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Translating Famine Early Warning into Early Action: A Sahel Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Sahel region of West Africa once again struggled to cope with the effects of a major drought. Disappointing rains in 2011 left communities facing the long months of the dry lean season desperately short of both food and other sources of livelihood.

The impact of poor weather was compounded by conflict, security crises and political developments – the flight home to Sahelian states of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who had been working in Libya; the takeover of northern Mali by Tuareg and militant Islamist rebels; the overthrow of the Malian government in a military coup; Nigeria's closure of the central and eastern sections of the border with Niger in an effort to curb the activities of Boko Haram militants; pre-electoral tensions in Senegal.

Good rainfall in the 2012 wet season has created scope for some recovery in food supply pressures, cereal stocks and rural living standards during 2013. But in some places, such as Niger, heavy rain has brought its own problems, with extensive flood damage in the Niger river valley. And in northern Mali the risks of food insecurity remain high, because of the conflict between jihadist militant groups and the forces of the government and France and their African allies.

Moreover, the fundamental long-term problem remains: the Sahel is always food-insecure, even when harvests are good. The risk of drought and harvest failure is a fact of life, a potential threat that hangs over the region each year.

This case study looks at the reliability and efficiency of Nigerien systems for warning of potential food supply crises and reviews the country's strategy for reducing the fundamental insecurity of food supplies and rural incomes.

Multiple factors

The food security crisis that the Sahel experienced in 2011–12 was driven both by political instability and by climate and the performance of the farming and livestock sectors. The latter displaced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and, in Niger, sharply reduced the cash incomes of many of the poorest households.

The scale and complexity of the crisis highlighted the importance of developing effective early warning systems (known generally in the Sahel as SAPs – *Systèmes d'Alerte Précoce*).

The crisis of 2011–12 severely tested these systems and the capacity of national authorities and development partners to adapt to fast-developing and often unforeseen events. However, it did coincide with important steps forward in a regional effort to substantially upgrade early warning structures.

Meanwhile, Niger is taking its own steps to reinforce the resilience of farm output, rural incomes and the wider rural economy and natural environment. The country has also set out proposals for a northern development strategy, which is designed to counter the risk of a resurgence in political discontent and security problems in the north.

CONTEXT

This case study looks at these issues through the example of Niger, while drawing some comparisons with conditions in certain other Sahelian states.

Niger lies almost entirely within the Sahel and Sahara climatic belts. It is landlocked and it is among the poorest countries in the world, measured in terms of per capita GDP. It has the world's highest fertility rate and the population – now around 16 million – is thus growing rapidly, imposing severe strain on a fragile environment and resource base. There are strong traditions of migration, and community reliance on remittance income; this leaves Niger exposed to the impacts of upheavals in other countries such as Libya and Côte d'Ivoire.

However, Niger has a number of factors in its favour. It is a major exporter of uranium, a resource of increased value at a time of renewed international interest in nuclear power; and the recent development of oil production has supplemented export earnings and enabled the country to establish a basic self-sufficiency in petroleum products. Political and security upheavals have been more limited than in either Mali or Chad: although Niger's democratic trajectory since 1991 has been disrupted by coups, and rebellion by Tuareg populations in the northwest, the government has managed to negotiate a settlement with the rebels. Meanwhile, the periodic political upheavals in Niamey have not disrupted the continuity and effectiveness of public administration.

By regional standards the public service has been noted for its technical capacity and solid implantation at local level. Niger benefits from being adjacent to Nigeria, the largest economy and market in West Africa – a customer for exports and a source of reserve food supply at times of domestic shortage.

However, Niger has regularly suffered food crises, and sometimes severe famine. The northern half of the country is desert, while the south lies in the Sahelian belt, where rains fall for only a few months each year and frequently fail. National production of essential food crops and livestock is inevitably subject to large fluctuations from year to year, while the financial wellbeing of many households is contingent on the flow of remittance payments sent by family members working abroad. With the population rising fast, food insecurity has become a fact of life.

After a drought in 2011, the 2012 rainy season brought severe flooding in some areas – a different kind of challenge but still a threat to food security, livelihoods and community survival.

Living in this condition of permanent fragility, yet equipped with a functioning state machine, Niger has developed what is regarded by many outside agencies as the Sahel's most comprehensive and thorough system for early warning of potential food crisis. This looks at a wide range of social and economic and environmental indicators far beyond the agricultural sector and market food prices.

The operation of an effective early warning system has, however, not proved a sufficient defence against the risk of extreme poverty, malnutrition, or famine. Niger has continued to find itself confronted by the risk of major crisis, sometimes almost annually.

The country illustrates the significance of other factors, particularly political leadership, in either enhancing the effectiveness of an early warning structure or hindering its effectiveness as a tool to prevent problems developing into crises.

EARLY WARNING

The role of politics

Effective systems for early warning of food security risks or crises depend in large part on technical competence and good organization. But the nuts and bolts of data collection and analysis can only be part of the story. The capacity of a government machine and its development partners to appreciate the significance of the indicator information they receive and to respond effectively is also key. But beyond these professional skills there is a role for political leadership.

The whole question of early warning for food emergencies in West Africa is, according to Noël Tsekoras, deputy head of the West and Central Africa office of OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'extremely politicized. ... People are basing their debates and discussions on figures that are provided by states – and often the figures are not correct and the way they have been consolidated is not correct.'¹The problem, he believes, is governance. 'African and European states need to show more honesty about what is going on. They are too polite.'

The experience of Niger and other West African countries demonstrates this point.

Politics is fundamental. The extent to which leaders are prepared to acknowledge national problems can play a decisive role. An open and proactive approach can stimulate or facilitate effective action by national government, other internal actors and the international community. And a reticent or obstructive attitude can inhibit the capacity of both national and external actors to tackle potential food shortages before they become disasters and hamper their implementation of effective longer-term strategies to reinforce society's resilience to weather future crises.

Mali, Senegal and Niger offer three contrasting examples of political leadership and the way in which it impacts upon early warning and response to food security challenges.

Senegal has a higher per capita GDP than landlocked Sahelian countries, but many rural areas face the same problems of environmental fragility and food insecurity that are seen elsewhere in the region. The long-term need to increase food output was openly recognized by the administration of Abdoulaye Wade, head of state until his defeat in the 26 March 2012 election. His drive to bolster food production – the 'Goana' campaign – had some success. However, his government's handling of the 2011–12 crisis was undermined by political defensiveness.

In September 2011, after disappointing rainfall, humanitarian agencies realized that the harvest was likely to be poor; OCHA encouraged the Senegalese authorities to develop a national preparedness strategy. By early 2012 it was clear that 800,000 people would face food insecurity; yet by this stage President Wade was on the political defensive, facing a difficult election on 26 March, which he would go on to lose; his administration was reluctant to publicly acknowledge the emerging humanitarian crisis.

