

Sahel food crisis

Actions the US can take to break the cycle of hunger

Summary

Ever since the first warnings of drought and poor harvests in Africa's Sahel region emerged in late 2011, vulnerable communities in many areas of the region have been threatened by a looming food crisis. That crisis is now real, and 15 million people across seven countries are vulnerable to its impact. Support to protect lives and livelihoods is urgently needed before the crisis becomes an emergency.

To meet the challenges of the current crisis, an estimated \$724 million was needed in early January, an estimate that will almost certainly rise to beyond \$1 billion as needs are re-evaluated in the coming weeks. The World Food Program alone now estimates it needs \$808 million to respond to this crisis.¹

This brief calls on the United States to take the urgent actions needed to save lives now and break the cycle of hunger. These recommendations are grounded in the reality of the current situation and lessons learned from previous crises. Oxfam calls on the US to:

1. Quickly turn financial pledges into disbursements to implement programs before the crisis peaks;
2. Ensure that effective assistance is delivered by:
 - a. Providing the right kind of assistance targeted to the most vulnerable, including women and young children and those affected by conflict;
 - b. Building resilience through long-term investments in agriculture to break the cycle of hunger and malnutrition.

¹ WFP, "Urgent Call for Timely Action in Drought Hit Sahel" <http://usa.wfp.org/news-story/urgent-call-timely-action-drought-hit-sahel>. Retrieved April 5, 2012.

3. Work in coordination with other actors in the region to bring a speedy resolution to the political crisis in Mali while ensuring that the delivery of humanitarian assistance is not compromised.

The current crisis: a legacy of poor harvests and high food prices

The current situation in the Sahel is the cumulative result of both short and long-term factors. Cycles of drought combined with low levels of agricultural investment, environmental degradation, high population growth and acute levels of poverty have contributed to structural chronic vulnerability where even moderate external shocks can have major impacts.² Even in “non-crisis years” 300,000 children in this region die from malnutrition annually. Amid high levels of vulnerability and food insecurity, small shocks like those experienced in 2011 can have major repercussions.

Repeated crises over the last ten years have produced a situation in which millions of people have not been able to recover assets and rebuild their livelihoods between periodic shocks. In 2011, the region’s vulnerability was laid bare yet again by low and uneven rainfall combined with attacks on crops by birds, pests and locusts. Cereal production across the Sahel in autumn 2011 was 25% lower than in 2010, creating a gross deficit of 2.5 million tons. Some areas fared worse, with production in The Gambia and Chad down over 50% compared to last year.³

While some neighboring coastal countries have produced more favorable production of crops, concerns have been raised that regional food markets will not function effectively to move food from surplus to deficit areas as occurred during the 2008 food price crisis. Unrest in Mali is likely to impede trade flows in the coming weeks, making it more difficult for traders to move food through the region.

Food prices are dangerously high. In comparison with the five-year average, prices are 30-40% higher in some markets in Niger and Chad, 50-60% higher in Mali and Burkina Faso, and in some areas such as in northern Mali prices

² Sahel Working Group (October 2011) *Escaping the Hunger Cycle: Pathways to Resilience in the Sahel*.

³ Report of *Concertation Regionale sur la Situation Alimentaire et Nutritionnelle au Sahel et en Afrique de l’Ouest*, Abidjan, 13-15 March 2012. Cereal deficits compared to 2010 were reported as 56% in The Gambia, 49% in Chad, 36% in Senegal, 31% in Niger, and 20% in Burkina Faso.

are up to 90% higher.⁴ With only a few exceptions, trends for February and March 2012 show few indications of price reductions. Given that 60% of people in the Sahel buy their food in the market, and that food accounts for 80% of the expenditure of the most vulnerable groups, local market conditions matter greatly.⁵

While food prices are up, income in many households is shrinking as remittance flows have been reduced. Migrant workers who previously sent money back from Libya and Cote d'Ivoire, for example, may have been forced to return home or have lost work opportunities.

