

## ANNEX: WEST AFRICA

### The Sahel, one of the fastest growing hunger crises in the world



Credit: Ibrahim Mahamat Saleh/Oxfam

« I sometimes spend sleepless nights fantasizing about what my children should eat the next day. »

*Achta Bintou Abouram, displaced woman and mother of five, Chad.*

The food and nutrition situation in West Africa has deteriorated significantly since 2019. The region is facing an unprecedented crisis due to multiple shocks on top of structural poverty, profound inequalities, and chronic food and nutrition insecurity.

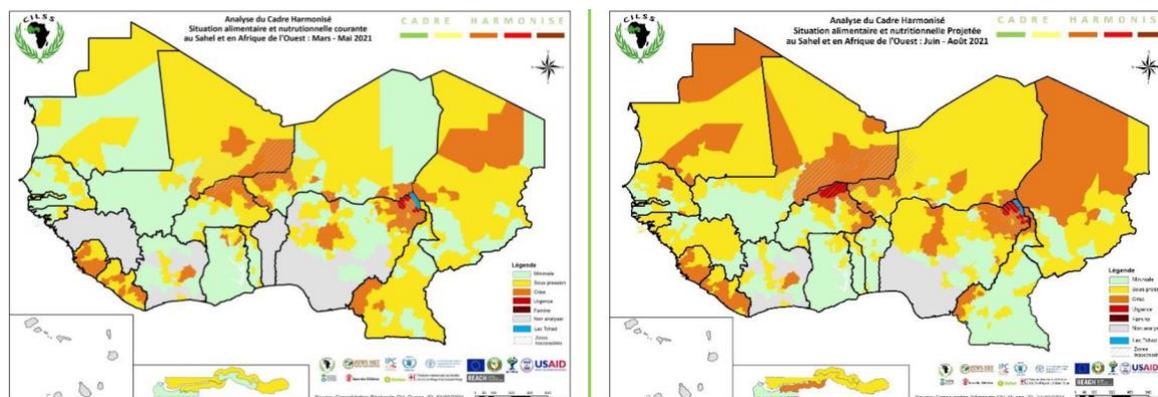
This "triple C" cocktail of Conflict, Covid-19 and Climate Crisis has led to an increased in the food and nutrition insecurity of people living in the Sahel, as well as impacting on household living conditions and economies.

For the second year in a row, West Africa is facing a major food crisis. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of hungry people in the region increased from 9.6 million to 17 million and is likely to exceed 27 million during the lean season of 2021.<sup>i</sup> This is despite the fact that the previous two agropastoral seasons were generally good and the availability of food, pasture and water for livestock seems adequate. The problem is instead primarily one of access to these resources, which remains very limited, particularly in conflict zones.<sup>ii</sup>

#### Peaks of conflict-related hunger

The increase of food and nutrition insecurity in the region between 2019 and 2021 is primarily due to the expansion of two major regional conflicts in the Sahel into areas already facing significant fragility and chronic food insecurity. The Sahel region (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad) had 15 million hungry people in 2020, a figure that is likely to rise to 22 million during the lean season from June to August 2021. The most affected countries and regions are those

directly affected by conflict: the Tri-border region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and the Lake Chad Basin region on the borders between Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.



Harmonised Framework, comparing the evolution of food and nutrition insecurity between March-May 2021 (right) and the lean season June-August 2021 (left)

Between the lean season of 2019 and the current lean season of 2021, the number of hungry people is projected to have at least doubled – and at most more than tripled – in all conflict-affected countries. The number of hungry people has increased by 317% in Burkina Faso, 178% in Chad, 159% in Nigeria, 136% in Mali and 97% in Niger.<sup>iii</sup>

This increase of food and nutrition insecurity in conflict areas is due to a combination of factors, starting with the massive displacement of people fleeing violence, leaving behind their fields, livestock, homes and livelihoods.

