

'Beyond the blame game'

Report on a meeting on Niger held in London on 4 October 2005

The Niger crisis and the response to it have generated considerable controversy within the humanitarian sector. How effective were early warning and assessment mechanisms in producing timely, credible and accurate information and analysis? When it finally came, was the response appropriate? Why did the donor response appear to be slow, and did lack of funds act as a significant brake on the response? Was it appropriate to blame donors for the slow response? Did this succeed in galvanising action?

This meeting aimed to create space for discussion in order to look for and capture lessons at a stage when these questions are still being actively debated. It aimed both to inform on-going policy and programming in Niger and elsewhere in the Sahel, and to contribute to wider discussions about early warning, disaster prevention and disaster response, including reform of the humanitarian system and challenges to current development models in such environments.

The event was hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group and ALNAP at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and was sponsored by the UK Department for International Development. In addition to ODI staff, it was attended by 36 representatives from donors and aid agencies, the media and academics. Three hour-long sessions discussed the role of early warning and needs assessment and the nature of the response, and the issues arising were summarised in a final wrap-up session. Each session began with a short presentation and brief responses from invited panellists, followed by a moderated debate amongst participants. In order to promote open discussion, the meeting took place under the Chatham House rule, so this report does not attribute views to individuals or organisations.

Early warning and needs assessment

Whether early warning systems (EWS) and assessments produced timely, credible and accurate results; how these informed decisions; and whether the crisis might have been prevented.

Early warning systems in Niger were focused on the areas that are usually the most marginal and food insecure. However, the crisis in 2005 was worst in what are normally seen as less marginal southern areas of the country. One weakness was the apparent inability of early-warning systems to adequately account for the impact of rising food prices on people's livelihoods.

The lack of qualitative data to complement the quantitative approaches of EWS was noted. The views of the people affected about the scale and severity of the crisis were not sufficiently taken into account in the analysis and presentation of data. Doing so might have indicated where and when the situation was tipping over into crisis.

A second issue concerned how information was presented, and the differential weight given to different types of information. Perhaps the focus was too much on relatively healthy levels of aggregate food availability, and not enough on the significance of rising prices. Linked to this was, the point was made that the types of questions you ask matter, and that there is a need to look beyond assessing food gaps to appreciate the other dimensions of crises, as they relate to health and politics, for instance, and the synergy between these and food crises. Our systems are probably not geared up to generate this sort of analysis. Participants argued strongly for better analysis and

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understanding of the politics and political economy of the crisis. This was particularly important for understanding why the problem was most severe in the southern regions.

There is a need to focus on the role of government in data collection and surveillance systems. There seems to have been investment in this in the past, but capacity has again eroded. Questions were also raised about the capacity of existing EWS and of agencies themselves to analyse information; there were, for instance, delays in analysing the data from food security assessments. FEWSNET had only one person in Niger.

There was debate around the extent to which EWS incorporated information that was already available regarding levels of malnutrition, and how these systems were dealing with MSF figures showing rising levels of admissions to therapeutic feeding centres. There was also discussion about the extent to which food insecurity and malnutrition levels were exceptional in 2005, or were within chronic norms but with a 'peak', and how this situation is different from the crisis levels seen across the Sahel in most years. Some argued that trying to distinguish between the chronic and the acute was paralysing action and leading to a failure to respond to excess deaths. Others suggested that it was still unclear whether there was an exceptional crisis, or whether it was simply the case that the situation had received more attention this year. The majority view seemed to be that, while the underlying factors had not changed drastically, a combination of circumstances had served to tip chronically vulnerable communities into crisis.

There were questions about what the development community was doing in terms of analysis and understanding of the crisis, and the role that development actors, including the Niger government, should have been playing. Some may have given warnings which were ignored by donors. If levels of acute malnutrition are chronically high in Niger, what does this say about what we have been missing over the last five years? It was argued that, in areas where long-term development programmes have been implemented, people showed greater resilience, suggesting that these programmes have had some impact in reducing vulnerability. There was an agreed need for greater attention to preparedness and contingency planning.

This is clearly relevant to the question of what the triggers for response should be, and at what point indicators pointed to the need for a humanitarian response. Media reports had in any case finally tipped the balance, although there were also questions about a media-driven rush to intervene. The point was made that humanitarian action is always going to be about decision making under conditions of uncertainty.

Donors were also tracking the situation at a regional level in the Sahel, and were having to make judgements about where to prioritise resources, and indeed what the differences are between the situations in the different countries, and when their significance might be known.

The response

The timeliness and appropriateness of responses to the Niger crisis; the balance between food aid, livelihood support and other interventions.

By general agreement, the response had not been timely enough. Preparedness was insufficient, and even when there were signs of crisis, there was no agreement among humanitarian actors, nor between them and development actors, over whether there

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was a problem that required intervention, or what that problem was. This reflects a failure of contextual understanding.

