



André, head of the family in a village in Ziniaré (Burkina Faso). Photo credit: Gery Barbot/ Oxfam

CENTRAL SAHEL

**URGENT ACTION NEEDED TO SAVE 7,6 MILLION PEOPLE
IN NEED OF FOOD AND NUTRITION ASSISTANCE**

The Central Sahel is facing a hunger crisis linked to a lack of agricultural production, coupled with the inaccessibility of necessities due to galloping inflation that affects the purchasing power of the most vulnerable. This situation is also one of the consequences of an international condition against which countries are struggling to protect themselves. The lean seasons come one after the other and systematically catch millions of vulnerable people in the spiral of a hunger crisis to which agricultural policies and emergency assistance provide only approximate and very specific responses. While the trends of the first analyses on the results of the last agricultural season announce an increase in cereal production of 20% in the Sahel countries, the need for vigilance and assistance remains crucial in this region. Indeed, behind this apparent progress, there are increasingly difficult realities for people in need of assistance, caught in the grip of structural poverty, deep inequalities and a chronic food crisis, who have had to face a particularly dire lean season this year.

DEEP-ROOTED AND RECURRENT FOOD CRISES

Food and nutrition crises in the Sahel are recurrent. They result from structural factors, which are aggravated by a cyclical context marked by multifaceted crises, which precipitate already fragile populations into a situation of extreme vulnerability. Insecurity has continued to destabilize the Central Sahel for more than a decade now, with its share of populations in situations of forced displacement within and outside their borders¹. These displacements lead to an inability to produce, reduction in agricultural and grazing land, loss of people's livelihoods, disruption of sources of supply, among others. The security impasse has further weighed down the agricultural sector, with the most vulnerable people, especially women and children, as the main victims. Blockades of cities sheltering large masses of displaced populations in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, closures of markets, schools, health centres, restrictions on population movements (prohibition of accessing the fields, pasture, fishing, prohibition of certain means of transport) affect the availability and accessibility of basic necessities, hamper emergency assistance and raise the spectre of famine in areas with high levels of insecurity.

In parallel, the Sahel states allocate fewer and fewer resources to the agricultural sector despite Malabo's commitments. This has a harmful impact on the most vulnerable populations' access to means of production. To date, none of the countries of the Central Sahel is on the way to implementing the transformation²³ of its Agriculture, which weighs on agricultural yields already tested by difficult climatic conditions.

In addition to the lack of financing, agricultural producers, especially small-scale farmers, are facing the effects of climate change : huge losses and damages due to droughts and floods, unsuitable seeds, degraded land. Poor distribution of rainfall have led to floods that

¹ the three countries total more than two million internally displaced persons: Burkina Faso, 1 882 391 (CONASUR, December 31st 2022), Mali: 412 387 (Ministry of Health and Social Development, December 31st 2022), Niger 530 000 internally displaced persons, (OCHA 2022)

² According to the latest assessments, Burkina Faso had a score of 5.20, Mali 6.66 and Niger 3.64 while for Be Declaration on the road to implementation work of the Malabo Declaration, we must have a score of 7.28

³ NICEF Niger Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2: 30 September 2022

<https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/unicef-niger-humanitarian-situation-report-no-2-30-september-2022>

have ruined the hopes of thousands of agricultural producers, including about 241,760 people in Niger alone in 2022⁴. In Burkina Faso, these floods caused losses of area in several regions including those of the Boucle du Mouhoun and the Centre Nord where are concentrated respectively 10 and 19% of the 2,618,638 people⁵ currently in a situation of insecurity. The situation is equally difficult in other countries such as Mali where a producer testifies: "the little we sowed was washed away by floods due to climate change" Halimatou Alpha, Baria, Bourem circle. In addition, vulnerable people have also found it extremely difficult to access fertilizers and seeds adapted to increasingly short rainy seasons and pockets of drought.

Farmers have also borne the brunt of an internal and international context marked by the Ukrainian crisis, which has led to an increase in the price of hydrocarbons in highly dependent Sahel countries. Thus, while producers were already struggling to feed themselves due to lack of resources, the soaring prices of basic necessities accentuated by the effects of COVID19 have significantly reduced their purchasing power. In Burkina Faso, from January to September 2022, the prices of a 100 kg bag of millet, sorghum and maize increased by +67, +72 and 56% respectively, while in Mali, for the same products, the variation was +90, 81 and 29% respectively. Niger, an oil-producing country, has suffered an increase in the price of diesel at the pump, from 538f to 668f CFA at the pump since August 2022. This has a considerable impact on food prices, the majority of which are imported. "Millet, maize, cowpea and imported rice are the most important food products consumed in Niger." FEWS NET, 2022.

