

Mercy Corps in the Sahel

Responding to a complex and growing West Africa food crisis

A broad region of Africa

The Sahel is the region of Africa that includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.



According to a recent report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, "A new food and nutrition crisis is affecting millions of people across the Sahel Region of Western Africa... Only rapid action would prevent further deterioration of the food security situation and avoid a full-scale crisis."

More than 18 million people at risk

This crisis has put more than 18 million people at risk of food insecurity. The causes are complex; they include high levels of poverty and population growth, pressure on natural resources, poor health and nutrition behaviors, inadequate health services, gender inequity, weak agricultural and livestock systems, conflict and consecutive droughts due to rainfall inconsistency. Across the Sahel, agricultural production has fallen over the last several years due to late and irregular rains as well as prolonged dry spells.

Sharply rising food prices

Pressure on the limited food supply has led to a sharp increase in food prices. For example, in Niger, prices during the last three months of 2011 increased by 51 percent for millet, 62 percent for sorghum, and 34 percent for cowpeas. As a result, 80 percent of household expenditures are

dedicated to food, with over 70 percent dedicated to cereal purchases alone.

Field assessment: people on the brink

A rapid assessment conducted by Mercy Corps in Niger in February 2012 indicated that many people have exhausted their traditional coping mechanisms, such as selling assets to purchase food. Some families are leaving the region in search of employment elsewhere. Animals don't have enough fodder to eat. To purchase food, many families are borrowing funds or selling the little livestock they have left, despite unfavorable prices. Because they are so hungry, the few people who have seeds left from the previous harvest have begun to eat them.

Conflict is causing people to leave home

Conflict and instability are contributing to vulnerability in the Sahel. In Mali, fighting between Tuareg groups and the Malian army has caused 168,000 people to flee into neighboring Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. Another 150,000 people are internally displaced within Mali as a result of fighting in Kidal, Tombouctou and Gao regions. The political instability and violence has had a severe economic impact, as Mali's traditional trade routes, notably north-south within Mali and east into Niger, have been cut off. This insecurity is making it difficult to get assistance to communities that are in great need of help.



In Niger, Mercy Corps is helping herders keep their animals healthy. Photo: Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

Mali: political crisis and food insecurity

Mali has sunk into a complex political crisis against the backdrop of an already-severe food security and malnutrition emergency. The UN estimates that more than 3.5 million people in Mali face severe food insecurity.

A May 2012 assessment by Mercy Corps Niger found that the price of rice has increased 43 percent and millet 50 percent. At the same time, livestock prices have dropped due to a shortage of fodder, which is causing animals to lose weight. The average price of a goat has declined 43 percent and the price of a bull has dropped 60 percent.



Mercy Corps is helping malnourished infants and children in Niger. Photo: Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

How Mercy Corps is responding in Niger

Mercy Corps is currently working in Niger to stabilize the hard-hit pastoral population by helping re-establish their animal stocks and improve their access to animal health care and feed. We are also distributing cash to the most vulnerable families so they can purchase essential goods to sustain themselves during the lean season.

Mercy Corps teams are setting up programs in some of the most at-risk areas. Even as we help the people of Niger survive this crisis, we believe it's vital to invest in ways to stop the cycle of hunger from recurring.

Our teams are working to:

- Distribute **emergency cash** to those who need help most, and create **cash-for-work** jobs that will allow local people to earn the money they need to

buy food. Together these two projects will help 83,500 people.

- Support eight nutritional screening centers that identify **malnourished children** and help them get the assistance they need. We are distributing the high-protein therapeutic supplement Plumpy'nut to help acutely malnourished children recover.
- Help herders keep their **animals** healthy, providing vaccinations and advice; help 6,000 pastoralists re-establish their stocks and improve access to health care and feed. To date we have helped 18,000 animals. This program includes **cash-for-work** to boost household income.
- Help communities deal with the effects of poor rains and build their **resilience** to future droughts and food shortages by putting in place monitoring systems for malnutrition and food levels. This way, when crises build, we can help before famine reaches the scale seen in the Horn of Africa.

Looking to expand programs to Mali

Mercy Corps is also looking to expand our response to Mali. Our aim is to help meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the most food-insecure, conflict-affected people, while promoting food security and building their resilience to future cycles of drought and famine.

CONTACT

Program Inquiries

Jihane Nami
Senior Program Officer
jnami@mercy Corps.org

Media Inquiries

Salma Bahramy
Senior Communications Officer
sbahramy@dc.mercy Corps.org

Mercy Corps
45 S.W. Ankeny Street
Portland, OR 97204
503.896.5000
800.292.3355

mercy Corps.org