The humanitarian impact: 15 million people vulnerable in 2012

For some communities, a food crisis has already arrived, for others it is looming on the horizon as an early lean season approaches and the annual "hunger gap" promises to last longer than normal. Overall 15.6 million people live in communities affected by the current crisis.⁶ Conflict in northern Mali has exacerbated the situation. Women, small livestock holders, poor households with limited access to productive means, households who used to rely on seasonal migration in conflict affected areas, and communities living in areas affected by insecurity are likely to be the most affected. More than 220,000 people have been internally displaced or have fled to neighboring countries.

The consequences are serious. There are already signs of extreme coping strategies such as searching for grain in the earth that ants may have stored. In the Tillaberi region in western Niger, communities have seen their food stocks dwindle and their debts pile up, and many families are migrating to cities in search of food and jobs.

Table 1: Populations at risk in affected countries

Country	Total food insecure/vulnerable ¹
Mauritania	700,000 food insecure, of which 290,000 suffering severe food insecurity
Mali	3,575,160 living in communities at risk
Niger	6,112,089 food insecure, of which 1,916,855 suffering severe food insecurity
Burkina Faso	2,065,738 living in communities at risk
Chad	3,622,000 food insecure, of which 1,180,300 suffering severe food insecurity
Senegal	850,000 living in communities at risk
The Gambia	713,433 living in communities at risk

Source: All figures come from national Early Warning Systems. Figures for Senegal come from the FAO/WFP Joint Update, January 2012. Figures for Mali, Senegal and The Gambia represent the number of people living in affected communes, but not necessarily the number of individuals directly affected.

⁴ *Securite Alimentaire et Implications Humanitaires en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Sahel*, Note Conjointe FAO/WFP January 2012.

⁵ *Securite Alimentaire et Implications Humanitaires en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Sahel*, Note Conjointe FAO/WFP January 2012.

⁶ OCHA (March 29, 2012) "Sahel Humanitarian Snapshot" http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/map_1935.pdf. Retrieved April 5, 2012.

Things will likely get worse in the coming months. According to a survey conducted by Oxfam for example, 63% of households in the Sahelian belt of Chad have food reserves of no more than three months.⁷

Without major interventions, livelihoods will be depleted and assets reduced as animals die or are sold for food and seeds are eaten. Malnutrition rates will also rise. UNICEF estimates that over one million children under-five in the Sahel are threatened by Severe Acute Malnutrition this year.⁸ The long-term effects of malnutrition on child development will stunt not only physical development but long-term economic growth as well, further exacerbating chronic food insecurity in the region.

The response to date and challenges ahead

In many ways the response to date has been more positive than in previous crises in the region. But much remains to be done. Early Warning Systems functioned relatively well, governments in the region raised the alarm quickly, and several donors mobilized funds more quickly than in previous crises. Still, a substantial gap remains in needed funding to meet the needs of affected populations.

There are three steps the United States must take if the opportunity to act early and effectively is to be realized.

Recommendation One: Turn pledges into disbursements to implement programs before the crisis peaks

On March 29th, Secretary of State Clinton pledged \$120 million for a quick response to the crisis in the Sahel, bringing total US planned or disbursed contributions to the region to nearly \$200 million. Rapid disbursement of this pledged funding is needed to address the emergency food and non-food needs of affected populations over the coming months. Given the high level of national leadership in several affected countries, this assistance should be based on country developed emergency plans.

⁷ Oxfam, Surveillance de la sécurité alimentaire, Zone de Gozbeida et Koukou Angarana, Newsletter 5 Octobre- Décembre 2011

⁸ UNICEF (April 4, 2012) "Unicef Executive Director Visits Chad to Highlight Looming Crisis in the Sahel" http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/chad_62170.html. Retrieved April 5, 2012.

To address the remaining funding gap, the United States should support a high-level pledging conference before the end of April to mobilize funds. OCHA should play a leading role in organizing the conference and in clearly establishing the scale of regional needs.

By investing now in earlier and more cost-effective actions, the United States can ensure vulnerable populations are protected at a much lower cost than if action is delayed until the crisis is at its peak. Preventing malnutrition is far cheaper than treating it, for example; and keeping animal herds alive is many times less expensive than replacing them.

