

Food crisis in Niger

20 July 2005

Background

The drought and locust infestation of 2004 has exacerbated the ongoing food shortage in Niger, west Africa, and led to the current crisis. Some 3.3 million people – including 800,000 children under the age of five – in nearly 3,200 villages have been affected.

Niger is one of the world's poorest and least-developed countries. It has the second highest under-five mortality rate in the world: one in four children die before their fifth birthday. More than 60 per cent of Niger's population lives on less than US\$1 a day. Only 48 per cent of the population has access to primary health care.

For many years, Niger has been experiencing a "silent emergency" in essential areas such as health, nutrition, education and access to clean safe drinking water.

Food insecurity

The majority of Nigerien families rely on subsistence farming, growing enough food to feed themselves from harvest to harvest. Even in the best of years, 40 per cent of children are malnourished. The

situation is significantly worse in years when the crops fail. Livestock breeding also plays a key role for families, serving as a kind of savings account; whenever the household needs money, they sell some of their animals on the market. A loss of livestock or decrease in the market value has a negative impact on the household and exposes it to food insecurity.

The sale of livestock is often the last resort when families have eaten all their cereal stocks and money is needed to buy food for the lean season. There are reports that increasing numbers of livestock are also dying due to hunger and thirst.

Natural disaster

Natural disaster can also have a devastating effect. During Niger's 2004 agricultural season, swarms of desert locusts consumed nearly all of the crops in some parts of the country. In other areas, insufficient rainfall resulted in poor harvests and dry pastures, which affected both farmers and livestock breeders.

UNICEF's response

In January, through early warning preparedness, UNICEF



Credit: UNICEF Niger

began taking proactive measures against the food shortage, which continue to make a difference. More than 41 tonnes of therapeutic milk and over one tonne of Plumpynut (therapeutic food with high protein and calorie content) were delivered to therapeutic feeding centres. More than 600 tonnes of grain have been distributed to the worst-affected villages and health agents have been trained to recognise and treat malnutrition. UNICEF has allocated US \$1,235,400 to treat children with severe and acute malnutrition, and to reduce the effects of household food insecurity.

Information Sheet

Health and nutrition

Admissions to the UNICEF-supported therapeutic feeding centres are rising and are at least twice as high as last year. Even before the current food crisis, more than 1 million children were suffering from some form of malnutrition. This number has increased dramatically because of the current food shortage. Acute malnutrition rates have risen to 13.4 per cent in the Maradi and Zinder regions of southern Niger, with 2.5 per cent of this group identified as severely malnourished children under the age of five. In response to the current crisis, UNICEF aims to reach tens of thousands of children through the therapeutic feeding centres.

In July and August, UNICEF plans to provide training in malnutrition awareness, prevention and treatment for 80 health agents. In addition, awareness campaigns will be conducted in the worst-affected areas to promote good nutritional practices, exclusive breastfeeding, adequate spacing between pregnancies, and the early detection and treatment of malnutrition.

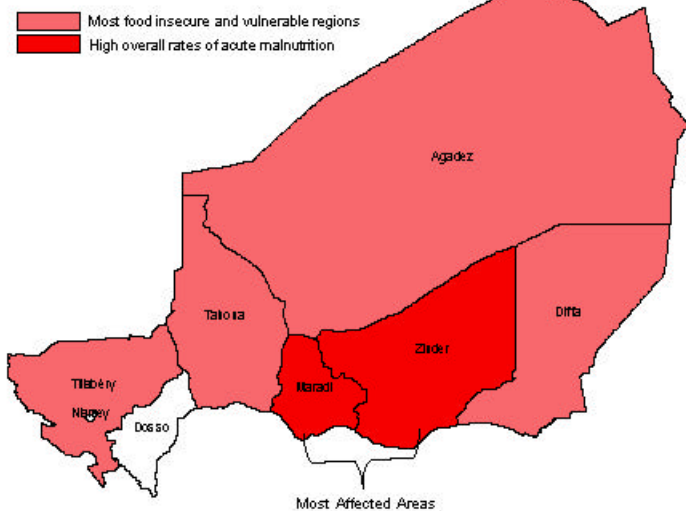
In order to prevent malnutrition, UNICEF will promote community-based growth promotion activities for young

children. UNICEF will train village growth-promotion teams to monitor the health and growth of children under three years of age through monthly weighing operations. They will also provide nutritional counselling to mothers whose children are underweight.

UNICEF will also supply communities with seeds to improve vegetable and off-season gardening.

UNICEF's appeal
UNICEF is appealing for £470,000 to continue the treatment of children with severe and acute malnutrition and to reduce the effects of household food insecurity.

Niger: Nutrition and Food Security Map 2005



Donate to UNICEF

You can help by making a donation to the Niger Food Crisis Appeal:

- by telephone: 08457 312 312
- online at: www.unicef.org.uk
- by post, with a cheque made payable to UNICEF, and sent to: Niger Food Crisis Appeal, UNICEF, Freepost, CL885 Billericay CM12 0BR