Sensitive to the government's awkward political position, donors agreed to provide urgent assistance without public fanfare, and the potential humanitarian crisis did not become a theme of controversy in the election campaign. This discreet short-term expedient ensured that timely help reached those in need, without waiting until after the election. However, this was no substitute for effective long-term food security.

In **Mali** the readiness to acknowledge food security risks has been patchy. Under the democratic presidencies of Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992–2002) and Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–12) the country earned a reputation for a commitment to basic development and, particularly in recent years, a sustained drive to bolster cereals output. It developed a system of stocks, with a National Food Security Commissioner reporting directly to the president. A national agricultural market monitoring agency monitored local pricing and demand trends around the country, while a system of annual cereal exchange meetings was established, to enable food surplus areas to sell excess

¹ Interview, Dakar, March 2012.

stock to food deficit areas. Fertilizer supply was officially subsidized by 50% during the final part of the Touré presidency.²

However, the translation of these initiatives into local delivery was inconsistent, undermined by weaknesses in the administration and by growing corruption. Some villages did not get the cheap fertilizer, because not all dealers had access to the subsidized supplies. The state was not always effective in ensuring that the much vaunted reserves stock policy was implemented at grassroots level; in some cases stocks only existed where villagers had agreed among themselves that the better off would contribute a share of their harvest to a communal reserve to help those with less land, as a form of the traditional *zakat* (Islamic charitable tax).

Foreign development partners complained that the collection of data and monitoring of local farm output was much weaker than in Niger. Meanwhile, independent assessments by CILSS (Comité permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel), the Sahel regional intergovernmental organization charged with monitoring farm output, found that in both the 2009 and the 2010 harvests the Malian authorities had massively over-estimated the increases in national cereals output that the country had claimed to have achieved.

Such heavy over-estimates seriously undermined any prospect of effective early warning coordination with the international community, because the government's official data were far too optimistic. In 2011 the government's early projections suggested harvest increases well into double figures in percentage terms; then suddenly, in early November, the food security commission concluded that the output projections were much too high and embarked on a fresh review. Routine over-optimism mattered less in years of good rainfall, but risked delaying an effective urgent response to poor harvests. The poor 2011 season may even have been a secondary contributor to the subsequent crumbling of state control as rebels swept across northern Mali in early 2012.

While in Senegal the growing 2011–12 rural crisis was barely acknowledged, in Mali food security was not a subject for political reticence. But there are big doubts about the reliability of harvest data, and the effectiveness of farm support and government stocks management -- and thus the genuine extent of progress towards national self-sufficiency in key staples.

Niger has presented a rather different case. The country's capacity to identify incipient risks to food security and to monitor potential crisis situations in the different regions of a vast national territory has been underpinned by strong local administration and data collection at the local level (see *following section*). By comparison with most Sahelian states, Niger has for many years sustained a more tightly controlled system of information gathering and reporting. Among international partners there is a general view that the civil service is probably more effective in Niger than in many neighbouring states. This may owe something to the country's history of pre-1990 authoritarian rule – though that is true of most other Sahelian states too. Cultural factors may also play a role – though again, one should be cautious about over-stating this argument. But in any case, the practical consequence is that officials working at the local level in Niger are accustomed to reporting regularly to the central government on agricultural and social welfare conditions.

The fact that Niger lies entirely within the Sahelian and Saharan climatic and environmental belts also fostered a general recognition of the need to monitor risks: in contrast to Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger lacks a fertile and relatively well-watered south to underpin national agricultural output; practically the entire country is vulnerable to the impact of any significant shortfall in rainfall. It has been permanently food-insecure, and this condition has steadily intensified as the population has grown fast – Niger has the world's highest fertility rate, at an average 7.52 children per woman. So central government, local administration and local communities are permanently attuned to the risk of serious food crisis. This is never further away than the next growing season. The current head of state, Mahamadou Issoufou, hopes to change this state of affairs through his new 3N initiative (see below). But, even if successful, this will only bring about a gradual reduction in the ongoing risk of food crisis.

² Interviews with President Touré, villagers, senior officials, and Malian, regional and international NGO specialists, Bamako and southern Mali, November 2011.

The presidency of Mamadou Tandja (1999–2010) highlights the critical significance of political leadership in shaping the effectiveness of early warning systems.

Tandja first came to office through an open democratic election in 1999; he was re-elected in 2004 for a second term. But as this drew to a close, he sought to remain in power, setting aside the two-term limit prescribed by the Nigerien constitution, becoming increasingly authoritarian and ignoring the objections of the national assembly and the constitutional court. So although he had come to office through the democratic path, he was in fact dismantling Niger's democratic safeguards, to prolong his personal hold on office. This eventually provoked the military to intervene, deposing Tandja in a peaceful putsch in February 2010 and promising the restoration of normal democratic arrangements. Under strong African and international pressure to honour this commitment, the military governed Niger for 14 months. Democratic elections, generally viewed as fair and transparent, saw Mahamadou Issoufou elected president in early 2011; he took office on 7 April that year. After a period of detention, Tandja was released into a quiet retirement from public life.

Tandja had been a career soldier before entering politics and, particularly during his final years in power, he adopted a strong executive style of government. He appeared uninterested in alternative critical views or independent technical analysis that did not concur with his own assessment. Tandja insisted that hunger did not exist in Niger and that the country did not face a risk of serious food insecurity or famine. Although government technicians continued to report on local farming results and nutrition, and donors and NGOs present in Niger were aware of prevailing local conditions, the central government explicitly refused to acknowledge whenever the food supply situation was seriously deteriorating. When news of famine or a critical risk of famine in certain regions leaked out to the international media, the government would sometimes relent at the last minute and permit donors to intervene with emergency assistance. But the humanitarian impact of poor rainfall and harvests was much worse because it was not tackled at an early stage with preventive measures to avert a full crisis.

Tandja's refusal to acknowledge Niger's food security risks became more adamant in his final years in power. On one occasion a regional governor, preparing for a presidential visit, asked the French NGO Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) to cover up or take down a roadside signpost to one of its projects; the governor explained that Tandja would be very angry if he saw a signboard suggesting that there might be hunger in Niger. Donors and officials quietly agreed to give a programme of relief for populations suffering from food shortages the euphemistic title *Appui à la Production* ('support for production'), because Tandja would not have tolerated a name indicating its true purpose, as this would have implied that some Nigeriens were suffering from malnutrition.