The debate focused on whether the response originally proposed by the Niger government and the UN, which was based on subsidised food sales and which avoided free food distributions, was appropriate. To an extent this cannot be known for sure, as it was never fully implemented because of procurement delays and a lack of funding. At what point this should have become clear, and whether the UN Flash Appeal in May was endorsing a strategy that was already failing, was disputed.

The extent to which government policy opposed free food distributions for fear that this would create dependency was debated. For some this was a major blocking point, while others argued that the government was more open to a change of strategy than has been credited, despite national political realities, and that international aid actors failed to engage with the government sufficiently over the basis of, and the thinking behind, the existing strategy. The focus on whether to move to free food distributions also led to neglect of other interventions, including health, immunisation and livestock.

There was also debate about the extent to which small farmers' greater integration into the market in the south had exacerbated vulnerabilities – for instance through the movement of food across borders, specifically to Nigeria, and through landholding and sharecropping arrangements. This may be a classic 'free market famine'. The general failure of the development community in Niger to signal the crisis was possibly based on a reluctance to suffer the likely market disruptions of food distributions. Ironically when the crisis becomes severe enough to generate a large humanitarian response, the development enterprise is more heavily affected and more severely jeopardised.

Why was the response slow?

Would making more money available earlier have helped to alleviate the crisis? Was the slowness of the response more to do with other factors?

Two particular issues were raised here: why the UN and government appeals failed to convince donors, and the difficulty the aid system had in shifting between developmental and relief approaches. Related questions were raised about trust and credibility – whether donors had confidence in the strategy being proposed, and in the ability of the actors to deliver effective assistance. In any event, there was consensus on the need to find ways of having a frank and constructive dialogue much earlier. A possible lesson from the Niger crisis was that donors need to engage the UN about the rationale for appeals, rather than simply not funding them if they do not find them credible.

There is a tendency to view 'normality' and 'crisis' as opposites, to which the appropriate responses are either small-scale development or large-scale food aid. But this on/off view of crisis masks the reality that many people live perpetually close to the edge of crisis, and that small deviations from the norm may tip them over the edge. Early intervention to stop people's livelihoods collapsing could in principle prevent escalation to a full-blown crisis. It was acknowledged that a degree of 'normalisation' allows the system to accept the unacceptable.

There were also questions about capacity. There was general agreement that there were serious limitations in the capacity of the actors on the ground. Donors did not necessarily have partners early in the crisis that they felt they could effectively

channel resources through. There was an acknowledged need to look beyond the capacity of the humanitarian system, and to consider the role and capacity of both national and international development actors, and of the Niger government.

In a situation where donors are having to juggle between competing priorities for attention and funding, an issue was how to get funding for earlier, preventive responses before the crisis gets out of hand. At the moment these often lose out to more immediate emergencies. Similarly, it is harder to get funding for 'slow burn' crises, where multi-year funding is needed, targeting those who are long-term vulnerable.

There was acknowledgement of the need to consider different funding mechanisms or streams for financing preparedness and early disaster mitigation interventions. However, there is also insufficient ability in the system to change gear when a situation becomes abnormally critical. In the case of Niger, there may have been too many debates about whether structural or emergency interventions were more appropriate, and insufficient high-level strategic leadership pushing for response.

There was also some discussion of the lessons that could be drawn from the Niger crisis for the humanitarian reform agenda, for example whether an expanded central emergency response fund (CERF) might have helped to enable an earlier response.

Summing up

Rather than trying to generate conclusions from a rich debate, the final session focused on what participants felt had been particularly enlightening from the discussions.

Issues raised included:

- The need for greater focus on preparedness and contingency planning, specifically developing the analytical and monitoring capacity that will enable us to pre-empt future crises.
- It is a positive development that poverty, impoverishment and famines are now being talked about as inextricably linked; the interactions between these conditions and their causes need to be understood, particularly in very poor countries.
- The need for greater sharing of information between agencies.
- The potential for tools developed for analysis in conflicts to be applied in natural disasters – notably political economy approaches, and a focus on who benefits from crises, as well as who loses.
- The need to alter EWS in the light of its failings in Niger, while recognising the knock-on effect on national systems that are still trying to set up systems according to current patterns.
- The need for collective planning based on scenarios that recognise imperfect information, and the need to plan on the basis of uncertainty.
- The potential for new approaches to the treatment of severe acute malnutrition to enable radically expanded coverage, and for this to generate action at a national level for treatment of acute malnutrition.
- The fact that many of the debates implied as many challenges for development as for relief actors. There is a need for investment in social protection and safety nets, and for these to be embedded in national systems and central to national policy.

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- Social protection systems need to have implicit within them the capacity to switch modes and respond to humanitarian imperatives during crises.
- The need for development and humanitarian actors to link up and work out how to switch modes together.
- A lingering question about the situation in other countries in the region (Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Mali), and whether our understanding of what has happened in these places is sufficient, and thus whether the focus on Niger has distracted attention from other perhaps equally needy contexts.