The Food and Nutrition Crisis in West Africa & The Sahel

"If you don’t feed people, you feed conflict"
-Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General

We Must Act Now To Avoid the Worst-Case Scenario

Note d'analyse 2022
According to the 2021 Global Report on Food Crises[1], West African countries are facing a worsening and continuous deterioration in food and nutrition security. In 2021, they were disproportionately hit, with an estimated 23,669,383 people in need of food. This upward trend is confirmed by the results of the March 2022 Harmonized Framework analyses. There are currently 27,344,197 people (an increase of more than 3 million) who need assistance to survive. This figure is a new historical milestone. Never in the last fifteen years have so many people found themselves in such a pronounced state of food and nutrition insecurity[1]!

Whilst they are already dealing with unprecedented security and humanitarian crisis, with 10.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 2.1 million[2] displaced persons, many of whom are children and teenagers, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger again seem to be the worst affected by food and nutrition insecurity. The crisis in Ukraine and its impact on international grain prices, any increase in which will have a direct knock-on effect in many West African and Central Sahel countries, risks further exacerbating an already difficult situation.

But over and above the statistics, this crisis will have dramatic consequences for millions of men, women, and children. It is important to note that this region is home to 11 percent of the world's children, yet it accounts for 20 percent of the world's cases of stunted growth. This crisis is threatening several national economies and the future of the whole region[3].

Climate change, continuing conflicts, the disuse of arable land due to insecurity, the increase in extreme poverty resulting from Covid-19, and market tensions are all contributing to making 2022 one of the worst years in terms of food and nutrition security in West Africa for 15 years. Projections for the period from June to August 2022 do not suggest that the situation is about to improve at all. The results of the 2021 Harmonised Framework highlighted significant pockets of food and nutrition insecurity, resulting from natural factors (drought, irregular rainfall, etc.) and situational factors, such as insecurity, rising commodity prices, or the Covid-19 crisis, which prevented people from going about their usual agricultural and pastoral activities. The situation in Mali has been aggravated by the second military coup in May 2021 that led to ECOWAS implementing sanctions as of 9 January 2022, the closure of the country’s borders as well as the imposition of a trade embargo, which also saw financial aid being canceled and the country’s assets being frozen at the Central Bank of West African States (CBWAS).

As of March 2022, 27,344,197 people were in need of immediate food assistance. Based on current projections, and if nothing is done, this number could reach 38,320,001 people, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), in June-August 2022. Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mali, already hard-hit by this food crisis, will continue to suffer badly. Thus, as shown in Table 1, the threat of another food and nutrition crisis looms on the horizon, in a region where, apart from in 2016 and 2019, the numbers of people suffering from a food and nutrition crisis have continued to increase exponentially.
The nutritional situation also remains worrying and more serious than in 2018. By 2022, it is estimated that 6.3 million children aged 6-59 months in the G5+1 Sahel region will be suffering from wasting, of whom more than 1.4 million children will suffer from severe emaciation. The prevalence of acute malnutrition is on the rise in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad, exceeding the alert thresholds of 10%; rates even reach 15% in some countries. The results of the national nutrition surveys conducted in 2021 show that in Burkina Faso and Mali, the national prevalence of stunting exceeds the high threshold of 20% (21.9% in Mali and 21.6% in Burkina Faso), whilst in Chad and Niger, the national rates of prevalence exceed the uppermost threshold of 30% (43.5% in Niger and 30.4% in Chad). Nearly 70% of children under 5 with wasting in the G5+1 Sahel region live in the countries of the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger). Vulnerable groups, women and children, are most at risk and households are sometimes forced to sell their already-eroded means of survival at a loss to cope with the crisis.

The Multiple Factors Behind this Deep-Seated Crisis

This exceptional food and nutrition situation can be explained by multiple factors, all of which are interrelated. Overall, production is declining in the most affected countries. The losses are particularly significant as regards cereal production: Niger (-36%), Mauritania (-18%), Burkina Faso (-10%), Gambia (-8%) and Chad (-6%). These production deficits can be explained by the increasingly frequent climatic shocks, but also by security constraints (particularly in the Central Sahel) which make farming increasingly difficult.

