

WFP Emergency Assessment Brief: Niger August 2005

Executive Summary

Niger is facing a food security crisis caused by the impact of last year's drought and locust invasions on the fragile livelihoods of subsistence farmers and pastoralists. The effects are twofold: a reduced availability of food in the country and poor household's inadequate ability to purchase food. The severity of the situation is evidenced by rising levels of acute malnutrition and admissions to health centres, drastic reductions in household food consumption, distress sales of livestock and other assets, and higher than normal out-migration.

The information presented below seeks to deepen the understanding of how many people are affected, where they are located, why they are food insecure and what actions are required to address the crisis.

The main sources of this assessment brief are the recent household survey undertaken in the early stages of the crisis in April-May 2005 (Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis –CFSVA) and a more recent cereal markets analysis conducted in June.¹ Other key sources include the joint National Early Warning System/WFP/FEWS-NET mission, the joint FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment mission of October 2004, nutrition surveys by WFP and Helen Keller International and other secondary data.

The main findings of these assessments are:

- ✓ Chronic, high levels of poverty (63 percent nationwide) and malnutrition (40 percent of children under five affected by stunting nationally), poor agricultural practices and limited income-earning opportunities have resulted in exceedingly precarious agro-pastoral livelihoods. Thus, even a relatively small shock was sufficient to exhaust many household's capacity to cope and to precipitate a crisis.
- ✓ Lower than normal commercial cereal imports coupled with last year's below average harvest added up to a sizeable food availability shortage in the country. Food imports during the first five months were only half the amount of the previous year, probably the result of border closures by neighbouring countries, high regional prices for staples and limited effective demand. Food supply from domestic sources was 16 percent below the five year average, when calculated on a per capita basis.

¹ Initial findings from the CFSVA are provided at <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp073376.pdf> and an interim report of the cereal markets analysis is provided at <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp073367.pdf>

- ✓ The initial response to the crisis was influenced by a “development consensus”, which sought to minimize free food distributions. The Consolidated Appeal issued in May emphasized the role of subsidised sales, food-for-work activities, cash-for-work, food-for-training and support to cereal banks in meeting food needs.
- ✓ As the crisis is caused by a combination of shortfalls in food availability and people’s ability to purchase food, the scope for enhancing purchasing power through cash transfers appears to be limited. As assessed by the joint National Early Warning System/WFP/FEWS-NET mission, 2.5 million people are currently food insecure; these people require direct relief in the form of free and targeted distributions of imported food. The role of food reserves to stabilize supplies during future shocks should be examined.
- ✓ The findings of the household food security and market analyses are compatible with the assessed emergency needs and confirm the recommended response strategy. Further food security assessments are planned to guide short and medium-term response strategies. In addition to ongoing food security monitoring activities, three assessments are planned: a household survey at the end of the lean season in September, a FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment mission in October, and a nutrition survey with UNICEF in December.

Country Context: A Crisis in the Making

The underlying causes of the current food security crisis in Niger are structural, the outcome of high rates of poverty, demographic growth and malnutrition combined with low agricultural productivity and employment opportunities. Economic growth rates averaging three percent in recent years are balanced out by an equally high population growth rate². Niger is prone to recurrent droughts, which regularly result in food shortages. At the national level, these shortages are met through cereal imports from neighbouring countries, which vary from 10-40 percent of domestic production in normal and lean years, respectively. In areas affected by shocks, large-scale population movements occur as agro-pastoral households search for food and fodder for their animals and better employment opportunities.

As the world’s second least developed country (176th out of 177 on the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index in 2004), Niger even in the best of years faces a “silent” hunger crisis. Poverty affects approximately 63 percent of the population and 34 percent are considered extremely poor. Over 80 percent of the estimated 12 million inhabitants rely on agriculture and livestock for their subsistence, but productivity is threatened by the environmental degradation, poor agricultural methods, lack of access to inputs and weak infrastructure. Chronic levels of malnutrition are very high, with 40 percent of the children under five suffering from stunting.

² Economist Intelligence Unit 2005. *Country Profile, Niger*. See p. 15 and 30.

The majority of the poor throughout the country rely heavily on cash earnings and loans to purchase food; their own production provides less than 30 percent of their household food requirements.³ These conditions are accentuated in pastoral areas, where even minor but recurrent drought episodes can cause poor households to lose their livelihood as they cannot rebuild their herds before another shock hits.⁴

A nutritional survey by WFP and Helen Keller International in Zinder and Maradi in January 2005 indicated a high global rate for wasting of 13.4 percent, with severe acute malnutrition rates of 2.7 percent and 2.2 percent respectively.⁵ This rate of wasting is considered an emergency situation by WHO (above 10 percent). The survey also confirmed that these two regions have a significant on-going and structural malnutrition problem, with a very high prevalence of under-five child stunting (61 percent). These malnutrition rates were found comparable to those normally seen in conflict zones or emergencies, and were expected to worsen in the lean season between April and September. Also, Médecins Sans Frontières reported alarmingly high levels of severe malnutrition and an increase in admissions to its therapeutic feeding centres.⁶

How Many People Are Affected?