It is encouraging that the United States has so far pledged nearly \$200 million toward the regional response. When fully disbursed, the US contribution will significantly boost efforts to mobilize the funding needed for the crisis.

Current US contributions focus heavily on meeting immediate food needs. Of the \$197 million allocated to the crisis, fully 65 percent will be provided as in-kind food aid. An additional 24 percent will be used for local and regional procurement or the distribution of cash or vouchers to assist people in meeting their food needs.⁹

The UN currently estimates that \$724 million is required to meet existing needs, although that estimate is likely to increase to almost \$1 billion as the consolidated appeal in Niger is revised over the coming days and could increase further still as needs in other countries are revised.

Among governments in the region, there have been positive aspects of the response to date. One of the most significant has been the effective functioning of national early warning systems in most countries. Further, almost all of the most affected governments had recognized the crisis and asked for international assistance by the end of 2011. Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso developed emergency response plans and budgets; Burkina Faso has itself provided \$16m for cereal purchases and maize production; Chad has subsidized around 20,000 tons of cereals; Mali has bought 21,000 tons of maize and millet; and the Government of Mauritania has committed to finance 50 per cent of its national plan.

In addition to providing life-saving food, we are working to help vulnerable families and communities buy locally-available food and services...

Sec. of State Clinton,
March 29, 2012

⁹ USAID (March 30, 2012) Sahel Food Insecurity Fact Sheet #4." http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/chad/template/index.html. Retrieved March 4, 2012.

Yet there also remain many significant areas to strengthen. Chad, Senegal and The Gambia have yet to agree fully operational national plans that are able to effectively coordinate and drive the response, while the implementation of other plans has often been too slow.

While further pledges are still required to meet funding needs, particularly in underfunded areas such as water, sanitation and hygiene, rapid disbursement of existing pledges from all donors would greatly increase the funding immediately available to scale up programs, allowing aid groups to implement programs when they can be most effective. The United States should work in concert with other actors to increase the scale and speed of response.

Failure to deliver needed assistance in a timely fashion can have unintended impacts. In the 2010 Sahel food crisis for example, the USA authorised \$50m in food aid for Niger from its domestic market, but it took three to five months to arrive and one third had not yet arrived by August – far too late for many. Similarly in Chad, a country with acute logistical challenges, additional requests for food were put in so late that much of the food only arrived by the end of July or the start of August.¹⁰ In recent years, USAID has taken important steps to speed aid delivery, a welcome step in ensuring timely response. Pre-positioning stocks can assist in the current crisis.

Recommendation Two: Ensure that effective assistance is delivered

Provide the right kind of assistance targeted to the most vulnerable, including women and young children and those affected by conflict

Humanitarian interventions provided by all actors, the United States included, must be targeted to the populations in need, particularly women food producers, young children who can suffer permanent physical and cognitive disabilities due to malnutrition, and pastoralists who are particularly affected in the current crisis. While the current crisis demands improving people's access to food, other non-food needs must also be met.

Timely response with sufficient scale is critical to protect vulnerable communities from sliding into further poverty and food insecurity as a result of current conditions. At the same time, there must also be a strong focus on

¹⁰ Sahel Working Group (October 2011) *Escaping the Hunger Cycle: Pathways to Resilience in the Sahel*.

targeting the people who most need help, including women and young children, pastoralists and those affected by conflict.

The specific needs of vulnerable women also require attention. In the poorest families, men often migrate to seek employment in other regions or countries, leaving women and children behind. When the search for employment fails, wives and children may have to leave as well and use precarious and destructive coping mechanisms such as selling assets, begging in towns or even prostitution. In order to protect children from these shocks, and from malnutrition, it is crucial to specifically target women so they can meet their own needs, look after their children and build their economic opportunities.

After the crisis subsides, women will continue to need assistance to recover and build resilience in the face of cyclical shocks. Providing access to productive resources to replace those sold during the lean season can, for example, generate income and protect against future shocks while also generating benefits in terms of improved nutritional outcomes for young children.