This shortfall in production comes at a time of tense agricultural markets and a continued upward trend in prices despite the ongoing harvests in the region. Markets in West Africa are being hit hard by price increases on the international market. Rice, wheat, oil, sugar, and more generally processed imported products are seeing their prices rise by 20% to 50% depending on the country. The situation is even more worrying for local food products which, due to the drought in the Sahel during the 2021/2022 growing season, experienced
significant reductions in yield (−75% compared to the five-year average in some regions of Niger). The prices of these products, some of which were already scarce on the markets during the harvest period, were 30% to 150% higher than the five-year average in December 2021.

Rising food prices are a major challenge in a region heavily impacted by COVID-19. It is estimated that COVID-19 increased the proportion of people living on less than $1.90 a day by 2.3 percent in 2020 and 2.9 percent in 2021, leading to extreme poverty rates of 34.5% in 2020 and 34.4% in 2021 (African Economic Outlook 2021 by the AfDB). While the recovery of the regional economy still shows signs of fragility and remains insufficient to allow households to reach their pre-crisis nutritional and economic well-being status, 62% of respondents indicate that their income level is still low[i].

The most affected socio-economic categories are mainly households dependent on unstable and insecure sources of income, namely shopkeepers, street vendors, and casual workers. Households that depend on remittances are also among the most heavily impacted by the pandemic. Indeed, the proportion of surveyed households who received remittances between 2020 (72%) and 2021 (54%) has fallen by about 20%[ii]; and the amounts transferred are also decreasing. Employees with a regular income were the least affected. The farming sector continues to suffer from a lack of agricultural labour, due in particular to the closure of land borders. This situation has undeniably been improving since July 2021, but these effects continue to disrupt the supply chains of local agricultural products[iii].

[i] CGAP Covid 19 Briefing Note, August 2020
[ii] Study report on the impact of covid-19 ECOWAS 2021
[iii] Study report on the impact of covid-19 ECOWAS 2021

Zeinabou, Yanoussa, and their eight children live in a village in the Tahoua region of Niger. They are among the country’s vulnerable rural households that face recurrent food insecurity. The family cultivates a plot of land to produce the millet and sorghum they need to feed themselves throughout the year. Zeinabou uses another small plot of land for a small income-generating activity: artisanal processing of peanuts into oil during the dry season. But this is not enough. Every year after the harvest, in December or January, Yanoussa migrates to the capital, Niamey, to earn money to support the family. For six months, he sells jerry cans of water to poor households in the city who cannot afford a subscription to the national water company. He supports himself with this meager income and is able to send $10 a month to his family in the village. That was until COVID-19 and its offshoots arrived in Niger. Yanoussa’s water business dried up overnight, so he is no longer able to send remittances to his family. The pandemic has disrupted their fragile livelihoods.

Zeinabou and Yanoussa were already facing the challenge of food insecurity even before the arrival of COVID-19. Their family and millions of other vulnerable rural households across the Sahel are struggling today with the severe economic impact of the pandemic.
The deteriorating security situation in some countries: Continued insecurity and armed conflict are still leading to massive population movements in the region and increased pressure on the most vulnerable populations. As of 25 January 2022, the region had more than 5 million internally displaced persons, including 1.8 million in Burkina Faso, 300,000 in Niger, more than 2 million in Nigeria and 400,000 in Mali and Chad. In some areas of the Sahel, households have barely been able to work their land and therefore have not harvested anything.

Mr. Ouattara faced several difficulties before the support of PASANAD (Support Program for Food and Nutritional Security, Sustainable Agriculture and Resilience in Burkina Faso):
"Before the project, I had difficulties feeding my children; the income from production was insufficient and I had difficulties to send my children to school and to take care of them," he says. Indeed, thanks to the project, he benefited, among other things, from cash transfer, poultry, infant flour and a sanitation kit.

