HPG Briefing Note

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Humanitarian issues in Niger

Few doubt that there is currently a humanitarian crisis in Niger. But the scale and severity of the crisis, the point at which it turned 'critical' and the question of whether there is a current or imminent famine remain disputed. What seems clear is that the humanitarian response has been too slow. This HPG Briefing Note highlights some of the questions that will need to be answered in explaining this slowness. It argues that this is not just a case of donors failing to provide resources quickly enough. Questions also need to be asked about the quality of early-warning and assessment analysis; the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond; the appropriateness of the proposed responses; and the preparedness of development actors for what should have been a predictable crisis. This note is based on a short review of the secondary literature, and a limited number of interviews with a range of humanitarian actors: it aims to highlight questions for further investigation.

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Tilling fields near Magariya Koshimawai, southern Niger, July 2005

The emergence of a crisis

Yields from the 2004 harvest in Niger were moderately affected by the combined effects of rain failure and locust infestation, and total grain production has been estimated at 11% below the five-year average. Similar crop failures have been experienced throughout the sub-region. An April 2005 joint food security assessment in Niger estimated that 2.4 million of the 3.6 million people living in agro-pastoral areas were highly vulnerable to food insecurity. Nutrition surveys carried out in April and May 2005 by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) showed global acute malnutrition rates of 19% and severe acute malnutrition rates of 2.9% and 2.4% in two of the worst-affected regions. MSF has seen a sharp increase in the number of admissions to its therapeutic feeding centres. Food prices are 75–80% above the five-year average, and declining livestock prices mean that cereal purchasing power for livestock-dependent households is a quarter of what it was a year ago, in an area where livelihoods are marginal at the best of times.

A humanitarian response is now getting under way, with aid agencies launching appeals and starting up humanitarian programmes in Niger. However, it is widely acknowledged that the response is late. Thus far, this has mostly been attributed to a slow response by international donor governments, particularly to UN appeals. Speaking on 22 July, Jan Egeland, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, complained that 'over the last few days, the world had finally woken up, but it took graphic images of dying children for this to happen. More money had been received over the last 10 days than over the last 10 months'.

The donor response certainly seems to have been slow, but it is important to examine the failings of international engagement with Niger in a broader sense. What we are

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seeing at the moment is the normal tendency for different parts of the system to blame each other, or even to deny that there is a crisis at all.

Is there a famine, or the prospect of one?

Defining famine is notoriously difficult, and in many crises there is strong disagreement about whether a famine has taken place or not, even after the fact. Recent examples are Ethiopia in 2000 and Malawi in 2002. Niger looks set to be no exception. Whilst some agencies are warning of the dangers of famine and arguing that excess deaths are already taking place, others are playing down the risk of famine. FEWSNET and USAID describe the situation as a 'very severe, but localised food security crisis', and have warned that 'sensational' media coverage and NGO reports of famine conditions may 'impede the market in delivering lower cost food'.

To some extent, how the situation is labelled is academic: for those who are dying from acute malnutrition and related diseases, the debate about whether there have been enough deaths to justify the famine label, and the extent to which this exceeds the normal hungry season mortality rate, is not helpful. Avoiding the famine label has often been convenient for those needing to justify slow or failed responses. According to the famine scale proposed by Howe and Devereux in a recent *Disasters* article, this would seem to be a food crisis, but one that is close to tipping over into famine conditions in the worst-affected areas.

According to the classification used by the Food Security Analysis Unit in Somalia, parts of Niger are hovering between a humanitarian emergency and an acute livelihood crisis. It remains to be seen whether Niger in 2005 will be seen as a famine with the benefit of hindsight, but the growing numbers of people in therapeutic feeding centres certainly suggest the possibility of hunger-related excess mortality. People affected by the crisis are themselves reportedly describing it as a famine.