Following a drought and a locust invasion which affected agricultural and livestock production in 2004, WFP undertook a series of assessments to determine the extent of the food security crisis. The latest results are from two studies, a CFSVA carried out in April and May 2005, and a Cereals Market Analysis in June 2005.

The CFSVA collected information from 1,800 households on indicators of household food security. Findings on dietary diversity, consumption frequency and sources of foods (which provide a measure of the quality and adequacy of the household diet) were correlated with other food security indicators such as household assets and coping behaviour. These data were analyzed using multivariate statistical techniques to develop Household Food Security Profiles.

The analysis indicates that a total of 33 percent of rural households or 3.8 million people nationwide face a high level of food insecurity/vulnerability, i.e. their *food consumption* and *access to food* are severely inadequate⁷. As of May 2005:

- ✓ *Nearly 2.9 million were facing high levels of food insecurity.* Their livelihoods, access and consumption profiles suggest that a large majority of these people are likely to be chronically food insecure.

³ FEWS NET 2005. Niger Livelihood Profiles, January 2005. USAID.

⁴ Idem, p. 21.

⁵ Helen Keller International and WFP 2005. *Evaluation de base de l'état nutritionnel de 6 à régions rurales de Maradi et de Zinder. Rapport de deux enquêtes.*

⁶ Médecins Sans Frontières 2005. *Statut nutritionnel et mortalité rétrospective Deux enquêtes réalisées en zone rurale d s régions de Maradi et de Tahoua au Niger 28 avril-3 mai 2005.*

⁷ These figures are based on an estimated rural population in Niger of 10.5 million.

- ✓ *A further 900,000 people were highly vulnerable.* Their food security status should be monitored closely, as their consumption patterns and coping strategies suggest that they are highly susceptible to any further shocks.

These figures update the estimates of the joint assessment mission conducted at the outset of the crisis (October 2004), which indicated that over 3 million people—located mainly in the central and northern agro-pastoral zones—were extremely vulnerable to food insecurity.⁸ They are compatible with the findings of the joint National Early Warning System/WFP/FEWS-NET assessment missions in March 2005, which indicated that approximately 2.5 million people are currently food insecure, mainly in Northern Tillaberi and Tahoua, followed by Maradi, Diffa and Zinder⁹ and the June 2005 reports from DNP-GCA's (Dispositif National de Prévention et de Gestion des Crises Alimentaires) which found that about 2.5 million people had significant food gaps and had adapted severe risk management strategies such as distress migration, exodus, wild food consumption, large scale sales of animals and assets, and consumption limited to one meal per day.

Which Areas Are Most Affected?

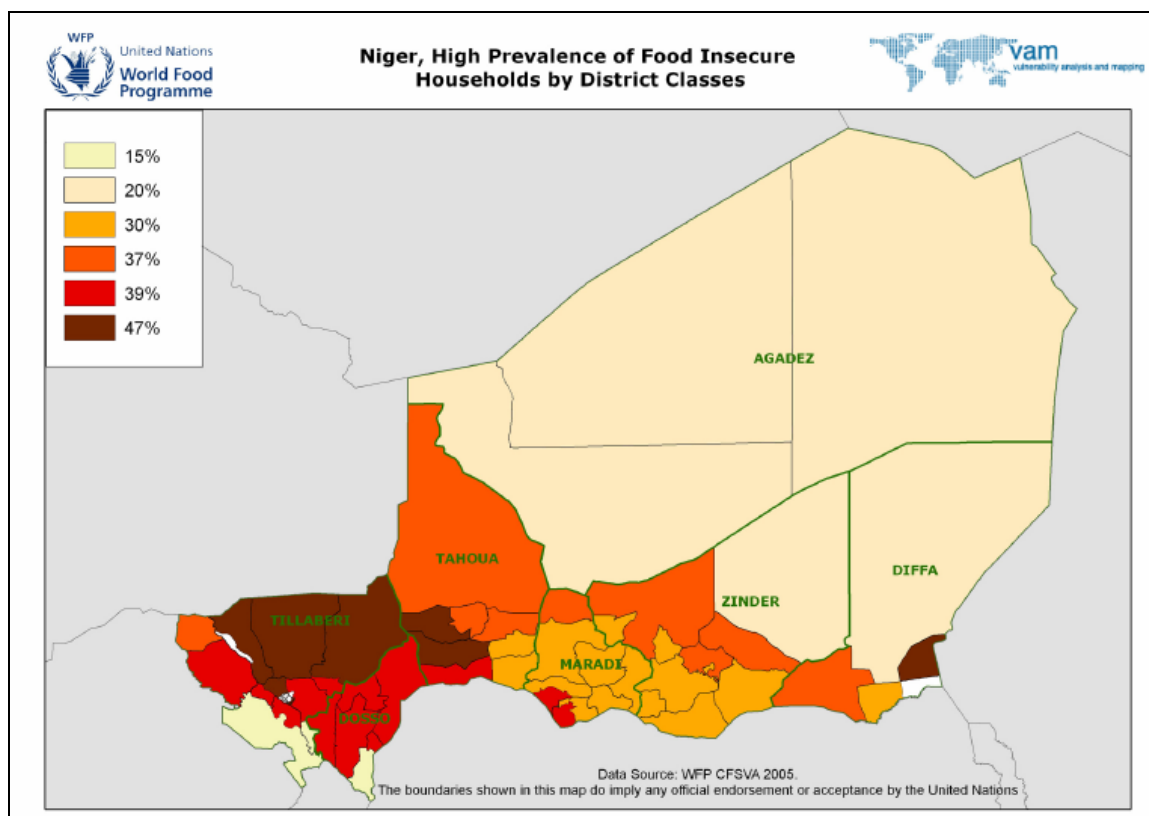
According to the CFSVA preliminary findings, households in the Sahelian zones of Tillaberi, Tahoua, Maradi, Zinder and Diffa reported the most severe effects on agricultural production from drought and locust impacts; around 40 percent of families were already using negative coping strategies such as reducing the quality and quantity of meals. The following regions have the highest proportion of food insecure and vulnerable households:

- ✓ The most critical area is in sparse/open grassland in and around Northern Tillaberi, where *47 percent* of households are food insecure or vulnerable. Production suffered particularly; the harvest of the food-insecure households was only 12 percent of the potential.
- ✓ In sparse grass/desert areas of North Tahoua, the extreme north of Maradi and parts of Zinder and Diffa, *37 percent* of households are food insecure or vulnerable. The 2004 harvest was only 15 percent of the potential.
- ✓ In medium-dry savanna areas of Central Tillaberi and Northern Dosso, *39 percent* of the households are considered food insecure or vulnerable. The 2004 harvest was less than half of the usual but with hardly any locust damage. The food insecure households in this area rely heavily on their own produce (65 percent).

⁸ FAO/WFP/CILSS-AGRHYMET/FEWS-NET 2004. *FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to Niger*. Rome.

⁹ *Rapport de la mission conjointe SAP/GC/FEWS NET/PAM sur l'évaluation de la situation alimentaire dans les zones vulnérables de Tahoua : 23 février – 2 mars 2005.*

- ✓ The dry savanna areas, mainly south of Maradi and Zinder, has 30 percent of households that are food insecure/vulnerable. Most of these households (73 percent) depend on their own food production. Last year's harvest was reduced to one third of the potential, although the damage from locusts was modest compared to other areas.



Who Is Most Affected?

Subsistence farming, despite being the main source of food for 70 percent of the 3.8 million food insecure and vulnerable households, is highly insufficient to meet consumption requirements. 54 percent of these households face a nine-month food gap; another 34 percent has only enough food for six months or less. Together with those food insecure or vulnerable households who depend mainly on cash earnings or other sources to obtain food, they regularly face food accessibility problems, particularly during the lean season when prices increase.

- ✓ Compared to the other groups, food insecure households are characterized by a very weak livelihood base and negative coping strategies. These households spent the highest proportion (72 percent) of their meagre income on food, have the lowest ownership of cattle or small ruminants and the greatest reliance on uncertain income sources (remittances, gifts or petty trade: 37 percent). The

share of female headed households is disproportionately high (26 percent) and coping strategies are the most negative: of all groups, they have the highest level of consumption of seeds, of days without any meal and of “distress” sales of livestock (as evidenced by sale of female stock).

- ✓ Households categorized as vulnerable also devote a large share—60 percent—of their income to procuring food. Although more of these households report owning cattle or small livestock, few families own six or more cattle (21 percent compared to 48 percent of the food secure households). Their reliance on uncertain income sources is the second highest (32 percent).
- ✓ The marginally food secure households, while having similar asset ownership levels as the vulnerable groups, are less reliant on erratic income sources and have much higher income as evidenced by their monthly expenditures (twice that of the vulnerable households).
- ✓ Households that are food secure have relatively viable livelihoods, as they have the highest ownership of assets (cattle, sheep and agricultural land) and lowest dependence on unreliable income sources such as gifts or petty trade. They also exhibit the lowest reliance on negative coping strategies.