[Achta Bintou](#) from Chad, a wife and mother of 5 children, found refuge in the IDP site of Amma (Lake Province). Oxfam supported her with money as a start-up fund for income-generating activities: "We fled our home after the attack by armed groups in Boma (Lake Chad region) and my family was looking for shelter and security. Before the crisis, we were living in good conditions and eating three meals a day. The conflict with armed groups has had a devastating effect on our community. We barely eat one meal a day and this has a serious impact on the health and growth of the children and my ability to provide breast milk for my babies".

Nigeria alone accounts for half of the region's hungry people and has 2.9 million IDPs<sup>iv</sup>, more than half of the 5.3 million IDPs and refugees in the Sahel region.<sup>v</sup> Burkina Faso, which is experiencing the fastest rise in food and nutrition insecurity in the region, has also seen the fastest rise in displaced populations over the past two years, with the number of IDPs increasing from nearly 220,000 at the end of June 2019 to more than 1.2 million at the end of June 2021.<sup>vi</sup>

These massive displacements also represent a significant additional burden for host populations who were often already vulnerable before the crisis and who have taken one or more families into their homes. Insecurity also severely restricts the movement of people who risk their lives by travelling to fields, pastoral areas or markets, leading to the abandonment of cultivated land and livelihoods in the areas most directly affected by armed violence. The mobility of pastoralist populations is particularly affected by conflict and insecurity, increasing the vulnerability of these households to food and nutrition insecurity.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition, the destruction of infrastructure (schools, health centres, markets) and the interruption of basic social services (health, nutrition, education, school canteens) due to conflicts increase vulnerability, particularly of women and young children. UNOCHA predicts that "nearly 29 million Sahelians will need assistance and protection in 2021, 5 million more than a year ago".<sup>viii</sup> Insecurity has limited humanitarian access, leaving communities without assistance and protection and exposing humanitarian workers to increasing risks.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Conflict in the West African neighbourhood continues to drive millions of Central Africans into food and nutrition insecurity**

Between December and February 2020, a spike in election-related violence led to an increase in the number of people facing food insecurity in the Central African Republic. About 2.29 million people - nearly half the population - are now food insecure.

The recent violence has also led to an increase in prices, as transporting goods to market has become difficult due to the insecurity. The main road between Bangui and Cameroon - 80% of the country's imported goods pass through there - has been closed due to the attacks, creating unprecedented supply disruptions.

The vast majority of the Central African population depends on subsistence farming to feed their families, but election-related violence has forced farmers to abandon their fields to save their lives. Many have missed the planting season for essential crops.

Housseina, a farmer living in Bangassou, was forced to flee her home in January 2021 because of attacks on the town. She and her family spent a month in a makeshift camp in neighbouring DRC, waiting for safety to return to her neighbourhood. However, when she returned home in February 2021, she found her house and fields looted: "My pain was immense. We used to eat almost exclusively the vegetables I grow. Now I don't know how I will feed my family.

### **COVID-19 and the impact of restrictive measures: a factor in increasing hunger**

Measures to curb the pandemic have affected food systems, through impacts on food supply and demand, disruptions in the supply chain, and also indirectly through loss of income and employment and reduction in social services. <sup>x</sup> For example, the coverage of nutrition services decreased by 30% during the first months of COVID-19 in the Sahel region. <sup>xi</sup> Food stocks were also affected (grain collection, sales, access to finance), according to a study carried out by Oxfam and farmers' federations in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad. <sup>xii</sup>

Fatimata Zoré, a 29-year-old displaced woman from Dori, Burkina Faso, told Oxfam: "*COVID-19 really made us suffer a lot. Before this disease, we used to go from door to door to find work. We did the laundry, cleaned people's houses and earned enough to feed ourselves every day. But when the disease came, we were told to stay at home. We could no longer go out to look for food. To tell you the truth, we suffered a lot. It's difficult to find food. What you used to be able to get, you can't anymore. Everything has dried out.*"