While the recollection of such episodes may provoke a smile, the practical consequences were serious. Tandja's refusal to acknowledge Niger's true position of food insecurity, or admit to emerging crises, seriously hindered the work of the major UN agencies and other donors and NGOs in tackling humanitarian emergencies and implementing programmes to reduce long-term food insecurity. In 2005 conditions were particularly difficult, because of the closure of the frontier with Nigeria, the usual reserve source of up to 60,000 tonnes of cereal imports during periods of shortage. Yet Tandja expelled the BBC, to stop information getting out, and came close to ordering the shutdown of the World Food Programme (WFP) office.

When the prime minister's office, the European Union, the WFP, the UN and UNICEF did try to develop a joint approach to food security, the president ordered that it be halted. Donors continued to assist with nutrition programmes, but they had to adopt a discreet, low-profile approach. The monitoring of the food security outlook became particularly difficult, because this varies from year to year, depending on rainfall; effective monitoring requires a good flow of information – which was seriously hindered during the latter years of Tandja's rule. Even in favourable circumstances it takes several weeks to collect information and analyse it to get a clear picture; and this became much more difficult when the country's president did not want the government to admit to food security problems.

The consequences of his attitude risked becoming particularly severe after the poor agricultural season of late 2009. By early 2010 the food supply situation was acute. Through their own local activities and their dealings with Nigerien technical officials, the humanitarian agencies were aware of the impending crisis, but their capacity to act effectively was hugely impeded by Tandja's refusal to admit to the problem.

However, the military officers who seized power in February 2010 adopted a radically different approach. They immediately admitted that Niger faced a potential food crisis and asked the international community to help. Otherwise, said one senior donor official, 'the 2010 crisis would have been a total nightmare'. With Tandja gone, Niger's long-established government early warning network (*Système d'Alerte Précoce*) was able to function much more effectively; the time-lag between assembling data at local level, collecting it and producing an overall national assessment was reduced from several months to 6–8 weeks, and the data became much more detailed.

Donors responded and in less than three months 70% of humanitarian needs were met.³ The policy of openness has been continued by President Issoufou. This has fostered a much-improved working relationship with external partners, and it may also have encouraged Nigerien government officials to report openly on conditions in the geographical areas and economic sectors for which they are responsible. The readiness to acknowledge vulnerability and plan ahead to deal with it may help to counter any tendency on the part of some local officials to put a positive gloss on the situation. The challenge will be to sustain this culture of openness and honesty as time goes on. That will demand political courage as the next election approaches, because Issoufou will be under political pressure to demonstrate that the 3N campaign to bolster food production – a centrepiece of his programme – is producing results.

That point reinforces the critical influence of political leadership and debate over the effectiveness of early warning systems and whether or not technical data that signal emerging problems spark a timely and efficient response from national government and from international partners.

³ Interview with senior UN official.

EARLY WARNING STRUCTURES IN NIGER AND THE REGION

The credibility of information for donors

The top of government can set a lead. But the engine room of the early warning and response process is the national structure of technical services whose personnel collect data, at local and national level, and maintain close practical relationships with donors, NGOs and other external partners. Niger has a history of dense technical reporting by officials working across the country and in a range of departments and services. Although the Tandja regime's reluctance to admit to problems sometimes inhibited the effective operation of early warning during the first decade of this century, the basic official networks and culture of data collection were already in place. This meant that after the military removed Tandja in February 2010 the new government could immediately draw on the information flowing through the system to give humanitarian agencies the detailed picture of what was happening on the ground they needed to assess emergency aid requirements.

Moreover, the restoration of democracy, with the election of Issoufou in March 2011, opened the way for the full normalization of relations with external partners – and the restoration of long-term development assistance designed to enhance resilience and reduce the risk of future food emergencies.

The relatively well-organized and thorough nature of the reporting and data management structure in Niger has bolstered the confidence of technical and financial partners. The core is the *Système d'Alerte Précoce* ('le SAP') – the early warning system. Although certainly not perfect, it is seen as credible, reliable and fundamentally 'trustworthy'. This meant that as reports emerged in late 2011 pointing to the emergence of big shortfalls in food supply, donors felt able to indicate strong early backing – 'almost a blank cheque', in the words of one NGO expert.⁴

Several factors had combined, pointing to a potentially major crisis:

- Poor rains had produced a disappointing cereals harvest and limited grazing and fodder for livestock;
- The poor rainfall also created a poor water supply situation for irrigated market gardening, normally a key mainstay of community food and income in the lean months;
- The Nigerian authorities' official closure of the central and eastern sections of the Niger/Nigeria border – to hinder the movement of Boko Haram militants – had disrupted the normal cross-border flow of trade in cereals that backs up Niger's domestic reserves;
- The crisis in Libya sparked the return of 250,000 Nigeriens who had been working as migrants there; this meant extra mouths to feed; it also brought a drastic slump in the cash remittances that in some areas of Niger had accounted for 80% of household income – a particularly vital support for the poorest rural families with little farmland;
- The longer-term security crisis in the Sahara region had already paralysed its tourism industry, which is normally a useful source of cash income, particularly around Agadez.

This was a complex situation. However, the capacity of Niger's government and its external partners to manage the emergency response was substantially helped by the existence of a well-organized early warning system.⁵

By comparison, even before the rebellions and state collapse of early 2012, Mali's capacity to manage crises has been hampered by the weakness of local organization in its early warning system, whose reports on local conditions are often inaccurate, and by corruption in the

⁴ Interview with NGO food security specialist, Niamey, March/April 2012.

⁵ Interviews with senior Nigerien officials, villagers, NGO specialists, regional experts and international partners, Niamey and southwestern Niger, March–April 2012.

administration, including, it has been alleged, the key emergency/risk agency, the Commission à la Sécurité Alimentaire (CSA – Food Security Commission).⁶

Niger's SAP is well regarded by international partners. An experienced NGO specialist describes it as a technically rigorous data-collection system, where officials working at the local level know what they need to report and are generally reliable in carrying out this task.⁷

An experienced regional specialist with a leading NGO sees it as West Africa's best-functioning system of information on food markets and supply. This expert says that an effective early warning system needs to take account of not only food output but also household budgets and welfare; it also needs to function well in institutional terms, both within the national structure of government departments and agencies and in relation to the donor community. Chad is now overhauling its early warning system; but the reform – which is funded by the European Union – is hampered by the absence of the local data-collection and monitoring network on which the Nigerien system is built⁸.

The SAP's capacity to monitor household welfare is key, because many poor Sahelian families depend on cash income, often from remittances, at least as much as they depend on food they have grown. Information from the early warning system is essential if programmes of cash transfer assistance to poor families are to be effectively targeted, so that the money is distributed to the households that need it most.