Given the difficulties they face, pastoralists represent an additional group requiring targeted assistance. Pastoral zones received too little support, too late in 2010, and the same mistake should not be repeated. Pastoralists are again amongst the most affected groups, with reduced pasture and declining terms of trade between animal and food prices reducing their ability to buy food. It takes at least three years to rebuild a small stock of sheep and goats, and up to ten years to build up cattle stocks. Supporting pastoralist communities to keep animal herds alive will be many times less expensive than replacing them, and given that pastoralists are affected earlier than other groups, early action is particularly important.

The current focus on meeting immediate food needs, as evidenced by the strong US focus on in-kind food aid and the use of cash or food vouchers, threatens to miss many other important non-food needs that are vitally important. Community-level water interventions appear to be currently under-funded, and available data does not provide evidence that the US is providing funding in this area.

Protecting and improving access to safe water and promoting community-based solutions in order to improve hygiene practices should receive greater

attention in order to reduce the risk of diarrheal diseases and malnutrition. The United States should ensure support in this area.

Build resilience through long-term investments in agriculture to break the cycle of hunger and malnutrition

Long-term investments in agriculture, including through the Feed the Future Initiative, the signature US food security and agriculture development program, are needed to reduce chronic vulnerability of people in the region. These investments should:

- Take a comprehensive approach to addressing food insecurity by investing in small farmers. This includes increasing agricultural productivity through agro-ecological approaches, linking smallholder farmers to market opportunities, developing robust risk management tools and expanding social safety net programs.
- Build on and support national level commitments by government to allocate at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture, targeting small-scale food producers.
- Support disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives and national platforms to help the countries of the region meet their commitments under the Hygo Framework for Action on DRR.

Protecting communities from the current food crisis in the Sahel is crucial, but represents only part of the battle to exit the vicious cycle of crises in the region. Long-term assistance will be needed to reduce people's vulnerability, and increase their resilience to recurrent crises.

The Feed the Future Initiative (FTF) represents an important effort to re-orient US development assistance towards greater support for agriculture and food security. It focuses on building the capacity of households, communities and countries to realize the resources needed to sustainably improve food security. In its conceptualization, the Feed the Future Initiative is intended to promote a whole of government approach to food security that is comprehensive in nature and puts women smallholder producers at the center of its investments and strategy. All actors in the region must support the realization of this vision.

Only two affected countries in the region – Mali and Senegal – are FTF focus countries, an indication that FTF cannot serve as the only tool to improve food security in the region. In 2010, the US spent \$235 million on assistance

for agriculture in the seven affected countries in the region.¹¹ At the same time it provided \$222 million in emergency and non-emergency food aid.¹² Given inefficiencies in the current US food aid program, the US must rethink how it delivers assistance to support agriculture and food security in non-FTF countries. In order for US assistance to the region to have an impact, it will need to be sustained and predictable and provided over multiple years.

Assistance provided by the United States must be based on country-owned strategies. Through their Maputo commitments, African governments pledged to direct 10 percent of government spending to agriculture, a commitment they must keep. Public investments in agriculture must be robust, sustained and based on strategic and comprehensive investment plans. Through Feed the Future, the US has committed itself to supporting this effort. Even in non-FTF countries, the US must continue to support countries in meeting their commitments.

In October 2011, the Sahel Working Group launched a report analysing the lessons learned from the Sahel crises of 2005 and 2010, making specific and detailed recommendations focused on strengthening the resilience of populations and changing the approaches of humanitarian and development actors.¹³ It outlines a series of priority interventions and encourages a conceptual shift away from the false dichotomy of “development” and “humanitarian” to respond in a flexible manner based on principles of risk reduction, early and appropriate response and resilience.

One example of a tool that can bridge this divide is a strategic grain reserve that can be drawn upon to soften sharp price movements and be drawn upon to support the implementation of effective social safety net programs. This proposal was actively discussed by the G20 in 2011, and the development of a regional system of grain reserves is being pursued by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

All of the seven affected countries except Chad have established National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). These are nationally owned and led, multi-stakeholder bodies that focus on implementing national and local DRR initiatives as well as linkages to global processes, such as the Hygo

¹¹ OECD DAC Creditor Reporting System. Information retrieved April 2, 2012.

¹² USAID (2011) *US International Food Assistance Report 2010*.

