

Niger, the year of starvation ahead

The impacts of IMF/ World Bank economic medicine

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Famine in Niger, according to this UNIRIN Report is not due to a shortage of food on the supply side but to the deregulation of the grain market under the auspices of the Bretton Woods institutions.

“the problem is not a lack of food nationally. Total grain production last year – though dipping below a five year average – was 22 percent more than the 2000/2001 season, a year in which “there was no major food security crisis”,

The famine in Niger is attributable to high retail prices and a lack of purchasing power. It is also accompanied by a crisis of the livestock economy, which has received virtually no support from the government.

The high domestic prices are also the result of exceedingly high gasoline prices which increase the costs of internal freight and transportation.

The fuel price policy is dictated by the World Bank. The tax on fuel is one of the main sources of revenue used to reimburse the country’s foreign debt.

Another critical factor which has triggered the demise of small scale agriculture has been the development of a World Bank sponsored privatised irrigation system, essentially implying the privatisation of water resources in a semi-arid region.

This program of privatizing water, which replicates that applied in Somalia in the 1980s, is supported by the World Bank as part of its “poverty reduction” program. The privatisation of water was a factor in triggering famine in Somalia.

As far as livestock is concerned, the World Bank is promoting commercial livestock exports to the detriment of the pastoral economy. Veterinarian services have been privatised, which has also contributed to decimating the herds.

It is worth noting that Niger is third largest uranium producer, yet most of the revenues of this lucrative trade accrue to the Western military industrial complex involved in the production of nuclear weapons.

Click here for a [Review of Niger’s macro-economic program under IMF supervision](#)

Click here for a review of [Niger’s Poverty Alleviation Program under World Bank Supervision](#). This program is based on the maintenance of “macro-economic stability”

including austerity measures

Michel Chossudovsky, Global Research, 7 August 2004

Niger, the year of starvation ahead

UNIRIN Report

After the news cameras are switched off and the world's journalists leave Niger, what is almost certain is that next season the poor will again suffer the pain of hunger and the weakest children will die.

"In any given year, in any given village, you will find malnourished children in Niger," said Salif Sow, regional representative of the US-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET).

The humanitarian crisis affecting parts of the arid Sahelian country this season is as much an issue of the affordability of food as its local availability, say aid workers.

But the problem is not a lack of food nationally. Total grain production last year – though dipping below a five year average – was 22 percent more than the 2000/2001 season, a year in which "there was no major food security crisis", noted a FEWS NET report.

What has changed this year is that in some parts of a southern belt sweeping from the border with Burkina Faso to Chad, food prices are critically high, while the value of livestock has crashed.

A 100 kg bag of millet, the staple grain, sold for around CFA 8,000 to 12,000 (US \$16 to \$24) last year but now costs more than CFA 22,000 (\$44).

An estimated 3.6 million out of a population of 12 million are affected by food insecurity, with 2.5 million identified as extremely vulnerable and requiring food assistance.

Aid workers are careful not to use the term famine to describe what is underway in Niger, the world's second poorest country.

"I'm definitely not using the expression 'starvation' and I'm definitely not saying 'famine' as these imply things we don't have evidence for. This is a food insecurity and nutritional insecurity crisis," said Victor Aguayo, regional nutrition adviser for the UN Children's Fund.

Grinding poverty leaves little cushion for when a hard life gets even harder. Across Niger agro-pastoral systems have remained unchanged for hundreds of years, despite accelerating desertification and climate change. A lack of health services, school opportunities for children, and the traditional status of women, further punish the poor.

A 1998 UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) profile for Niger, reviewing 10 years of data, concluded: "The rates of malnutrition among children are high throughout the country: over 32 percent are stunted – half of them severely stunted – over 15 percent are wasted, and over 36 percent are underweight."

“Every year the levels of malnutrition in Niger pass over the emergency threshold,” World Food Programme (WFP) information officer, Marcus Prior, told IRIN. “In many senses I don’t think [the current nutrition crisis] is very new.”

FAO noted in its 1998 report that the region most affected by malnutrition was Maradi. This year, Maradi is at the centre of the nutrition crisis again, along with zones in five other southern regions, says WFP.

A survey by the medical charity Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) in April found malnutrition rates in some departments in Maradi hitting over 19 percent.

But what is unclear is how much of that suffering can be attributed to the underlying vulnerability, and what is a direct result of the current crisis.

“Just because it’s a problem every year does not mean this is excusable,” said Johanne Sekkenes, head of MSF’s mission in Niger. “In no way can this situation be excusable.”

In a normal season in the Sahel, food prices begin to fall from September through to December, before rising again. Last year, according to Sow, food prices did not fall, and from January rocketed to a “level we have not seen before”.

Part of the reason was high regional food prices and an element of speculation, noted Sow. In anticipation that last year’s locust infestation would lead to shortages, traders held onto food stocks rather than releasing them onto the market.

The locust swarms, while affecting some crops, decimated *pasAfricaNiger*, the year of *starv.ems ture*. Then came an early end to last year’s rains, and pastoralists found what remained of their fodder shrivelling in the scorching heat, and their animals weakening and dying.

Livestock are traditionally exchanged for food, but the terms of trade have turned against pastoralists. “In the bad areas it now takes two to three animals to buy the same quantity of food that previously cost just one,” said Sow.

In this current hunger season in the run up to the next harvest in October, farmers are struggling – and in their tens of thousands failing – to find the money to pay for food on the markets.

Before significant amounts of aid started flowing there was an agonising debate over whether free food distribution would undermine the working of the free market and create dependency.

In April the government, heavily dependent on donor funding, raised taxes on a range of consumer goods, including milk and flour, as a condition for budgetary aid from the International Monetary Fund. Some of those increases were recinded after protest marches.

“The biggest challenge for Niger and the international community, to ensure that this crisis doesn’t happen again, is to help the country out of what is really pulverising poverty,” said WFP’s Prior.

Niger Struggles With Worsening Food Situation

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Rome)

July 20, 2005

Niger is facing a worsening food crisis due to limited food supply and increasingly high prices for local food staples, such as millet, FAO warned today.

Some 2.5 million people in around 3 000 villages are at risk of food shortage, including about 800 000 children. Severe child malnutrition is increasing rapidly; the number of children supported by feeding centres is rising.

Targeted food supply and the delivery of agricultural inputs such as seeds and fodder are urgently required to enable affected vulnerable households to cope with the crisis until harvesting starts in October, FAO said.

"In late 2004, a combination of drought and desert locusts struck the northern parts of the Sahel and the impact on many communities in these marginal areas has been very severe," said Henri Josserand, Chief of FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System.

"In Niger, several years of economic hardship or decline have also lowered people's capacity to deal with such shocks. This is why the crisis is now more acute in Niger than in other parts of the Sahel. People in affected areas are in critical need of seeds and enough food to carry them through until late October," Josserand added.

Out of 63 districts surveyed in the country, 11 have some populations in an 'extremely critical' situation, and in 16 districts the situation is considered as 'critical', according to national estimates. Pastoralists, in particular, have difficulty accessing main food staples.

While there has been adequate rainfall in recent weeks and land preparation and planting are under way, availability of seeds in regions hard hit by drought and locusts remains limited. Desert locusts remain a serious threat, although FAO is not expecting a large-scale invasion this year.

FAO launched an appeal for Niger in May 2005 asking for around \$4 million for emergency agricultural interventions.

As of today, the UN agency has only received a contribution from Sweden of \$650 000 to provide cereal and pulse seeds for the rainy season, and animal fodder and vegetable seeds for the dry season starting in October. Seed distributions from this initial donation are currently ongoing.

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