The SAP and the cellule de crise

The SAP in Niger was established in 1989, ahead of many other early warning systems in the region. A number of other Sahelian states have tried to emulate it.

Initially, the system focused on food security, nutrition and basic health. But in the mid-1990s USAID argued that the model needed to be extended so that it could actually be used to manage crises. USAID set up a fund to pay for this transformation and for crisis relief; this saw the SAP become the SAPGC (*Système d'Alerte Précoce et de Gestion des Crises*).

A military coup in Niger in 1996 led USAID to suspend some funds and to channel remaining assistance through NGOs. However, the EU stepped in to help – and its expert advisers argued that the early warning system and the crisis management team would operate more effectively if they were run by separate units, as distinct functions. So in 1998 the crisis management element was hived off, to form a separate Cellule de Crise. In 1998 the government drew up a strategy for managing crises – the Dispositif National pour la Gestion de Crises.

This is the structure that exists now. But the component elements work closely together. The SAP team and the Cellule de Crise are in close regular contact; SAP staff often makes suggestions to the Cellule de Crise about the actions needed. Both the SAP and the Cellule de Crise report directly to the prime minister; they occupy offices in close proximity to the premier's own office – which facilitates their regular access to the top levels of government.

Collaboration between government and donors is overseen by a joint committee (the *Comité Mixte de Concertation* – CMC). This is a more political and general body, bringing together senior official figures including ambassadors. But day-to-day collaboration is overseen by a more technical *Comité Restreint de Concertation* (CRC), chaired jointly by the head of the prime minister's office (*directeur de cabinet*) and a food security specialist from the European Union delegation in Niamey. It meets fortnightly or, if required, weekly, to discuss the technical details of the specific actions that need to be taken.

The various political upheavals that have taken place in Niger – coups in 1996 and 2010, the assassination of President Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara in April 1999 – have not interfered with the

⁶ Comment from senior NGO sector specialist.

⁷ Interview, NGO specialist, Niamey, March–April 2012.

⁸ Interview, NGO Sahel specialist, Dakar, March 2012.

functioning of this system, even during the Tandja presidency. Although Tandja refused to admit to the hunger problem, he did not actually interfere with officials' technical work in collecting data, nor did he seek to alter the figures they had collected.

The strength of Niger's SAP is the collection of a broad range of data on a regular basis, giving a picture both of the agricultural and food supply situation and of local patterns of development performance and nutrition.

Data are collected for the SAP unit not only by agricultural officials but also by those from other departments and agencies with local-level engagement. Potentially this could be a large workload, but in fact officials are frequently collecting the information anyway for the needs of their own agency. For example, when nurses and healthcare assistants visit villages to check on the wellbeing of babies and young children, they make assessments of weight and nutritional status as part of their normal work as health ministry employees. The data they collect are sent both to the health ministry and to the SAP unit; likewise, agricultural ministry officials submit data on crops both to their own department and to the SAP. By collecting data from a range of indicators, the SAP is able to get an overall picture that is much more comprehensive and detailed than would be possible if it relied solely on agricultural data. For example, information on crop growth and harvests would not give any indication of the level of remittance income received by villagers from family members abroad, even though this cash is the mainstay of household welfare for families in some regions of Niger. However, if families are short of cash to buy essential food, this may be reflected in indicators of low weight and malnutrition risk among infants, which the SAP is also receiving.

SAP data strands in Niger

The main types of data collected for the SAP are:

- Rainfall volumes and timing over the course of the year;
- Outlook for cereals and other food crop production, harvest data;
- Outlook and harvest data for crops cultivated by farmers for cash sale;
- Livestock numbers and condition, the availability of forage, grazing and water;
- The availability and pricing of food in local markets and livestock in markets;
- The performance of non-agricultural livelihoods and products, such as fishing;
- Health and nutrition of local populations; trends for the incidence of illnesses; levels of health staffing – numbers of doctors, nurses, health assistants etc.);
- 'Indicators of alert' – e.g. when villagers start selling farm equipment, land, household possessions or female breeding livestock;
- 'Adjustment capacity' – e.g. if the rains fail, whether a village has a pool from which it can draw water, or alternative products to sell to supplement income;
- A 'vulnerability rating', which seeks to measure vulnerability to crisis by comparison with how the village has weathered conditions in previous years.

Between August and early October – during the main agricultural season – the SAP unit aims to produce an assessment of the situation in each of the administrative areas (*départements*) into which Niger is divided and then to assess the vulnerability of each municipality (*commune* – a town or administrative group of villages). In late October there is a national review meeting. Those municipalities deemed to be in a critical or highly critical risk position – typically accounting for 10–20% of the national population – are then subject to monthly monitoring.

Since 2005 the SAP and the Cellule de Crise have regularly drawn up contingency plans, and the value of these was highlighted in early 2010. Once a change of government removed the political

obstacle to admitting that Niger faced a crisis, it was possible for the humanitarian donor response to begin rapidly and make an effective impact – because technical data on the extent of the problem and contingency planning on how to deal with it already existed.

Typically, three million people are in a precarious situation, with 300,000–400,000 children suffering malnutrition. It is this permanent vulnerability and suffering that the 3N programme aims to resolve, through a step change in reducing community vulnerability and increasing access to adequate nutrition for the most vulnerable populations.

The SAP and Cellule de Crise have small staffs. Supported by technical staff in the key ministries, their role is one of coordination; they do not duplicate the main sector ministerial structures. To ensure effective early warning and crisis response at local level, this pattern of interdepartmental coordination is replicated through regional and sub-regional crisis prevention and management committees.

But the system still has operational weaknesses. The sheer volume of data flowing into the SAP represents a major challenge, particularly as the lack of access to electricity or appropriate telecommunications means that a lot of the information has to be transmitted in handwritten or typed form – and then re-keyed at the SAP office in Niamey, after it has been brought there by drivers of bus services from provincial towns. In 2005–06 UNICEF provided support for a trial system of data transmission by radio, but this did not function well. Now the SAP is looking at the feasibility of using flashdrive memory sticks – which would allow the physical transfer of data from a fieldworker's laptop in a village or provincial town to the computers of the SAP in Niamey: officials in local areas would record data on their laptops and then copy this onto flashdisks – which could still be brought to Niamey by bus drivers from the towns where reliable email connections are not available.

Some international partners wonder whether it might also be worth developing a simple set of key indicators that could be monitored with much less workload. This might operate in parallel with the existing highly detailed system – but because the processing of these more limited data would be less labour-intensive, it could be updated more frequently, to provide regular quick snapshots of trends as they develop.

