressed with the swift delivery of relief supplies once in a while. There is definitely an urgent need, but it is for consistent funding and support for agriculture, infrastructure projects, education, health and social services, and to establish special trade arrangements that allow for the protection of the national food supply.

A MARSHALL PLAN FOR AFRICA

If an emergency fund is not the solution for Niger's crisis, then what is needed? As the poorest country in the world and one facing tremendous challenges, Niger would be an ideal first recipient of funding from a "Marshall Plan for Africa." Such a plan has been advocated for over a year now by a number of preeminent personalities: in December 2004, Jacques Diouf, Executive Director of the FAO, called for a Marshall Plan to help Africa with the construction of infrastructure.[114] Others, like Antonio Guterres, the former Prime Minister of Portugal, added that such a plan needs to be non-conditional and non-paternalistic.[115] In 2005 the British Chancellor, Gordon Brown, also called for a Marshall Plan for Africa, including 100 percent debt relief and a boost in Western assistance to Africa (see box).

> Mr. Brown said there was no justification for Africa to be weighed down by debts from 20 or 30 years ago and he proposed erasing all debts African countries owed to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund.
>
> Mr. Brown also proposed boosting direct aid payments, selling bonds on the international market to fund immunization programs for malaria and HIV/AIDS and eliminating trade subsidies in rich countries that make it difficult for African nations to compete in world markets.
>
> "These proposals represent a new deal between rich and poor countries," Mr. Brown said. "We are determined the empowerment of the people of Africa ... can be made possible by decisions at Gleneagles. The scale of what we outline is very substantial indeed."
>
> Britain, holder of the rotating presidency of the G8 group of industrialized countries, has declared 2005 a make-or-break year for Africa and says there is no chance of meeting the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving world poverty by 2015 without a concerted effort on debt relief, increased aid, and improved governance.
>
> Britain, however, faces an uphill task in persuading the US to back its plans. President George Bush yesterday reiterated his opposition to a British plan to create an international finance facility (IFF) to boost foreign aid for Africa. While in agreement on the need for relief of Africa's World Bank debts, Britain and the US differ on the means. Mr. Brown and Mr. Blair think rich countries should pick up the debt servicing bill, but the Bush administration wants the cost to be taken out of direct aid budgets, with the consequence that recipient states do not receive any more funds.[116]

The Marshall Plan for Europe was comprised of some $13 billion in economic and technical assistance, which, when adjusted for inflation, would be equivalent to around $130 billion in 2006. The US gave this money to help the recovery of the European countries that had joined in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.[117] The annual budget of Niger is $320 million,[118] which, when compared to the more than $332 billion the U.S. has spent on the Iraq war alone, is hardly a drop in the bucket.[119]

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However, the world we live in today is quite different from when the Marshall Plan was instituted, and Niger is not Europe in 1948. The threat of communism triggered a tremendous program of rehabilitation, and, without a similar danger, perhaps the international community does not have sufficient motivation to act in a concerted way to achieve long lasting prosperity in the world's poorest country.

CONCLUSION

Niger's story is one of entrenched and deepening poverty. Relying on the market to solve food shortages has only left the poorest people hungrier and driven more of the population into chronic poverty. Development policies that promoted economic liberalization and encouraged regional integration along with specialization, commercialization of agriculture, and the withdrawal of the state from regulating the market have left Niger less able to meet its own needs than ever. Large traders' monopolistic control of over national cereal trade has centralized control over food access and global economic factors, such as rising cereal prices and fluctuating currency prices, have destabilized regional markets.

If solutions are to be found to Niger's chronic food shortage, political will and international commitment will be necessary, as well as a shift away from the free market ideology that has been the primary factor in the country's descent. Alternative agricultural development models such as agro-forestry have been shown to yield profound and lasting improvements in food security, but they require a long-term and systemic view of development that is not characteristic of how the international community approaches food aid. The 2005 food crisis in Niger is a telling example of how emergency aid is an inadequate—and yet essential—component of development policy when food security is left solely to market forces. The global community must choose between continuously shoring up the faltering economies of countries such as Niger or making an effort to find solutions that will allow the world's poorest country to forever shake off that title.

Afterword

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW IN GUARDING AGAINST FUTURE FAMINES

The right to food and to be free from hunger is widely established and is not a new concept in international law. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food..."[120]

In 1966, the United Nations adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which codify a broad range of rights set forth in the UDHR. The ICESCR recognizes the right to an adequate standard of living, adequate food, and the right to be free from hunger.

