

JULY 2012

The Sahel region of West and Central Africa is in the grip of a food crisis. Already, families in hard-hit areas are employing desperate measures to find food, like foraging in anthills for bits of edible grain. Oxfam and our partner organizations are working throughout the region to get help to struggling communities, but severe shortfalls in funding are hampering the aid response.

Background

The Sahel is a semi-arid swath of land that spans Africa and stretches from the southern border of the Sahara desert to the northern reaches of the continent's equatorial region. Here, as in many parts of the world, there is a period between harvests known as the "lean season," when those who depend on agriculture and live in poverty face privation until the new crops ripen. Even in a year when the land has been productive, many cannot survive the lean season, but when the harvest has been poor, untold numbers of people go hungry.

Since late in 2011, a perfect storm has been brewing in the western Sahel. In a region plagued by deep poverty, environmental degradation, lack of investment in agriculture and rural development, and a recent food crisis (2010) from which many have not yet recovered, the erratic and inadequate rains of 2011 and the poor harvests that followed foretold disaster. In some areas, grain production was 25 percent lower than the previous year; in others, it was down by more than 50 percent. The result: families across the region were left with nowhere near enough food to survive until the next harvest.

Now, food shortages have triggered a rise in prices, further reducing access to food. And with pastureland withering in the drought, the animals that farmers and herders depend on for both food and cash are suffering from starvation.

In one of poverty's vicious cycles, survival in the short run will require many people to sell the livestock and other assets they need to earn an income; many will even need to consume the seeds set aside for planting this year's crops.

And in northern Mali, armed conflict has deepened the crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people have had to flee their homes—some to neighboring countries and some to new locations within Mali. Many are now living with hosts who, already struggling with the food crisis, are ill-equipped to accommodate the new arrivals.



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If the rain doesn't fall, we cannot talk of life here.

—Koubra Hamid, Chad

A few facts

MORE THAN 18 MILLION

People affected by the food crisis

1 MILLION

Children in the region at risk of severe acute malnutrition

26 PERCENT

Drop in agricultural production in the region from 2010

20–60 PERCENT

Average rise in food prices across the region compared to the past five years

MORE THAN 360,000

People displaced by the conflict in Mali



What Oxfam is doing

Oxfam has set out to quickly reach 1.2 million people with aid across seven countries: Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal, and Gambia. Our programs include:

- providing cash transfers and cash-for-work projects to help people gain access to food without having to sell critical assets such as livestock;
- supporting the health of livestock through vaccination programs, distribution of fodder, training of veterinary staff, and improving water sources;
- providing agricultural support, such as seeds for planting;
- combating threats to public health with clean water, sanitation, and hygiene promotion.

While working to meet the most immediate needs, Oxfam is also assisting farmers and herders to improve their longer-term food security. In Mauritania, for example, we are providing irrigation to enable 1,300 women to grow vegetables in cooperative gardens—helping them feed their families, earn incomes, and reduce their vulnerability to drought. In Niger, we are supporting the rehabilitation of grain banks to help farmers store future crops safely and choose the best moment to put them on the market.

But addressing the causes and effects of the food crisis requires more than material assistance. At the heart of Oxfam's work on humanitarian response is a commitment to helping communities stand up for their rights, including the rights to protection and assistance in disasters. We are working both to help local voices be heard and to hold governments in the region accountable to their people in this disaster and beyond—advocating for stronger disaster preparedness, investment in rural livelihoods, and policies that meet the needs of the region's most vulnerable citizens.

IN NIGER, A LIFELINE

"I used to be able to harvest 100 bundles of millet from my field," says Son Allah, a farmer from the Dosso region of Niger. "This year, I have only had three."

In the wake of the disastrous harvest of 2011, Oxfam is undertaking a range of programs in Niger that include providing clean water and agricultural support, and aiding families who are hosting refugees from the conflict in Mali.

Enabling the most vulnerable community members to purchase the food they need is a top priority, so in Son Allah's village Oxfam and partners are providing cash payments to 83 households in exchange for work on improving a large tract of damaged agricultural land.

For Son Allah, who hasn't had enough food for his family, the project is a lifeline.

"With help, we can plant trees and sow grass before the rainy season comes. Hopefully, if we have a good rainy season, we will have pasture for our cattle, and in a few years, the plateau may even be reforested."

Above: The cash-for-work program that Son Allah has been working on in Niger is supported by Oxfam and partners. Residents are rehabilitating damaged agricultural land by molding soil into shapes that will prevent runoff when the rains finally arrive. *Fatoumata Diabate / Oxfam*

What can you do to help?

In a food crisis, quick action can save lives and prevent suffering. Delay can be deadly. Please join Oxfam now in helping the farmers and herders of the western Sahel survive the hardships of 2012 and begin building a more secure future.

DONATE

To support our efforts, donate at oxfamamerica.org/sahel or (800) 77-OXFAM.

JOIN OXFAM'S GROW CAMPAIGN

You can also help by joining Oxfam's GROW campaign—a global movement that seeks solutions to hunger, wherever they may be found, based on the understanding that we can't wait until the next crisis to do something about it. Take the GROW pledge or learn more at oxfamamerica.org/grow.

GROW
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