Donors also express concern that the size of Niger means that current SAP system cannot work to the same standard nationwide; in some regions there simply are not enough personnel from the appropriate government departments to collect the full range of data. There is also concern that the current detailed reporting questionnaire is too subjective and leaves too much room for officials to give a subjective assessment – rather than acting as a measure that is neutral and objective. Some busy officials do not have the time to complete the questionnaire carefully. Analysis of the data once collected also poses a big challenge.

The EU humanitarian agency ECHO and NGOs such as Save the Children and Oxfam have done considerable work on the question of 'household economy assessment' (HEA); in forming a picture of food security and malnutrition risk this is particularly important in a country such as Niger – where many of the poorest families depend largely on cash income – because it looks at issues beyond food production and pricing. HEA assessment is now being tested on a large scale.

The regional debate over indicators and data

Effective management of information is critical to the functioning of an early warning system that is credible and treated by the international donor community as a reliable guide to food supply conditions and the risks of potential crisis.

If donors do not trust the data and analyses that are cited to justify appeals for humanitarian assistance, they will be more cautious about pledging the aid and delivering it on the scale or to the timetable that is really needed to prevent a potential problem developing into a major crisis.

In 2012 the security crisis in northern Mali, and concerns that the violence jihadist groups that had taken over the region could pose a threat to both West Africa and Europe stirred international

concern about the Sahel. France's President François Hollande, for example, made the Sahelian crisis, and Mali in particular, one of his top two non-European foreign policy priorities (alongside Syria).⁹

In this worrying security context, donors did respond effectively to appeals for aid for the Sahel. By September 2012, the United Nations and West African governments felt able to express satisfaction at the way donors had responded to the food supply problems caused in the Sahel by the 2011 drought and other problems.

However, senior UN sources have warned that there was no assurance of such an effective response by donors on the next occasion when the Sahel faces a food crisis, particularly if, by that stage, their fears about terrorism and violent insecurity in the region have eased.¹⁰

Edging towards a common view

If aid appeals are to spark a timely and adequate donor response, in a situation where the Sahel has slipped down the foreign policy and security agenda, it will be even more important that they are founded upon credible data and assessments of need.

Donors' decisions over how to respond to potential crises in Sahelian countries have sometimes been complicated by differences between the assessments made by different agencies. Appeals are less credible, and less likely to generate a strong donor response, when agencies and governments are divided both over the essential data and over how it should be interpreted, to reach conclusions about how much outside aid is needed.

In particular, FEWSNET has been much more cautious than most other agencies in forecasting potential shortfalls in food supply and potential crises. Some sources in that agency have argued that there is a difference between agencies – such as FEWSNET – whose role is purely one of technical assessment of trends and needs, and those agencies and NGOs whose role is actually to mobilize resources and deliver assistance. Moreover, some agencies actually fulfil both roles.

The assessment of food insecurity and the need for assistance has become a contentious issue, the subject of impassioned argument between many of the agencies and individual experts that are working in the Sahel.

But several points have emerged in the course of research for this project:

- FEWSNET was more confident than most other agencies about the ability of West African market supply and demand mechanisms to respond to local harvest shortfalls during the 2012 crisis. Other agencies were more pessimistic about the risks of crisis, arguing that even when local shortfalls are met by commercial imports, these may be priced at levels that the poor cannot afford.
- Some senior UN sources have expressed concern that there is a lack of rigour in the data methodology in parts of the UN system, and within OCHA in particular. Examples of specific serious flaws in the collection and presentation of key data have been cited to the author of this report in interviews. There is recognition at high level in the UN system that it needs to develop more technical competence, consistency and rigour in its handling of the data and exposition of humanitarian needs in the Sahel. For example, sometimes untested West African government statistics are cited as 'UN data'. According to one senior UN source, 'The UN needs its own internal numbers.'
- Concern was expressed by a senior UN source that OCHA, or elements of OCHA, sometimes regard data as an advocacy tool to be mobilized in support of an argument, rather than an objective and neutral measure of a situation.

⁹ Interview with senior French diplomatic sources.

¹⁰ Interview with senior UN official, London, 2012; comments by senior UN official, London briefing, 2012.

- But, even on rigorous technical grounds, most other agencies and NGOs engaged in technical assessment tend to reach more pessimistic conclusions than FEWSNET about the likely severity of crises in the region.

In summary, beyond arguments over objectivity and institutional motivations, there are notable differences between FEWSNET and most other agencies and NGOs over how data should be assessed and, in particular, over the conclusions about risk and need that should be deduced from the bald numbers. And even within the UN system, there are differences between the approaches taken by individual institutions: 'We still don't have a good standard methodology', one UN interlocutor said.

However, 2012 saw the emergence of a broad acceptance that differences in assessment between agencies have undermined the overall effectiveness and credibility of reporting on drought and food security risks across the Sahel. Many technical specialists in the key agencies, among both international and African agencies and NGOs concerned with food security in the Sahel, have argued that it would be better to produce a common assessment, agreed by all players, and that was therefore treated seriously by donors, even if there were quibbles over some of the detail.

A senior UN humanitarian manager for the Sahel has proposed that an expert inter-agency group examine how projections are developed for various regions around the world.

Since early 2012 technicians from a range of international agencies and the main West African regional body for these issues, CILSS (see below), have been engaged in detailed discussions over the development of a common approach. At a workshop in Niamey in early April 2012 they reached provisional agreement on a map of food security risk across the region. However, some significant differences of approach are yet to be resolved. Meanwhile, key UN humanitarian agencies have been asked to jointly develop a package of advice for all nine existing member states of CILSS on how to measure and interpret data on a common basis.

In developing a common approach, and agreed assessments of vulnerability, the obstacles are not only technical but also philosophical and institutional. Individual agencies are proud of the expertise and analytical concepts they have built.

For example, FEWSNET stresses the extent to which it examines the functioning of local household livelihoods, the movement of goods, and markets in food, and how these fluctuate according to seasonal patterns of agricultural output. A degree of fluctuation in levels of supply and pricing is normal; and the agency believes that it is therefore important to examine how far a current position is out of line with what should be the normal pattern or trend. In technical terms, this is an approach that it applies worldwide, wherever it is monitoring farm output and food security.

The path towards common agreement among experts on how to measure and report food security in the Sahel is further complicated by the complexity of assessing other influences beyond agriculture, the environment and the market for food. Recent expert discussions on harmonizing the assessment of food insecurity have had to tackle not only the obvious 'frontline' questions such as the measures of malnutrition, but also issues such as the analysis of seasonal migration patterns.

Food security remains a hugely difficult issue to measure accurately and fully understand. The Sahel is a vast and complex region, where national factors are only part of the picture; and the importance of the cash economy for household welfare further complicates attempts to fully understand the food security position.