ICESCR, Article 11

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.

2. The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international cooperation, the measures, including specific programs, which are needed:

(a) To improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition and by developing or reforming agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilization of natural resources;

(b) Taking into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries, to ensure an equitable distribution of world supplies in relation to need.

The Right to Food has since been recognized and affirmed at the international level in several other international human rights documents. For example, States Parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have agreed to take special measures to eliminate gender-based discrimination, including insurance of equal access by rural women to food security measures (Article 14) and appropriate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation. States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), have undertaken to respect and ensure the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24:1), implemented, *inter alia*, through the provision of adequate nutritious food and clean drinking water (Article 24:2:c).

WHAT THE "RIGHT TO FOOD" ACTUALLY MEANS

The vague nature of certain provisions of the ICESCR, and particularly the right to adequate food and freedom from hunger, has been the source of much scholarly and political debate since its adoption. The debates range from the jurisprudential, such as whether there exists a "right" to food, to the more practical such as what the right entails, whom the right insures, and the nature of concomitant state obligations. At this point, though, the right to food and to be free from hunger are recognized as legitimate rights in international law.

While the right to food has been included in international human rights resolutions and covenants for many years, serious discussion or scholarship of the meaning of such right, or how it is implemented, was scarce. All that changed in 1996, with the first World Food Summit, organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). At the conclusion of the World Food Summit, the participant states committed to "clarify the content of the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger."[121]

Owing to requests from the international community as set forth in the Rome Declaration drafted at the 1996 summit, and again at the 2002 follow-up summit, two authoritative United Nations organizations have published documents which provide normative content to the right to food. Both the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the FAO have published General Comments and Guidelines, respectively, which discuss States' obligations, proffer definitions, and provide suggestions to both states and stakeholders as to how to best realize the right to food. In addition to conferring further legitimacy to the right to food and the freedom from hunger, the documents render concrete meaning and methodology for implementation of the right.

In 1999, the General Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights promulgated for the General Comments which provide normative content to the "right to food." (The General Committee is a group of experts whose job is to oversee compliance with the ICESCR.) The Committee's General Comments are considered the most authoritative interpretation of the right to adequate food as set forth in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

While several of the Committees' General Comments further define the meaning of the right to food, General Comment 12 articulates the obligations of States Parties with regard to ensuring the right to food. Commonly known as the tripartite typology, the three bases of obligations are that States must "respect, protect, and fulfill" the right to food.

The obligation to *respect,* the General Comment explains, means that States Parties not take any measures that result in preventing access to food. The obligation to *protect* requires measures by the State to ensure that enterprises or individuals do not deprive individuals of their access to adequate food. Finally, the obligation to *fulfill* (*facilitate)* means the State must proactively engage in activities intended to strengthen people's access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security. Finally, whenever an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, States have the obligation to *fulfill (provide)* that right directly.[122]

General comment 12 clarifies that "the principal obligation is to take steps to achieve progressively the full realization of the right to adequate food. This imposes an obligation to move as expeditiously as possible towards that goal. Every state is obliged to ensure for everyone under its jurisdiction access to the minimum essential food which is sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe, and to ensure their freedom from hunger." It is important to note that General Comment 12 explicitly urges states to adopt a "framework law" which defines domestic strategies for realizing the right to food and calls for the establishment of independent judicial procedures to adjudicate grievances related to the right to food.

The General comments discuss states' obligations in terms of progressive realization—that is, the Committee set the framework for states to work toward achievement of the right to food, giving states deference to difficulties and obstacles, real or perceived, in ultimately realizing the right to food.

In late 2004, the FAO completed its guidelines to support States' efforts to realize the right to food. The guidelines came about as a result of a 2002 follow-up meeting to the World Food Summit, where the summit body mandated the FAO to create such guidelines. The guidelines, which resulted from the work of an intergovernmental working group who consulted with various NGOs, are quite detailed in some of their recommendations and provide practical tools for the implementation of the right to food at the national level.

The nineteen guidelines dealing with government responsibilities regroup recommendations for government policies among different policy areas including guidelines on economic development policies, access to resources and assets, market systems, safety nets, international food aid, national strategies, among others.[123] The guidelines describe what governments can and should do within the policy area to implement the right to adequate food. For instance, the guidelines recognize that the right to adequate food is more than simple access to food. It also contains the access of individuals and groups to productive resources. It makes it clear that States have various obligations vis-à-vis people living in their territory. Governments have to respect existing access to food and to productive resources, protect people from being deprived by economically more powerful actors and to invest the maximum of the available resources to progressively achieve the full realization of the right to food.