	Livelihood			Coping Strategy
	Households raising cattle	Depend mainly on own agricultural production	Depend mainly on petty trade, remittances and gifts	Consume lesser quality / quantity of food than normal
Food Insecure	23%	47%	37%	39%
Vulnerable	35%	57%	32%	26%
Marginally Food Secure	35%	57%	24%	30%
Food Secure	58%	76%	12%	21%

What Caused the Food Security Crisis?

The main threats for food insecure or vulnerable households arise from both, loss of production and income-earning opportunities and high prices of staple foods.

Production of millet, sorghum, maize and rice in 2004 fell by nine percent compared to the 1999-2003 average. On a per-capita basis this represents a 16 percent decrease in the domestic supply of food. This national figure masks much higher local losses which in some district reached up to 90 percent.

Imports, which normally act as a regulator, also fell. According to Ministry of Agriculture statistics, cereal imports were down by 60 percent when comparing January to May 2005 with the same period in 2004. This can be attributed to higher

prices on Nigerian markets, tightening of controls on cross-border trade and the slowdown of imports from Burkina Faso.

As a result of decreased domestic production and reduced imports, prices for staple foods rose substantially. According to WFP's market analysis average prices increased by 37 percent for millet, 25 percent for sorghum and 23 percent for maize compared with the levels of the previous seasons. Increases on some rural markets are likely to have been even more dramatic. Price levels are now higher than those recorded during the last bad harvest in 2000–2001 while in-country food stocks are low compared to last year and there is no evidence that traders practiced any hoarding. Government plans to tighten tax and import policies at the beginning of the year were never implemented. However, they may have sent the wrong signals early in the crisis. Government efforts to subsidize sales of 40,000 mt were insufficient to stabilize prices.

The combined effects of reduced household incomes and increased food prices are particularly felt by agro-pastoralist households. According to WFP's analysis, sheep and goat prices have decreased by 23 percent since January. In some areas, distress sale of livestock was reported in response to the reduction in fodder availability (36 percent, the worst ever experienced, affecting around 3.5 million head of cattle).¹⁰

Recommended Response

Actions taken to date: Despite a Government appeal on 25 November 2004 for 78,100 MT of emergency food aid, and a Flash Appeal in May for US\$16 million (including US\$1.4 million for food aid), the international response has been slow and inadequate. The initial response strategy was to avoid free food and fodder distributions, relying instead on subsidized cereal sales, provision of subsidized fodder, food- and cash-for-work schemes, and cereal banks.¹¹ This strategy was intended to prevent dependency and avoid disrupting markets which historically relied on cross-border trade in meeting food shortages.

However, as discussed above, trade was well below previous levels. Insufficient data to provide reliable information on imports and exports of these products has made it difficult to evaluate food insecurity at the national and household level. Also, not all assistance can be given through development mechanisms. As noted by ODI, the view that relief to people during crises causes them to become lazy or dependent is an “unhelpful myth”; rather, if sufficient and early relief is provided, it can be incorporated in survival strategies and help prevent destitution.¹²

Response Options: Given the dual nature of the shock (food availability plus economic access to food), the response needs to address both aspects:

¹⁰ Oxfam International 2005, draft. *Niger Rapid Food Security Assessment*.

¹¹ Overseas Development Institute 2005. *Humanitarian Issues in Niger*. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Briefing Note. London.

¹² Overseas Development Institute 2005. *Dependency and Humanitarian Relief: A Critical Analysis*. HPG. London

- ✓ Imports of food should be pursued until the next harvest.
- ✓ There is a clear need for a relief component involving free food distributions in the most affected areas.
- ✓ Blanket supplementary feeding should be provided to nutritionally vulnerable or malnourished women and children to prevent further declines in nutritional status.
- ✓ The role of food reserves to stabilize supplies during future life-threatening shocks should be examined.
- ✓ Food aid should be implemented in ways that complement other programmes to support agricultural and pastoral livelihoods.
- ✓ Currently, some humanitarian agencies are suggesting the use of vouchers for a variety of items, including for food commodities. However, given the low level of food stocks and limited import supplies such programmes would need to be implemented with caution and careful monitoring would be required to ensure that there are no negative inflationary effects.

Next Steps

In Niger's disaster-prone areas, the interrelationship between people, land, water and climate, which represents the basis for food and livelihood security, has become increasingly tenuous. Any small shock may push the poorest households over the edge into food and income destitution. This calls for a close watch on the upcoming agricultural season, both of possible shocks on food availability, and on factors affecting economic access to food.

Further assessments are planned by WFP to refine the number of food insecure people and plan the longer-term response. This includes an Emergency Food Security Assessment in September on a sample of households, a Crop and Food Supply Assessment mission in October, a nutrition survey with UNICEF (December), and system for monitoring market prices. Strengthening the capacity for monitoring cross-border food trade should also be considered.

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