'Everyone can say everything and the contrary,' says one specialist¹¹. 'Food security is a science in its infancy' – for example, technical analysis of price trends remains generally weak, and headline figures or averages do not tell the whole story.

There is one region of Senegal where overall data show that households are heavily dependent on remittances for family members working as migrants elsewhere; but detailed HEA research found

¹¹ Interview, international donor specialist, Niamey, March–April 2012.

that it is the better-off families that receive most of this money – while 65% of families do not have any remittance income flowing in. So remittance flows are not a good guide to all households' ability to buy food.

In Niger, research by Save the Children has found huge disparities in wellbeing between families in the same village: the most prosperous 15% of a village population typically have a household income of CFA1.3 million (\$2,470) a year, while 35% fall into the poorest category, with total household incomes of around CFA120,000 (\$230) a year. This poorest 35% will typically own only two chickens, supplemented with a goat or sheep that is loaned by a more affluent neighbour, and from which they can take the milk (but not the meat).

Senior UN sources hoped that work on developing a common methodology would advance sufficiently to permit agencies to produce an agreed joint assessment during the 2012–13 agricultural year which began with the July–September 2012 rainy season. However, significant technical and institutional hurdles had to be overcome. So despite some progress, full agreement on a common system had still not been reached in April 2013. Still, senior UN sources said that even substantial progress short of a full agreement would strengthen the foundation for future consolidated aid appeals, when these were needed.¹²

The gradual reinforcement of CILSS' authority and reach

One of the strengths of the Sahel, and West Africa as a whole, is a strong sense of regional identity and a readiness to view problems in regional terms. This reflects economic and social realities. West Africa is relatively well integrated; markets are not purely national and cereals, livestock and other foods are traded extensively across borders. This is partly a reflection of the natural complementarity between the more well-watered and fertile countries of the West African coast and the drier, environmentally fragile Sahelian regions of the interior.

In 1973, as the region struggled to cope with the impact of a major drought, Sahelian states formed the Comité permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse.¹³ Headquartered in Ouagadougou, with associated institutions in Niamey and Bamako, CILSS acts as a hub for the collection of data and the mobilization of West African government efforts to counter both emergencies and longer-term drought and desertification risks. In partnership with other major technical agencies (the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the WFP, FEWSNET etc.), it carries out missions to assess the food supply position in each member state; there is a programme of assessments and review meetings, in which donors are also involved, that unfolds during the course of the agricultural and food supply calendar, to monitor the position and consider whether outside aid is needed.

Hitherto, CILSS has often been viewed by international donors as subject to national political pressures from member governments. It has been perceived as reluctant to openly criticize national government data or publish data that are more pessimistic than government assessments. But CILSS has begun to develop a more muscular approach over the past few years. For example, during the 2009 and 2010 assessment process, the Malian government's bullish official harvest data were rejected by the independent monitoring mission; the problem occurred again in November 2011, when Mali presented a set of data that was simply not credible in the view of West African experts involved in the assessment system.

In such situations, however, governments are often too proud to admit they have been over-optimistic; and the difference between their upbeat figures and the more realistic assessment of the independent review is not always widely noticed. The independent verdict is not widely publicized by CILSS and it may still lack the institutional clout that would lead the international community to treat CILSS assessments as the foundation for decisions on whether or not humanitarian assistance is needed.

¹² Interview with senior UN official, May–June 2012.

¹³ Member states: Cape Verde, Chad, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal.

Confronting national governments publicly with the independent assessment, in a public challenge to their national data, could prove politically difficult or even impossible. However, the development of a harmonized expert assessment of the food security position right across the Sahel could offer a tactful route around this hurdle. The results of the CILSS independent assessment are one of the main ingredients in creating this 'common map'. Because such a common assessment would be the fruit of a broad inter-agency effort, it could potentially carry greater political and public authority than the pronouncements of individual agencies, whether regional (such as CILSS) or international. Such a common assessment would come to be treated as the principal basis for donor analysis of the food security position in the Sahel, including individual countries.

But in any case, the CILSS system is being steadily reinforced. This indicates a broad degree of acceptance among West African governments of the need for a more effective shared regional monitoring system, even if they are sometimes uncomfortable with its specific country-by-country findings.

CILSS is joining the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the internationally recognized standard for categorizing food security. This will further reinforce the credibility of its assessments.

Moreover, the CILSS system of early warning (SAP) reviews of each country's agricultural season is now being extended to the coastal West African states – a recognition of the fact that the West African regional market in food is relatively integrated.

Levels of food production and export capacity in coastal areas can have a big impact on the situation in the vulnerable Sahelian countries. For example, a food crisis was provoked in 2008 by a supply/demand imbalance, and consequent food price pressures, between northern Nigeria and adjacent southern regions of Niger. Similar factors had also been in play during the crisis of 2005.

The original CILSS system was based on monitoring cereals. But as it is extended to encompass the whole of West Africa, its scope is being expanded to monitor crops such as yam and cassava that are important in the wet tropical areas of the coast.

The performance of the national early warning systems of member states varies. Those of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are viewed as the most effective, while in Senegal the Wade administration had in recent years tried to strengthen the national system, with the assistance of FAO and WFP; CILSS hopes that the new government under President Macky Sall will reinforce this process. The organization is also concerned to encourage an overhaul of early warning structures in long-standing member countries where these systems are currently weak – such as Gambia.

However, there is a shortage of CILSS staff and funding, particularly at a time when the organization is trying to help the new nine coastal member states develop SAP arrangements. The current level of development varies considerably: for example Ghana is one of the most advanced economies in West Africa, with some of the strongest governance structures in the region – yet external experts felt that the country still lacked an effective SAP system. CILSS therefore included Ghana in the list of coastal West African countries requiring assistance to reinforce their SAP structures as they were brought into the expanded regional monitoring network.¹⁴

CILSS specialists also face the challenge of trying to persuade government ministry personnel to think outside their institutional boxes – so that health workers, for example, feed health data into their national early warning system (as already happens in Niger). For CILSS is increasingly aware of the need to broaden the scope of data collection and monitoring if this is to provide a comprehensive picture of food security and malnutrition risks.

¹⁴ Interview, senior monitoring and SAP specialist, West Africa, April 2012.

Nigerien strategies

Historical context

Niger exemplifies the impact that government leadership can make in shaping a national response to the food insecurity that has become a fact of life over the past two decades.

In this situation the response of the state and its political leaders is key. Niger does have a relatively strong public administration, by comparison with neighbouring states such as Mali and Chad. The public service has thus played a crucial role in managing the risk of food insecurity. Central government does have access to a significant volume of up-to-date detailed information on local food production and nutritional conditions.