A fundamental element of the Guidelines is that governments have a national strategy for the implementation in place, either through an overall right to food strategy or via integration of right to food aspects in already existing poverty or food security strategies. The guidelines also cover the responsibilities of actors, other than the nation state, by means of government obligations to effectively control these actors. While industrialized countries, in particular, tried to avoid any international dimension responsibilities of nation states beyond their borders (for example, to assist other states in implementing the right to food) Part III on International measures, actions, and commitment recognizes that without enabling international framework conditions it can be difficult for the nation state to fully guarantee the right to adequate food. Some international framework conditions, such as trade or structural adjustment policies seriously influence the nation states capacity and possibility for policy choices.

The work of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, appointed in 2000, has further contributed to providing substantive meaning to the right to food. At the request of the UN General Assembly, the United Nations Human Rights Commission appointed Jean Ziegler as the Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food. His mandate includes, among other things, to see and respond to information on the realization of the right to food, including the urgent necessity of eradication hunger, and to identify emerging issues related to the right to food worldwide.[124] By providing analysis of the right to food through reports based on, among other things, country visits to assess compliance with state obligations, the Special Rapporteur's reports lend further elaboration of the applied definition of the human right to food.

NIGER'S HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS

Niger has ratified major international treaties that recognize the right to food. In 1986, Niger ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. By doing so, the government of Niger bound itself legally to work toward "realization of" the right to freedom from hunger and the right to adequate food for those living within its borders. Niger is also a State Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the committee on CEDAW has additionally specified that the right to health includes women's fundamental human right to nutritional well-being throughout their lives by means of secure food supply. In addition, it has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Further, Niger's constitution, adopted in 1999, explicitly proclaims its allegiance to human rights as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. While it does not explicitly mention the right to food, Niger's Constitution affirmatively guarantees the right to health and physical well-being.[125]

NIGER'S FAILURE TO MEET ITS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS

An examination of the 2005 food crisis shows that Niger failed to meet even its minimum "core obligations." General Comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights clarify that "a state party in which any significant number of individuals is deprived of essential foodstuffs, of essential primary health care, of basic shelter and housing, or of the most basic forms of education is, *prima facie*, failing to discharge its obligations under the covenant. If the covenant were to be read in such a way as not to establish such a minimum core obligation, it would largely be deprived of its raison d'etre."[126]

The general comment states further that, while resources constraints must be taken into account in assessing compliance with minimum core obligations, the country must demonstrate that "every effort has been made to use all resources that are at its disposition in an effort to satisfy, as a matter of priority those minimum obligations…" The meaning of the term "making effort to use all resources at its disposition" is still very vague; however, it is clear that the Government of Niger was derelict in meeting its minimum core obligations by failing to request donor aid in a more timely manner, by failing to request a sufficient amount of aid, and by failing to have stocked sufficient grain reserves.

Furthermore, State Parties to the ICESCR are required to develop and implement policies and programs aimed specifically at the progressive realization of the rights contained therein, including the right to adequate food. The FAO Guidelines (Guideline 3) also emphasize the importance of adopting a national human rights strategy for realization of the right to food, including legislation and administrative measures, identification of constraints and available resources, monitoring procedures and inter-departmental coordination. The 2005 food crisis and endemic hunger in Niger demonstrate the government's failure in articulating policies and programs within a human rights framework.

The General Comment 12 describes State obligations for the human right to food as having three levels (respect, protect, fulfill). In exercising its obligation to protect, the Government of Niger must ensure "that enterprises or individuals do not deprive individuals of their access to adequate food" (para. 15). The findings in *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* of the continuation of food exports including cereals in a year of food deficits, highly volatile food prices, domination of national markets by an oligopoly of big traders who fix national prices, and the absence of government intervention to minimize the speculative behavior of grain traders all point to the government's failure in fulfilling its human rights obligations.

THE FAILURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF STATES

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights specifically mentions "international cooperation." More specifically, it provides that States Parties shall take measures to realize the right to an adequate standard of living (and therefore the right to food) "recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international cooperation based on free consent."