In response to this crisis, Oxfam, in addition to its efforts to support the development of the agricultural sector to protect the most vulnerable, including women and youth, and the resilience of communities to climate change, has adopted response plans in the three countries of the Central Sahel to provide food and nutrition assistance to people in need. These plans have made it possible to provide assistance to 153,024 people: 38,784 in Burkina Faso, 59,157 in Niger and 55,083 in Mali.

7,651,904 WILL BE IN NEED OF FOOD ASSISTANCE IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL DURING THE NEXT LEAN SEASON

The first results of the IPC analyses reveal a cereal surplus in the region with production having increased by 5.6 % compared to the five-year average against 2.7% last year. However, the fact remains that 7,6 million people will be in need of food assistance in the central Sahel in the next lean season, if urgent measures are not taken. Already for the period from October to December 2022, 5,3 million people in the Central Sahel⁶ are in need of food assistance.

The Central Sahel is home to more than 2 million internally displaced people and is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with constantly evolving needs. Paradoxically, the region suffers from underfunding in all countries with considerable gaps

⁴ Forecast results of the harmonized framework, November 2022

⁵ **7,651,904** people. 2,872,278 in Niger, 1,246,406 in Mali and 3,533,220 in Burkina Faso

⁶ **5,294,653** people in the Central Sahel, including 2,618,638 in Burkina Faso, 2,044,331 in Niger and 631,684 in Mali

in the Humanitarian Response plans (62% for Burkina Faso, 62% for⁷ Mali and 41 % for Niger (OCHA, January 2023),

Populations in need of assistance have also suffered from the lack of support to enable them to produce sufficiently, in order to completely get out of the vicious circle of hunger. Finding resources to ensure the subsistence of one's family in a context of unprecedented inflation but also investing in the family field to ward off the spectre of hunger has proved to be a difficult equation for millions of people across the Sahel: "During the lean season, we encountered many difficulties including financial problems", says André BIRBA, a producer in the Central Plateau Region of Burkina Faso. These financial difficulties have also made it difficult for vulnerable producers to access fertilizer: "this year fertilizer was expensive and we did not have enough to put in our fields," he says. Access to adapted seeds for vulnerable producers has also been affected, with repercussions on the yields of their farms: " we had to consume our seeds due to the lack of food, so we no remained without seeds for the agricultural season", Bahiya Baye, Bourem Djindo, Mali

This situation compromised his yield, as did thousands of other farmers across the Sahel: *"During the rainy season, we did not even have money to pay for fertilizer to put in our field. On top of that, our donkey died this rainy season. So we had to cultivate our field with daba⁸. The attic is unfortunately empty,"* says a widow head of household in Burkina Faso's Plateau Central Region. The difficulties of the lean season have also pushed vulnerable producers to sell off their livelihoods to meet emergency needs: *" I was forced to sell off the goats I had. Despite everything, I got into debt with the shopkeeper,"* says Fatoumata Sangare, a widowed head of household living in Djondjori, Mali. These debts of vulnerable people will continue until the next harvest: *" We are forced to sell some things to support ourselves. Today, I am gradually selling my stock of millet, to survive,"* says a producer in central Mali.

The response to the 2022 lean season has suffered from low funding. The underfunding of the humanitarian response plans of the various countries (38% covered for Mali and Burkina Faso, 59% for Niger, January 2023) has had a severely harmful impact on vulnerable populations. Despite the efforts made by States and donors, the assistance delivered to vulnerable populations remains insufficient compared to their needs. Sahelians are emerging from the lean season with consequences that permanently undermine their resilience to food crises and their dignity: debts, loss of livelihoods, economic and social disorganization, etc. A poorly planned lean season leads to a risk of falling into emergency food assistance needs. The lack of resources to invest in production and underfunding of the food crisis exacerbates the vulnerability of affected communities.

Should we continue every year to provide an emergency response to these recurrent food crises? Surely, there needs to be a sustainable response to these crises. To do this, it is essential to look beyond the emergency responses, and address the root causes of the crisis. It is crucial to support the emergence of an agricultural sector that takes into account the most vulnerable populations and prioritizes food sovereignty in the Sahel.

⁷ OCHA: 2022 Humanitarian Needs and Response <https://response.reliefweb.int/west-and-central-africa/2022-humanitarian-needs-and-response>

⁸ Daba is an African tool used in agriculture. It is found in West Africa, notably Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Burkina Faso.