Even so, this has not always proved an adequate defence against the risk of supply shortfalls, malnutrition or famine. Niger has regularly suffered severe emergencies. As previously noted, President Mamadou Tandja was not prepared to recognize publicly that the risk of famine was a real one. This inhibited the capacity of both national actors and development partners to take actions to counter the threat of food insecurity. When the military seized control in February 2010 almost their first action was to admit publicly that Niger faced a severe risk of famine and to seek international assistance.

President Mahamadou Issoufou, elected with the restoration of democracy in March 2011, has continued this policy of open acknowledgment of the problems Niger faces in food supply. A programme to bolster national food production, *Les Nigériens Nourissent les Nigériens* ('Nigeriens feed Nigeriens') – 'les 3N' – was a central plank of his election campaign programme. The government is now starting to put this into effect (see below).

On 1 October 2012 the Prime Minister Brigi Rafini – himself a Tuareg from the north – launched an ambitious \$2.5 billion development strategy for northern Niger – the SDS/Sahel-Niger initiative. Having seen rebels take over the north of neighbouring Mali, the Issoufou administration is anxious to tackle the governance and socio-economic problems that could fuel instability in its own Saharan regions. Law enforcement, border control, infrastructure and basic social services will be key themes of the five-year programme; the government believes that it will be able to meet half the cost from domestic fiscal resources, while the European Union is expected to contribute €91.6 million. However, it still has to mobilize substantial extra donor support if the strategy is to be fully implemented. The initiative is not primarily concerned with food security and household income, but it should foster a more favourable environment for progress on these issues.

The 3N initiative and urgent action

Technical work on the 3N policy was entrusted to a sector specialist who supports Issoufou's PNDS party – Amadou Alahouri Diallo, an irrigation engineer who had held senior government agricultural posts before working elsewhere in Africa for the World Bank and FAO. This was innovative in its public recognition of the food insecurity problems that face Niger; indeed, it was unusual for a political candidate to set out specific sectoral policies in any detail in an electoral platform, rather than relying purely on personal, regional and ideological themes.

The 3N programme is not, of course, the first attempt by a Nigerien government to promote domestic food production. But what marks the strategy out is a deliberate focus on community initiative. Rather than entrusting the role of project initiator to central government and its local agencies, the new approach aims to encourage individual villages and municipalities to assess their own needs and put forward proposals for government to assist.

However, in the 2011–12 agricultural year, central government led from the front, because a poor 2011 rainy season had left Niger facing serious food supply risks. Urgent action was obviously necessary to tackle this and help local communities recover from the current crisis and prepare for the new 2012 planting season. (The rains normally fall between July and October.) But the

government also began to prepare to apply the new 'bottom up' approach; resources for this were allocated under the 2012 budget (Niger follows a January–December budget year).

Longer-term resilience through the 3N initiative

The 3N aims to develop a long-term response to Niger's problems of food insecurity. It was born out of a recognition that each time the annual rains are inadequate the country faces a crisis and the risk of famine. Even if donors provide emergency aid on time, the country remains exposed to the risk of a repeat experience the following year – and, without a fresh approach, the situation risks getting worse, as climate change leads to increasing unpredictability in rainfall.

Although Niger is a Sahelian country with average per capita income among the lowest in the world, the Issoufou administration believes that insecurity can be reduced. Senior officials point out that some other countries in the region have already managed to establish a more secure base of food supply. Moreover, Niger does have cards to play: it has substantial artesian water reserves, as well as a large national livestock herd and strong pastoral traditions. The government can expect a moderate increase in its spending power – because of the rise in global demand for Niger's uranium (as the need to tackle global warming has renewed interest in nuclear energy) and because it has now started commercial production of oil, serving national needs and West African markets.

The 3N seeks to provide a comprehensive strategy for bolstering national food output and enhancing the positive impact that this has on levels of food security, nutrition, household welfare and economic activity. In late 2011 Issoufou established an agency to drive the strategy forward – the Haut Commissariat des 3N – headed by Diallo, his key technical adviser on the subject.

This unit reports directly to the president. It has only a small staff and its purpose is not to duplicate the work of government ministries, but to act as a motivator and coordinator, mobilizing state agencies, the elected leaders of local communities, donors, NGOs and the private sector into mounting a coherent and sustained national effort. Senior sources say that at present there is a lack of synergy between ministries, while NGOs tend to choose their project locations solely according to their own criteria, rather than dovetailing into a national strategy. The role of the 3N High Commission is to produce a more joined-up and strategically coordinated approach.

The programme looks beyond Issoufou's current five-year term of office. But the hope is that even if the president failed to secure re-election for a second term, a successor administration would continue this coordinated approach.

For the first five years, the prime focus will be to increase food production, both in the traditional main cereal crop season and through initiatives to support irrigated market gardening during the dry, lean months (*la soudure*), livestock, fish farming and the planting of orchards and firewood lots. But the strategy also looks further, to the reinforcement of crop processing, conservation and marketing networks, improvements to household nutrition and social programmes, for example, to strengthen the position of women. Community mobilization is a key theme throughout – and this is to be a particular focus of the work of the 3N High Commission.

A checklist of targets for development provision has been set at national level, but the underlying goal is to stimulate a proactive local culture of development planning and implementation, in the belief that this will increase the chances that projects and initiatives will be sustained over the longer term.

The 3N strategy aims to ensure there is a basic development 'kit' or checklist of possessions, structures, equipment and services at every level of society locally:

- *For an individual household:* improved seeds and fertilizer, access to water and training in how to conserve and use it most effectively, and at least a couple of chickens and a cockerel, and a goat or a sheep;
- *For each village:* a cereal reserve, a communal bank or shop supplying agricultural inputs, an animal vaccination unit, a communal supply of farming tools and shared

machinery (e.g. threshers), a women's market garden, a recovery centre for malnourished people and a 'farm field school' for learning about new techniques and crops;

- *For each municipality* (usually 15–20 villages, with a combined population of 30,000–40,000): a market, all-year vehicle road access (to reach urban markets), a central purchasing unit for equipment, a cereals store, and a hub for trading agricultural products.

Of course, in many places a number of these elements are already in place. The 3N High Commission estimates the cost of developing this national strategy over the next four to five years at \$2 billion. The commission hopes that individual villages and municipalities, and their elected local councillors, will put forward the practical suggestions for the actual detailed implementation of the programme in their villages. Government will then aim to help, or mobilize the assistance of development partners. For example, villagers could ask for engineering help to build a small dam, to create a pool for irrigation or fish farming. 'We want a bottom-up approach, which means villagers setting priorities,' said a senior policy-maker. The government also hopes to stimulate more local private-sector activities in villages and provincial towns, to trade or process farm products or, for example, repair agricultural equipment.