While the language is ambiguous with regard to what obligations inure to food-surplus states as respects food-deficient states, authoritative commentary over the past decade clarifies that the Covenant imposes legal obligations on States parties to other States. Indeed, in a recent report, Special Rapporteur Ziegler stated "Although the primary responsibility to ensure the right to food lies with the state in the protection of its own citizens, the international, or extra-territorial obligations of states, have also been stressed by *inter alia*, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to include the obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food of citizens in other countries…The Committee has clarified in General Comment 12 that States should take steps to respect the enjoyment of the right to food in other countries, to protect that right, to facilitate access to food and to provide the necessary aid when required." [127]

By failing to respond far more quickly to Niger's request for food aid, several States Parties violated their obligation under the ICESCR. It took almost eight months for several countries to respond to the government of Niger's request for aid assistance. This time lag can only be regarded as a violation of such states' rights under the ICESCR to provide necessary aid when required.[127]

The Nigerien government, dependent on foreign funding for nearly half of its national budget, has to comply with the priorities and conditions of the donor governments and has limited autonomy and control over its policy-making. It is as much a responsibility of the donor countries to ensure that Niger's legal and binding obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the human right to food are considered and integrated in the design of development assistance programming.

The 2004 FAO Guidelines recognize that the international framework conditions, including free trade and the structural adjustment policies can seriously influence the nation states capacity and possibility to ensure the right to food to its citizens. *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* exposes the role of international economic policy making in perpetuating endemic hunger in countries like Niger.

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Niger's ability to challenge food insecurity and realize human rights is threatened by agricultural trade liberalization, privatization of State agricultural agencies and services, and reduction of import and export tariffs in response to conditions imposed by creditors at the International Financial Institutions (IFIs)—primarily the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—and commitments made at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other trade agreements. Of particular concern are trade negotiations currently underway on an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the European Union (EU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Niger is a member. The resulting loss of public revenues, decreased basic service provision, and declining real incomes have serious implications for the realization of human rights, the government's ability to ensure food security, and to protect agricultural livelihoods.

USING HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK TO ENSURE THE RIGHT TO FOOD

Obviously, the food crisis that occurred in 2005 was caused by multiple factors as shown in *Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation?* The 2005 report of Special Rapporteur Ziegler states that Niger's famine was caused by, among other things, natural conditions including drought and locusts, policies of International Financial Institutions, and delayed receipt of aid.

However, the authoritative commentary from the Committee's General Comments and the FAO guidelines suggest methodology and frameworks for states working toward accomplishment of the goal of freedom from hunger and the right to food. As applied to the state of Niger, some of those methodologies are as follows:

- Adopt a human rights framework for ending pervasive hunger in the country
- Develop a national right to food strategy
- Budget priorities should respect human rights obligations including allocation of maximum resources for sustainable solutions

- Submit requests for food aid in sufficient quantities to meet food needs
- Promotion of the consumption of regional and local food
- Encourage the organization of Farmers' Associations by promoting such associations and allowing their freedom of association
- Regulate grain market speculation
- Encourage crop diversification and agro-forestry programs
- Continue to contribute resources to study and research regarding the underlying causes of poverty and famine in Niger
- Encourage the independence of Human Rights Commissions
- Promote human rights education

While these steps at the national level are essential, the international community has an obligation to reinforce and encourage the efforts of the Nigerien government to meet its human rights obligations. Consequently, the donor states and the IFIs should refrain from imposition of deregulation and privatization policies which constrain the government and aggravate hunger and poverty in the country. Instead, development assistance should support budget allocations designed to end hunger and strengthen self-sufficiency.

In addition, many of the donor countries and Niger's trading partners also have obligations under ICESCR, CEDAW, and other international treaties to develop economic and trade rules grounded in human rights principles. At a minimum, before entering into any new trade agreements, an independent impact assessment of the effect of proposed commitments on the right to food should be carried out.

In Special Rapporteur Jean Ziegler's words, hunger and famine are "a silent massacre." There is much that can be done on the part of governments to usher in achievement of the right of all human beings to "live in dignity, free from hunger." In order to meet obligations under international human rights law, States Parties to the ICESCR must do much more to implement policies and practices that are directly or indirectly designed to further the realization of the right to food. Such obligations are imposed both on food-deficient and food-surplus states with the goal of achieving a world without hunger.

It is now beyond any dispute that there is more than enough food on the planet to feed every human being, and standards set forth in international human rights law, coupled with guidelines giving definition to international human rights, should be applied rigorously and relentlessly until all are free from hunger.

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