In addition, preventive measures against COVID have contributed to price fluctuations during 2020, linked to regional restrictions on the movement of people and goods and the closure of borders. The World Food Programme (WFP) confirms food price levels in April 2021 which are at more than 15% above the average of the last five years, a situation exacerbated by economic instability (disruption of markets and trade). <sup>xiii</sup> Some countries, such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, have been particularly affected by the relatively restrictive COVID-19 prevention measures, which have aggravated a burgeoning economic crisis and a food security situation that has been steadily worsening over the past decade. 20% of the Liberian population and 22% of the Sierra Leonean population are likely to face food and nutrition insecurity during the lean season from June to August 2021, mainly due to severe economic crises in addition to the structural fragility of a suffering rural world. <sup>xiv</sup>

### **The climate crisis**

The Sahel region is highly exposed to the effects of climate change and will become globally and progressively warmer, with increasingly irregular rainfall and seasons. The effects of climate change in the region appear to involve significant variations in seasonality as well as an increase in the frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts or floods. OCHA estimates that the frequency of major floods increased by 180% between 2015 and 2020. In 2020, the scale of flooding

was exceptional in almost all Sahelian countries.<sup>xv</sup> According to OCHA, floods have affected some 1.7 million people in 14 countries and destroyed 162,000 homes.<sup>xvi</sup> About 1.4 million of these were in Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Burkina Faso.<sup>xvii</sup>

In interaction with social, economic and political factors, the climate crisis can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and increase the risk of local conflicts, such as tensions or even clashes between pastoralists and farmers over access to water and grazing land. Rapid-onset disasters and climate change cause temporary or permanent displacement, as well as eroding people's resilience, increasing the vulnerability of communities to predation by armed groups and manipulation by elites.<sup>xviii</sup>

### Insufficient and underfunded responses - a question of priorities

While food and nutrition insecurity continues to rise and humanitarian response plans remain underfunded, defense budgets continue to rise. Between 2019 and 2020 the combined defense budgets of Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger increased by 29% or US\$930 million,<sup>xix</sup> an increase that could have funded the total value of the 2020 humanitarian response plans of Burkina Faso and Mali combined.<sup>xx</sup>

Oxfam has assisted more than 700,000 vulnerable people in the region since the start of the pandemic. Together with its partners, Oxfam has supported more than 60,000 people in Chad to meet their immediate food needs and secure an income. In Niger and Senegal, more than 280,000 people have been helped to cope with the economic impact of the pandemic (food, cash assistance, clean water, sanitation and hygiene kits).

#### The story of Alizeta in Burkina Faso

Imagine having to grow vegetables in temperatures approaching 50 degrees with recurrent drought. In Burkina Faso, it is a matter of survival for the vast majority of the population who depend on agriculture for their food. *"All my life I have farmed,"* says Alizeta Sawadogo, 55. *"I used to grow cereals. But it rains less and less. And the dry season is getting longer and hotter. Harvests are getting smaller and smaller."*

Add to these difficulties the conflict in the north of the country, which is destroying entire villages and forcing people to abandon their land, as well as the economic impact of COVID-19, which is increasing food prices, and the lean season, when reserves are depleted while waiting for the harvest. The result is that more than 2 million Burkinabè are currently food and nutrition insecure.

This was also the fate of Alizeta, who lost her land and her husband and had eight children to feed: *"I had to look for ways to adapt and take care of my family."*

With the support of the NGOs Alliance Technique d'Assistance au Développement (ATAD) and Oxfam, Alizeta was able to join a group of 50 vulnerable and landless women in a collective farm of two hectares with four wells. Each woman manages her own plot free of charge, but they work on a collective basis. For Alizeta, this is an opportunity to reinvent herself: *"I have learned to produce organic food using environmentally friendly techniques. We do not use phytosanitary products because we want to offer healthy food. We enrich the soil with compost because it is easily depleted. We also produce our own seeds by propagating them,"* she says proudly.

Alizeta can now get through the lean season without fear: *"I can feed my family all year round. I even sell part of my harvest to cover medical expenses and school fees for the children."*

### Conclusions and recommendations

The serious deterioration of food security over the last two years is a response to structural elements (endemic poverty, chronic malnutrition, climate-related vulnerability, etc.) to which are added the "3Cs". Of these, there can be no doubt that conflict is the main factor when it comes to

the deteriorating situation in the Sahel. The maps of food insecurity and human security overlap and result in an unprecedented crisis – according to the analysis given by the Harmonised Framework – that is aggravated by the impact of COVID-19 and the climate crisis.

