

Hand That Feeds Endangered!

Large parts of the Western Sahel region bear the brunt of structural food insecurity and malnutrition.

BOBO-DIOULASSO, BURKINA FASO, January 9, 2016 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A bleak narrative of an estimated 18.4 million people afflicted for the umpteenth time in another threatening food crisis, in the wake of drought in West Africa's Sahel region, is starting to capture some media attention.

If anything, access to food considered a right and vital to people's well being is being endangered. Norman Borlaug once said and I quote: "The first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind, food is the moral right of all who are born into this world"

In the Sahel, evidence points to an existing yet intolerable level of chronic malnutrition in children aged less than five years. In Niger for example, 51% of children are stunted: a situation, which sets them back for life. Many stunted children rarely ever regain the height or weight lost with attendant irreversible cognitive damage.



Lean farm yields ... women pound millet in the Sahel region, which is facing food insecurity due to changing climate. Photograph: Kayode Egbeleye



Arid soils in Mauritania, 2015. (Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam)

The Sahel region is one of the poorest in the world. Countries of the Sahel face extreme poverty, internal tensions, institutional weaknesses, very high population growth rates, high exposure to climate change, drought, frequent food crises, fragile governance, illegal trafficking, radicalization and violent extremism.

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Norman Borlaug

While the deteriorating political, security, humanitarian and human rights situation in the Sahel region since the early 2000s continue to be a source of worry for many, food crisis and long-term food insecurity in the region appear to be a frightening reality, which is catching the attention of many international actors and national governments.

Impact of Food Insecurity.

Large parts of the Western Sahel region bear the brunt of

structural food insecurity and malnutrition, compounded by low household incomes, vulnerability to natural disasters (droughts), and increases of food prices on international markets. On top of over 5 million stunted children, the distressing human and social costs, the economic cost of malnutrition is estimated between 2% to 8% of Gross Domestic Product.

Weakness of public finances and national institutions in some countries makes it more difficult to respond to the frequent crises that affect the region. Some countries however, have adopted national response strategies supported in greater part by large-scale funding from donors.

Since the food insecurity and acute malnutrition crisis in 2011/2012, USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) observed that the overall situation in the Sahel has improved with the majority of households across the region experiencing stable food security conditions in 2013. Nonetheless, pockets of food insecurity and acute malnutrition persisted during that year, and the U.N. estimated that no fewer than 11 million people throughout the Sahel remained food-insecure.

Between 2013 and 2015, sporadic insecurity flared across the Sahel, particularly in Mali and Nigeria. In northern Nigeria, escalating violence since May 2015 has displaced thousands and negatively impacted farming activities and regional food markets. In Mali, however, the situation has improved significantly after nearly 20 months of instability, although incidents of violence continue in the north.

Response amid Growing Needs.

As one of the largest contributors of humanitarian aid to the Sahel, the European Commission has assisted 1.7 million extremely food insecure people and 580 000 severely malnourished children in 2014.

With a contribution of €202 in humanitarian aid for 2014 and an initial envelope of €156 million earmarked for 2015, the European Commission continues to support life-saving aid, covering a quarter of all food security needs and half of nutrition care needs. The Commission also assisted people affected by conflict including hundreds of thousands of displaced people from Mali, and Nigeria.

To aid more than 3 million food-insecure and conflict-affected people in the Sahel, the U.S. Government (USG), in 2013 alone provided approximately \$231 million in humanitarian assistance. USG support included food distributions, cash transfers, and agricultural, nutritional, and livelihoods activities, as well as assistance for displaced populations.

Building Resilience

While humanitarian aid in the interim can cushion the shock occasioned by food insecurity and malnutrition in affected countries of the Sahel, national governments, international donors, and agencies as a matter of urgency would need to implement in not too distant a future, visionary development programmes aimed at strengthening resilience, helping address the root causes of malnutrition, improving the functioning of regional markets and increase the regional and national capacity to mitigate the risks of disasters.

One major development being closely watched by many is the on-going West Africa Food Markets Pilot Programme (WAFM). Scheduled to last five-years, the DFID funded initiative at a cost of £7.7 million is being implemented by The Palladium Group in association with a consortium including Carana Corporation, KPMG, and Saana Consulting.

Not only does the programme headquartered in Accra, Ghana aim to significantly increase the availability of staple foods and boost the purchasing power of farmers in food insecure regions of the

Sahel, it has its eyes riveted on building beneficiary countries' resilience to hunger and malnutrition during the habitual hungry seasons and intermittent shocks.

A pathway to achieve the set out goal is envisaged to pass through increased food production (yield increases and reduction in postharvest losses) and cross border trade along the Ghana-Burkina Faso and Niger-Nigeria trade corridors, thereby contributing to lowering seasonal price volatility in selected food markets. After a full belly, all is poetry!

Kayode Egbeleye
IQ4 News
+44-1214771012
email us here

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