SHIFTING FROM CRISIS RESPONSE TO RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT

Niger's approach to early warning and resilience

Niger has been notable among Sahelian states for the strength of its technical early warning structures, the central position that these occupy in the public administration and the openness with which public officials at national and local level are prepared to discuss these issues.

However, the country also demonstrates how even a well-established SAP system can struggle to provide a comprehensive picture and stimulate a timely and adequate donor response when required. Niger has continued to experience food emergencies.

Political leadership is certainly a factor – as was demonstrated when President Mamadou Tandja refused to acknowledge the risk of severe hunger until a crisis had occurred. But the complexity of the challenge in ensuring food and livelihood security is daunting in a fragile Sahelian environment, with so many other risks involved.

The Sahel and West Africa – an emerging regional strategy

Much work remains to be done. The Sahelian countries, regional partners and the international community have already made huge progress towards the development of a harmonized and better-integrated system for monitoring food security and wider risks to livelihood across the Sahel and indeed the whole of West Africa.

There are still technical details to iron out and political and institutional tensions to be resolved; but the region is already well advanced in the process of enhancing the overall regional early warning structure and ensuring that it dovetails with national SAP systems. This should enhance the credibility of the process with donors.

A powerful positive factor is West Africa's strong sense of regional identity, evident also in its handling of peace and security issues. There is a sense of common purpose, an acceptance of the way that events in one country can impact on neighbours, and a willingness to work together and recognize the validity of regional institutions.

Implications for international partners

The challenges facing West Africa are huge – and the environmental and political security risks to the region have been highlighted by the coincidence of a drought emergency and the Malian coup and rebellions.

However, the region has made substantial progress towards the development of an effective harmonized early warning structure, despite resource constraints. The provision of even very small sums of external funding could usefully assist the completion of the necessary technical work – for example, by expanding the small team of CILSS technicians working with coastal states on their integration into the CILSS monitoring network.

At the same time, Niger offers a demonstration of the depth of institutional culture and practice that has to be built in order to develop a credible early warning system at a national level. There is room for improvement even in Niger – and other countries have further to go.

Given the challenges required in developing an early warning structure that functions well and provokes appropriate donor responses when necessary, the role of resilience becomes crucial.

In a wide range of research interviews for this report, interlocutors repeatedly stressed the need to bridge the gap between humanitarian emergency relief and long-term development. It was frequently argued that the best defence against crises was to enhance resilience, so that

communities and households could better withstand the times of shortage and difficulty that are almost inevitable for those living in a Sahelian environment. For example, it is likely that every second or third year the rains will fail. Equally, it is probable that political upheaval or economic depression elsewhere will periodically produce a slump in the remittance payments on which so many Sahelian families rely.

Niger shows how the development of strong early warning systems is essential and can be achieved, even in a poor country. However, the country's experience also demonstrates the critical importance of complementing such structures with a strategy to build up community resilience, diversify sources of livelihood and reinforce the base of household incomes. The poorest households often depend more on cash income than their own farming output, and the cost of enhancing their resilience on a sustained and widespread scale can be large: a World Bank programme to provide cash transfer support over two years for poor families in 20 of Niger's 63 administrative districts is budgeted at \$70 million.

The provision of support on the widespread ongoing basis that could permanently enhance the food and income security of the poorest will be expensive and will depend on long-term commitment by national governments and external partners. There is therefore a case to be made for the explicit institutional recognition of resilience as a priority theme for national development strategies in Sahelian countries.

But strong resilience structures can only be part of the picture, a necessary complement to an effective system of early warning – the essential subject of this case study.

CONCLUSIONS

From this assessment of early warning arrangements in Niger and other Sahelian countries, several conclusions can be drawn.

1) The administrative and technical capacity of the state is key. Niger shows how even a low-income country with limited resources can develop strong systems for monitoring food security and key development indicators, nationwide and in detail. The improvements still required in Nigerien structures for the collection and handling of data are achievable at relatively modest cost.

Niger has demonstrated how a credible early warning system can strengthen the confidence of external partners and stimulate the timely supply of urgent assistance when evidence of a potential crisis is spotted.

2) However strong the early warning system, political leadership still plays a crucial role. Through their readiness to acknowledge problems and promptly seek international assistance, the current government of Niger and its immediate predecessor administration have opened the door to the rapid provision of emergency external aid when needed.

But there have been times, both in Niger and in other Sahelian states, when the ability to identify and tackle incipient emergencies has been hampered by political leaders' reluctance to acknowledge problems or by the weakness of government's capacity to operate effective early warning, emergency response and food security systems.

3) Regional structures for monitoring and early warning are important, particularly in the Sahel, and the wider West African region – where cross-border food supply and other trade, migration and remittance income payments are critical for food security and household welfare.

West Africa has a well-developed culture of intergovernmental partnership and a regional institution, CILSS, that is specifically tasked with the independent monitoring of agricultural output and food supply networks. The coverage of this system is being extended to embrace the Sahel's coastal neighbour economies.

Yet CILSS' track record shows how difficult it is to establish the independent authority of a regional system and ensure that its assessments command attention and stimulate appropriate responses at the national level. CILSS' assessments are still far from commanding the sort of media and political attention in member states that International Monetary Fund missions routinely enjoy in the financial sphere.

4) Efforts have been made to develop a common basis for food security early warning that ensures the buy-in of all the key external partners and NGOs as well as CILSS and national governments. The obstacles to reaching full agreement on a system that would command universal authority are technical, philosophical and institutional.

At senior UN level there is strong belief in the need for such a common assessment methodology that can command universal acceptance as technically rigorous, independent and objective. This argument is also accepted among other key partners, both external and Sahelian. But agreement on the essential technical fundamentals is still some way off.

5) External partners can have a positive impact, through support to bolster local technical capacity in early warning and contingency planning, and through their diplomatic capacity to get things done and mobilize international participation and funds.

6) However effective the early warning systems, the Sahel will remain a region that is vulnerable to the risk of food insecurity. For the foreseeable future, therefore, the region will need to pursue a sustained drive to enhance household and community resilience and strengthen underlying economic capacity and development structures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND NOTE ON SOURCES

Research for this report was conducted in Niger in March and April 2012 through a wide range of interviews and discussions with residents of villages in Niger, government officials in local positions and senior national posts, and regional experts, official and NGO development partners. Further research interviews and discussions were conducted with farmers groups, national government officials and political figures, NGOs, international experts, diplomats, regional technical specialists and senior United Nations personnel in Bamako and villages in southwest Mali, Dakar, Ouagadougou, London and Paris in November–December 2011, March–April 2012 and May–July 2012.

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