The Situation Risks Worsening

If urgent measures are not taken to provide food support to people/households under food pressure, all these figures could increase, with the possibility that households under pressure (phase 2) fall into a crisis situation or worse. With the increase in commodity prices, estimated at +30% between now and the lean season; untimely transhumance departures (forced and early departures) and an unusually early lean season, a decrease in household stocks and low availability of products on the markets are to be expected.

Ultimately, forecasts predict an early lean period, which risks doubling the prices of basic foodstuffs in several countries while household incomes are stable or falling. The period of Ramadan, which generally leads to an increase in demand and prices, could increase pressure on the markets in April. These factors could exacerbate the already deteriorating food and nutrition security situation in the region. The conflict in Ukraine is likely to maintain this upward trend, given that "Forty-five African and other least-developed countries import at least a third of their wheat from Ukraine or Russia, and 18 of these countries import at least 50%"

[ii] https://unric.org/fr/un-ouragan-de-la-faim-gonfle-par-la-guerre-en-ukraine/#:~:text=Quarante%20cinq%20pays%20africains%20et%20le%20Soudan%20et%20le%20Y%C3%A9men
Stronger Mobilization to Respond to the Crisis

The gap between people’s needs and food availability at the household level is considerable. Seasonal Household Economy Analyses carried out in March 2022 project a situation of survival deficit and lack of protection of livelihoods of quite remarkable magnitude. In other words, projected income and food availability at the household level are not sufficient to cover food expenditure, maintain access to basic social services and continue productive activities. Ultimately, this situation will force many households to develop survival strategies and make choices between their health, their children’s education and their diet.

The table below shows the 7 countries with populations facing a food and nutrition crisis: Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry, Mali*, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Chad. It also highlights countries with populations in phase 2, i.e., populations under food pressure. Already at this stage, people will be experiencing many difficulties in meeting their food needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pays</th>
<th>Total population analysée</th>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Phase 4</th>
<th>Phase 5</th>
<th>Total in Phase 3-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bénin</td>
<td>12 915 000</td>
<td>9 766 619</td>
<td>2 318 231</td>
<td>806 329</td>
<td>23 821</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>830 150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>21 253 895</td>
<td>12 468 940</td>
<td>5 331 444</td>
<td>2 825 046</td>
<td>628 464</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 453 510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabo Verde</td>
<td>483 628</td>
<td>299 473</td>
<td>138 062</td>
<td>43 003</td>
<td>3 090</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>46 093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>16 059 751</td>
<td>12 294 031</td>
<td>3 103 718</td>
<td>662 002</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>662 002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambie</td>
<td>2 455 839</td>
<td>1 642 345</td>
<td>606 782</td>
<td>199 751</td>
<td>6 962</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>206 712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>5 578 246</td>
<td>4 504 385</td>
<td>794 700</td>
<td>262 348</td>
<td>16 812</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>279 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinée Conakry</td>
<td>11 165 931</td>
<td>6 115 433</td>
<td>3 831 210</td>
<td>1 198 458</td>
<td>20 830</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 219 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiné Bissau</td>
<td>1 328 669</td>
<td>1 009 990</td>
<td>245 587</td>
<td>73 092</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>73 092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>21 696 914</td>
<td>15 444 742</td>
<td>4 411 103</td>
<td>1 684 507</td>
<td>156 560</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 841 067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritanie</td>
<td>4 359 275</td>
<td>2 045 401</td>
<td>1 434 953</td>
<td>795 603</td>
<td>83 317</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>878 921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>24 933 140</td>
<td>13 217 392</td>
<td>7 313 342</td>
<td>3 976 601</td>
<td>425 805</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 382 006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[i] [https://unmsg.org/fr/un-ouragan-de-la-faim-gonfle-par-la-guerre-en-ukraine/#:~:text=Quarante%2Dcinq%20pays%20africains%2C%20le%20Soudan%20et%20le%20Y%C3%A9men.]