The management of the 2020 food crisis revealed a lack of funding for response plans in the face of growing demand for food assistance. Confronted by such huge and pressing needs, it is urgent that the states of the region with the support of regional and international partners

- **Provide emergency assistance to the most vulnerable to save lives while accompanying them in the reconstruction of their livelihoods**, in particular by strengthening, extending and adapting social food safety nets to new vulnerabilities and crisis contexts.

- **Guarantee access to humanitarian aid to populations in accordance with humanitarian principles**. Where aid is blocked, the international community must act to end the use of hunger as a weapon of war and hold those responsible to account.

- **Prioritise positive and inclusive approaches to peace that address the root causes of conflict and protect all populations**: Warring parties must forge an inclusive and sustainable peace that prioritises human security and addresses urgent food and nutrition insecurity in conflict-affected countries. Leaders must fulfil their commitments to include marginalised groups, including youth, women and minorities, in peace processes. Ceasefires have been shown to last longer and be more effective when women are actively involved in negotiations.

- **Commit to building fairer, more resilient and sustainable food systems** by taking the issue to the next World Food Summit and increasing investment in small-scale and agro-ecological food production, establishing minimum producer prices and other support mechanisms, and ensuring that workers earn a living wage.

- **Tackling inequality. West African governments should prioritise free public health care, social protection, decent wages and a fair tax system**. These are measures that have a proven track record in tackling inequality and can help the most vulnerable people cope with the multiple crises in the region.

- **Take urgent, equitable and consultative action to mitigate the effects of climate change and help producers and pastoralists - especially women and the poorest - to adapt to climate change**

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Cadre Harmonisé, comparaison entre les projections du nombre de personnes en phase 3 à 5 dans les périodes de juin à août [2019](#), [2020](#) et [2021](#).

<sup>ii</sup> RPCA, Note aux décideurs, Avril 2021

<sup>iii</sup> Cadres Harmonisés 2019, 2020 et 2021 sur la période juin-août.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/nga>

<sup>v</sup> OCHA, [Aperçu des besoins humanitaires et financiers – crise du Sahel](#), Avril 2021

<sup>vi</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa>

<sup>vii</sup> WFP FS Highlights

<sup>viii</sup> OCHA, [Aperçu des besoins humanitaires et financiers – crise du Sahel](#), Avril 2021

<sup>ix</sup> OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2021 <https://www.unocha.org/global-humanitarian-overview-2021>

<sup>x</sup> CSAO [https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/Food-nutrition-crisis-2020-Sahel-West-Africa\\_EN.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/Food-nutrition-crisis-2020-Sahel-West-Africa_EN.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> FSIN, Global Food Crises

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<sup>xii</sup> Oxfam, Rapports Oxfam et Fédérations Paysannes (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Tchad)

<sup>xiii</sup> WFP FS HIGHLIGHTS

<sup>xiv</sup> World Food Program in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone, [State of Food Security in Sierra Leone 2020. Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis](#), May 2021

<sup>xv</sup> CSAO / OECD, [https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/Food-nutrition-crisis-2020-Sahel-West-Africa\\_EN.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/Food-nutrition-crisis-2020-Sahel-West-Africa_EN.pdf)

<sup>xvi</sup>

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2021\\_sahel\\_crisis\\_hnro\\_fr\\_2.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2021_sahel_crisis_hnro_fr_2.pdf)

<sup>xvii</sup> FSIN, Global Food Crises

<sup>xviii</sup> SIPRI NUPI, Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet, April 2021 <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/climate-peace-and-security-fact-sheet-sahel-april-2021>

<sup>xix</sup> SIPRI database

<sup>xx</sup> Les plans de réponses du [Mali](#) et du [Burkina Faso](#) en 2020 nécessitaient respectivement des financements de 474 million USD et 424 millions USD, soit 898 millions USD combinés. En fin d'année ces plans étaient financés à pour le Mali et pour le Burkina Faso