There is a clear divergence of views among international actors on the magnitude and intensity of the crisis. Some NGO appeals talk of millions facing imminent starvation. Other actors point to localised pockets of acute food insecurity, and are adamant that this does not constitute a famine. Neither formulation quite fits the apparent facts: that hundreds of thousands of children are acutely malnourished, many to the point of near starvation, while hundreds of thousands more people are at risk from malnutrition, disease and destitution unless they receive urgent help. A clearer analysis of different risk categories is needed to inform appropriate responses.

Early warning, assessment and response

There has been a tendency to present this as a crisis that was predicted, but not responded to. Warnings about the potential for crisis were being issued throughout 2004 and 2005, but the overall message of the early-warning information was that the situation was under control. In December 2004, for instance, a FEWSNET update for the Sahel described the regional picture as 'indicating a fair food situation in terms of availability and access, with localised access and availability problems in those countries hard hit by the drought and/or the locust plague'. Certainly, donors felt that a potentially large-scale crisis was not being signalled until relatively recently. Alarming figures started emerging in January from nutritional surveys by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the NGO Helen Keller International, but it seems that it was not until MSF's nutrition surveys in April and May that the true severity of the crisis really started to be noticed internationally.

As often before, the problem seems to have been both in the quality of the analysis, and in a disconnect between assessment and response. A particular problem seems to have been the types of responses that were being proposed. Until recently, the strategy of the Niger government, agreed by the UN, was to avoid free food distributions. The focus was on subsidised cereal sales, cereal banks, food and cash for work, subsidised fodder provision and curative and preventative veterinary care. A FEWSNET alert in March 2005 noted that 'a consensual decision was taken by government and its major partners to proceed with an emergency plan from which food aid is, for now, excluded'. The UN Flash Appeal in May 2005 continued this strategy, and over half of the $16 million appeal was for UNDP to support the national emergency plan with subsidised food and fodder distribution. However, the amounts of subsidised food distributed were evidently insufficient to have a significant effect on prices, or to reach enough of those who needed it.

The problem seems to have been less the quality of the information about the food security situation, and more the way that information was interpreted, and the analysis developed on which subsequent decisions about response were based. The rationale for a subsidised food strategy is not explained in any of the appeal or assessment documents, but seems to have arisen from a desire to avoid disrupting markets, encouraging dependency and harming development mechanisms. As late as 7 June 2005, IRIN was reporting that 'donors, aid agencies and the government brushed aside suggestions of distributing food for free'. Whether this was the right initial response, its effectiveness does not seem to have been adequately monitored.

Part of the problem seems to be that 'food availability' approaches – as distinct from approaches focused on food access – continue to drive policy, as they did for example in the 2002 crisis in Ethiopia. Weather conditions in 2004/2005, and the locusts, have had a relatively modest impact on national grain production. But, as Amartya Sen pointed out more than 20 years ago, famines can still occur when aggregate food availability is sufficient, if prices are too high for poor people to access enough food. In a country like Niger, where a large percentage of the population lives in absolute poverty and relies on purchased food during the hungry season, a near-doubling of staple food prices and a collapse in the terms of trade for livestock should have triggered an earlier response. It

should also have called into serious question the wisdom of a strategy that relied so heavily on trying to subsidise food prices, particularly when these prices kept rising.

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Women pound millet in a village in southern Niger, July 2005

Development, relief and dependency

The desire to avoid 'harming development mechanisms' points to some of the fundamental tensions between relief and development discussed in a recent HPG report on dependency. This argues that fears about creating dependency should not be a justification for failing to provide relief when it is needed. UNOCHA notes that the government was reluctant to adopt a strategy that may have weakened development efforts. It is unclear, however, why relief is seen as weakening development. The report argues that earlier and more generous assistance to maintain livelihoods is more likely to support development than withholding relief due to poorly articulated fears about dependency.