The Harmonized Framework did not take place in these countries in 2022; the figures from the last Harmonized Framework of November 2021 have been repeated.
Confronted with a true crisis, households are and will remain economically unable to afford a healthy and diversified diet whilst also paying for their children’s health care and education. There is an urgent need to strengthen comprehensive integrated measures for the prevention and treatment of malnutrition in high-risk areas to protect children and women and prevent associated mortality.

Actions to support the livelihoods of stricken populations must be carried out by empowering affected households to maintain, relaunch, or diversify their arable and pastoral production activities by considering all the categories of people who make up the household so that each person’s specific needs and strategic interests are taken into account. This may include the initiation of income-generating activities (IGAs) or capacity building for better management of existing IGAs to improve resilience among these populations.

There is also an urgent need to put in place stronger social protection mechanisms for these populations (such as cash transfers) to prevent and overcome the impacts of such shocks. The situation in countries with populations in crisis is also characterized by the limited availability of biomass, and a significant loss of livestock due to insecurity in central and northern Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the north-western states of Nigeria. It should be noted that there is limited pastoral mobility in the Lake Chad basin due to insecurity.

Right now, we must save lives. For this, food aid to vulnerable households is essential for the lean season, which is expected to be very difficult in all affected countries. Particular attention should be paid to children aged 6-24 months who have an absolute need for nutritional inputs if they are to stand a chance of withstanding the shock.

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Findings and Recommendations

A food and nutrition crisis has been affecting people in some West African and Sahel countries for a long time. This food and nutrition insecurity is structural and endemic. Despite the countries’ efforts, supported by development partners and humanitarian organisations, the situation continues to deteriorate for the most vulnerable populations and those in rural areas in particular. In 2022, the severity of the crisis is of exceptional magnitude and severity, far beyond all the crises experienced over the past 15 years.

The situation is extremely serious and requires urgent remedial action. It is no longer a question of providing ordinary assistance but of saving lives and avoiding at least the worst-case scenario through rapid and massive mobilization. All stakeholders need to act immediately and decisively. We, therefore, call for action and ask:
To States:
- To strengthen the mechanisms for assisting States, through the mobilization of the regional food security reserve, including the need for food and livestock supplies.
- To ensure that the Community regulations on the free movement of goods (foodstuffs, pharmaceutical products) and persons are fully implemented, even in countries subject to sanctions, with a view to limiting the potentially negative effects of cumbersome procedures on transport costs, which have an impact on food prices, assuming that the borders which have been closed for more than two years do not reopen rapidly.

ECOWAS and WAEMU:
- To strengthen the mechanisms for assisting States, through the mobilization of the regional food security reserve, including the need for food and livestock supplies.
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To Partners:
- To rapidly strengthen support for States’ efforts as regards the implementation of national response plans for identified vulnerable populations through substantial funding.
- To reach an agreement between humanitarian and development donors on joint strategic and operational planning to ensure a more balanced geographical and temporal distribution of funding and responses (from emergency interventions to the rebuilding of locally-suitable livelihoods) and limit gaps.
- To commit among development donors to sustainably fund early recovery and resilience-building responses that are flexible and responsive to the context of conflicts and climate shocks and coordinated with humanitarian responses and donors.
- To reach an agreement between humanitarian and development donors on joint strategic and operational planning to ensure a more balanced geographical and temporal distribution of funding and responses.

Civil Society Organisations
- To organize information and awareness campaigns on food and nutrition with a view to early warning and prevention.
- To create inclusive frameworks for consultation and collaboration with governments to discuss food and nutrition issues.
- To participate in the development and implementation of national response plans alongside governments.

[1] Crise et sécurité alimentaires : vers un nouvel ordre alimentaire mondial ? (openedition.org)
[1] Note de synthèse Covid 19 du CGAP, août 2020