¹³ See Sahel Working Group, *Escaping the Hunger Cycle: Pathways to Resilience in the Sahel* for detailed recommendations.

Framework for Action on DRR. Currently, only about 1% of aid to disaster-affected countries is devoted to DRR.

Recommendation Three: In coordination with other actors, the United States must assist in the resolution of the political crisis in Mali while maintaining humanitarian aid flows to the region

All relevant political actors on the ground must prioritize reaching a political agreement as soon as possible allowing all actors to focus on meeting the immediate humanitarian and security needs of the population.

The United States should maintain humanitarian aid flows, and any other freezing of assistance should be designed in such a way so as to minimize the impact on communities and allow for rapid return in the case of positive political developments.

Since late January 220,000 people have been internally displaced or fled to neighboring countries as the result of the conflict in Mali, a situation that remains extremely unstable following the coup d'état of March 22nd. Assessments show that displaced people have urgent humanitarian needs, while the movement of populations to already food insecure zones risks aggravating the food insecurity of host communities. Heightened insecurity also risks hampering humanitarian access to communities requiring urgent support.

The situation requires the immediate attention of all actors in the region, including the political and military leaders in Mali, ECOWAS, the African Union, donors and UN officials. Steps must be taken to prevent a further deterioration of security, maintain and scale-up on-going assistance and ensure that all actors can focus on ameliorating food insecurity in the region.

Oxfam is concerned that the ongoing food security crisis poses a significant risk for 3.6 million people in Mali who are vulnerable to a serious food crisis and are entering the lean season. There must be no question of any cut-backs in humanitarian assistance.

The current number of displaced people will likely increase as a result of continuing instability. Increased displacement, both within Mali and beyond its borders, will place further pressure on areas and communities that are already facing a highly precarious situation, creating major additional humanitarian needs for food, water, sanitation, hygiene and shelter. UNHCR has already called for \$94m to deal with the needs of displaced people, in

addition to the resources needed for the food crisis. The United States has so far provided \$7 million to UNHCR for assistance to refugees.

With humanitarian access already challenging in pockets of Northern Mali, a further escalation of conflict is likely to make the humanitarian intervention more complicated in areas affected by the crisis, such as Gao, Timbuktu, Mopti, Koulikoro, Segou and Kayes, just at the start of the hunger gap period - a critical time in the food security crisis the region is witnessing.

The conflict will undoubtedly impact food markets, not just in Mali but regionally as well, hampering efforts by traders and others to get food from surplus to deficit areas. The disruption of trade will affect the ability of local populations to purchase essential non-food items. Normal seasonal migration patterns will likely be disrupted and have already been compromised by the failure of pasturelands and water sources, further intensifying the food crisis. Mali's borders have already been temporarily closed, and proposed ECOWAS sanctions - including the closure of Mali's borders to all goods other than humanitarian goods and restrictions on access to seaports for traders - if implemented, could result in a serious deterioration in the functioning of the markets.

Bringing a peaceful conclusion to the current political and security situation in Mali must be a priority. Beyond this, it is critical to make every effort to meet humanitarian needs. All actors must prioritize the unimpeded flow of humanitarian assistance. In many cases, secure access can be facilitated most effectively by using local institutions and working directly with local communities.

Future droughts in the Sahel are likely; the question is how well equipped communities will be to cope with them. Whether the Sahel will remain stuck in a cycle of under-investment, chronic vulnerability and late response to crises, or whether the cycle of hunger is broken will depend on early and appropriate action with more thoughtful and effective investments in the coming months and years. The challenge lies ahead.

Forty percent of the people on our planet—more than 2.5 billion—now live in poverty, struggling to survive on less than \$2 a day. Oxfam America is an international relief and development organization working to change that. Together with individuals and local groups in more than 90 countries, Oxfam saves lives, helps people overcome poverty, and fights for social justice. To join our efforts or learn more, go to oxfamamerica.org.



Headquarters

226 Causeway Street, 5th Floor
Boston, MA 02114-2206
(800) 77-OXFAM



Policy & advocacy office

1100 15th Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 496-1180

oxfamamerica.org

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