Taking more and better account of the fight against climate change in agricultural policies and development programs is necessary to enable populations, especially vulnerable populations, to be more resilient. In a volatile Sahel marked by insecurity, working for the return of peace is more important than ever to end hunger. Emergency responses must be combined with development actions, and strategies to build and consolidate peace. Only this way will we be able to stem recurrent food crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The hunger crisis, which peaked in West Africa during the past lean season, is likely to continue to plague the 2022-2023 agricultural season if there is not a strong mobilization to provide emergency assistance to communities and provide an adequate response to the structural and cyclical factors that cause the food and nutrition crisis.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS:

- Provide timely emergency assistance to the most vulnerable populations, especially children, women, youth and internally displaced persons to save lives while supporting them in rebuilding their livelihoods, including by strengthening, expanding and adapting food security safety nets to new vulnerabilities and crisis contexts.
- Support populations in the off-season production activities through the development of perimeters and the mobilization of water, the reconstitution of livestock and support access to means of production.
- Support vulnerable people, and women in particular, in need of food assistance with income-generating activities to enable them to meet their needs and live in dignity.
- Invest in agriculture by supporting family farmers and vulnerable populations in secure access to land, inputs (improved seeds, fertilizers), equipment and especially adapted financing.
- Identify and implement sustainable solutions to the structural causes of food and nutrition insecurity by implementing development policies and structuring investments to promote food and nutrition security.
- Commit to building fairer, more resilient, and more sustainable food systems by scaling up investments in small-scale food production and promoting agroecological practices.
- Take urgent, equitable action to mitigate the effects of climate change and help producers and pastoralists adapt to climate change.
- Promote social protection which is productive and shock adaptive.

TO INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS AND DONORS

- Finance the humanitarian response plans to meet the urgent needs of affected populations.
- Provide timely emergency assistance during the lean season to vulnerable people and IDPs to enable them to feed themselves and produce.
- Finance resilience projects to promote off-season crops.
- Fund triple nexus projects which combine humanitarian, development, and peace components.

TO SUB-REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

- Ensure that States effectively implement agreements on the free movement of persons and goods, including food products and pastoral mobility.
- Support the implementation of regional and national fertilizer supply strategies to ensure unhindered access for smallholder farmers.



André, head of the family in a village in Ziniaré (Burkina Faso). Photo credit: Gery Barbot/ Oxfam

André, fifty years old, is the head of a family of six (6) people living in a village of Ziniaré in the Central Plateau Region of Burkina Faso.

Previously, his productions allowed him to have at least two granaries of food. Added to the vegetable production he managed to do with the help of his wife, his family lived relatively well.

The last season was catastrophic for André and his family. Barely a granary and a half of food harvested, the weight of age and the difficulties of access to water and inputs did not allow the activities of vegetable production. "Without help it is impossible to reach the next season. Two of my sons interrupted their schooling and faced with the same difficulties, this year we opted to suspend my daughter from conventional schooling for a vocational training centre (...) We have nothing to sell, we were only left with these difficult choices", regrets André who remains optimistic because for him if "efforts are made in the field of training in vegetable production, accessibility of water and inputs, the coming lean season may be less painful" !



Sibdou widow and head of household. Photo credit: Gery Barbot/ Oxfam

Sibdou widow and head of household for the past 12 years. "My co-wife and I are in charge of our ten children and three grandchildren (my eldest son who died prematurely left me his three children). We have no activity apart from agricultural production."

Sibdou did not have enough fertilizer for the past season. Worse, the donkey they used for field work died. Together with his daughters and co-wife, they were forced to cultivate only with the daba with barely two granaries filled. Sibdou confesses to having insomnia due to his family's situation. "Finding food for children is not easy. What is in the attic may end in a few weeks. Before, we had a space to make tomatoes and onions, but this is no longer possible, the owner of the space has recovered it. If we had this opportunity and equipment for gardening or breeding small ruminants, we could hope to reach the next season with dignity."

While waiting for Sibdou, his co-wife and their children pick wild grains in the bush dozens of kilometres from their house in order to sell them at the Ziniaré market to survive.

Bahiya Baye in her fifties, widow, and head of household of (7) seven people lives in Bourem Djindo in the Gao region of Mali. After the lean season, Bahiya experienced it with many difficulties: failing health, lack of money, poor access to food, etc. To cope with these difficulties, this mother had to consume her seed reserve. "We had to eat our seeds with the lean season which is why we had no more seed for the agricultural season." In addition to these cyclical difficulties, there are the effects of climate change: "floods have considerably affected large fields. Many fields were destroyed and did not give their usual yield." To adapt to this difficult period, this mother and widow was also forced to find survival strategies at the community level: "Make loans with neighbours and merchants of the place".

Also, the last crop year did not grant the expected results and will have an impact on the next lean season.