

GRAIN BANKS IN NIGER

The Need

When a family runs out of their staple grain before the planting season, it means they go into debt. They will get little to eat during the hardest work of the year, and have little to plant to get a harvest the next season. When they borrow a bag of millet from a community grain bank, however, it has the opposite effect. They can produce around 10 bags on just one hectare of land, returning their borrowed bag at harvest time with enough food to eat and extra to sell for covering their farming costs.

In Niger, there are shortages of rain and poor harvests in different areas of the country every year. The difference can be drastic even between neighboring villages. The problems of erratic harvests, rising cost of living, and growing families push many people to run out of grain before the next harvest (a conservative estimate by our church partners is that a typical family is feeding at least seven people at this time). This forces a family to buy grain around planting time at exorbitant prices. It places them at the mercy of loan sharks, who buy up cheap grain at the harvest and then sell it to people at planting time for a huge profit. Community run grain banks are an important food stability solution, because they weaken the loan sharks' position of power. When families in need can borrow grain for planting, it goes a long way to keeping them out of debt. It also serves to keep their money in their own village economies, as well as giving them the power to stay ahead of their needs for the next year.



Farmers examining the millet harvest.

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History

In 2018, the EERN church (French acronym for the Evangelical Church

in the Republic of Niger), received a grant from the Presbyterian Hunger Program to establish grain banks in rural villages. The EERN's vision was to help communities solve their big problem in dealing with food security. Successful secular initiatives by communities in neighboring countries were the model for this strategy. The EERN added the benefit of starting these grain banks where the church has a pastor, to give a strong witness to the love of Jesus Christ for those hurting in this 97% Muslim country. The church also provides accountability and continuity on the ground for the management of the community grain bank.



A map of Niger with the four regions with banks highlighted.

History continued...

After the EERN started this grain bank program, the Presbytery of Lake Huron (PLH) started contributing resources through the Two Coins A Meal offering that many of its churches collect for hunger causes. This helped the EERN in 2019 to open 11 grain banks across Niger's central regions: Dosso, Tahoua, Maradi, and Zinder. Each of these banks have been able to assist 12-15 families with loans of grain at planting time. Offerings in the following years helped the EERN continue to strengthen these existing grain banks and assess their usefulness to the community.

Practice and Impact

Each family that participates can initially borrow a 100 kg bag of grain to plant their fields in the month of July. In November, once the crop has been harvested, that amount of grain is returned to the bank with an additional 10%. This replenishes the stock so that they – and others – can obtain grain in the future, and pays for the costs the locally elected management committee have incurred. An additional local contribution is obtaining a secure storage space from the chief or leaders of each village.

The initial grain banks were supplied with between 12 and 15 bags of millet depending on the cost in that place. The majority have been able to maintain that supply over the intervening years, which works out to more than 120 families assisted each year from these 11 grain banks. The EERN estimates that the benefits of these banks have touched over 1,000 people a year, in addition to the witness it has given to many more.

The EERN received appreciative feedback from many families because of the “hand up” this program has provided. They’ve also seen it impact the relationship between Christians and Muslims in some of the eastern villages near volatile areas where church burnings had occurred in the past. There are a couple villages where the grain bank has declined due to poor management, and the EERN leadership is evaluating whether to re-strengthen these sites or move their efforts elsewhere. One example from last year was a village where the pastor intervened to stop the distribution of grain in July. He discovered that all the families requesting grain had already received a bag from another organization in another village. The pastor felt it was an abuse of trust, that this grain would simply be used as extra food at the upcoming feasting time, and not produce grain that could be returned. We continue to rely on our partner’s diligence like this, in order to determine the best ways to help their own communities.

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Goals for 2023

There was no additional funding requested for these grain banks in the past two years, so PLH offerings have gone to help the EERN provide water in villages. But the EERN is now ready to continue expanding the grain bank program. This year, the EERN hopes to establish four more banks in new villages. Lake Huron Presbytery has been a great supporter of this hunger issue in the past, but our current level of giving through Two Coins A Meal will only be enough to support two additional grain banks. We want to encourage new

congregations to participate and try to double our contributions from last year, in order to help the EERN reach their full goal. We ask congregations to collect their donations for the first half of the year and send them to the Presbytery office in July, so that the funds can reach the EERN in time to buy grain at the right time during the harvest.



EERN leaders inside a grain bank during committee training.

“We want to double our contributions from last year, in order to help the EERN reach their full goal.”

What is Two-Coins-A-Meal?

“Two Coins” is a small step in the battle against hunger and poverty. Congregations invite members of all ages to contribute a few coins at every meal. This simple act is an expression of thanksgiving for what we have received. When the members bring their offering to church on the appointed Sunday, all of those coins “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” as they are received and dedicated.

50% of your offering will be used to support church partners in the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger (EERN) establish grain banks in rural communities experiencing extreme hunger.

25% is designated to the Presbyterian Hunger Program to respond to the crisis of hunger in the United States and around the world. PHP addresses hunger by providing direct food aid by helping poor and hungry people help themselves through development assistance.

25% is designated by your congregation to meet hunger needs in your local community.

If you have questions or need more information on how you can participate, contact the presbytery office or Strategic Mission Liaison to the EERN, Rev. Michael Ludwig - michaell@mempres.org