In Niger, fears about harming development seem to have resulted in an extreme reluctance to move from subsidised food to free food distributions. The Food Aid Charter of the Food Crisis Prevention Network of the Sahel explicitly aims to 'limit the distribution of free food aid in emergencies'. As late as April 2005, as the numbers in MSF's therapeutic feeding centres were climbing rapidly, FEWSNET was arguing that free food distribution would 'undermine the coping strategies of the local population, the role of market mechanisms and the analytical and response capacities of food security and early warning systems'.

The Niger government has developed a mechanism to prevent and mitigate food crises, but this current emergency suggests an urgent need to review its effectiveness. This review should include the relationship between development policy and emergency planning. In April, the government raised taxes on a range of consumer goods, negotiated with the International Monetary Funding (IMF) as a condition for budgetary aid. Following protests, most of the increases (apart from sugar) were retracted, but the fact that the IMF and the government could consider introducing them in the first place, in the context of the escalating crisis, suggests a disconnect between broader development policy and relief planning.

Part of the explanation for the continuing controversy over the severity of the crisis seems to arise from a difference of view as to whether current levels of malnutrition and food insecurity are truly exceptional, or a relatively normal occurrence in this desperately poor and chronically marginal environment. FEWSNET notes that 'there are very few malnutrition surveys available from previous years to serve as a baseline for the current crisis'. But the fact remains that current levels of malnutrition are above crisis levels, and therefore warrant an emergency response. To argue that such levels are 'normal', even if true, is dangerously beside the point. While it is true to say, as FEWSNET does, that emergency assistance is not enough, it is essential that development actors have the necessary mechanisms in place to identify and respond to acute food insecurity and malnutrition. Reducing chronic vulnerability in the medium and long term is crucial to development in Niger. But the fact that the present situation is largely a consequence of chronic poverty can be no excuse for failing to respond to crisis levels of hunger and suffering.

Architecture, resources and capacity

As well as inappropriate or inadequate strategies for response, there also seems to have been a lack of capacity on the part of humanitarian actors. Relatively few aid agencies were present in Niger, and humanitarian capacity at a global level was overstretched, with ongoing responses in Darfur and to the Indian Ocean tsunami. This seems to have been as much a question of lack of human resources as lack of funding. Until recently, donors were reporting that they were finding it difficult to find partners and credible proposals to fund.

The delay in response is blamed in part on the problems of procuring food in a region generally suffering from low yields and high prices. It is only recently that the necessity of importing large quantities of grain from outside the region has been recognised and acted upon. A rapid scaling up of the food aid operation will be no simple matter at this stage, given the likely constraints to implementation, such as logistical bottlenecks.

Over the past year, there has been much discussion of the need to reform the humanitarian system. This has engaged donors, primarily though the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, as well as operational agencies, for instance via the recent Humanitarian Response Review, commissioned by the UN in response to Darfur. Niger shows just how far the system is from providing a timely, effective and proportionate

response. The crisis is being cited as an example of why new mechanisms are needed to improve performance. Egeland and UK Development Secretary Hilary Benn have both cited Niger as an example of how an emergency reserve fund would help in responding to crises in a more timely fashion. But the failure to respond more effectively to the Niger crisis has as much to do with a failure of analysis and a lack of implementing capacity and as it does with available funds. If, as could be argued, the strategy proposed in the UN Flash Appeal in May was misconceived, then all a central emergency fund would have provided would have been more funding for the wrong response. Nor would it in itself have helped to address the capacity issues that have constrained aid agency responses. Whatever the merits of the emergency fund proposal, the Niger case demonstrates why more flexible funding arrangements cannot of themselves ensure an appropriate response.

The existence of agencies' own reserve funds raises further doubts as to whether lack of resources was the primary constraint to a more rapid response. WFP was able to act through its Immediate Response Account, drawing on this facility as early as February this year. Major NGOs and the Red Cross movement also have mechanisms to respond early to crises before donor funding is available. These could arguably have been used to respond earlier, or at least to increase the evidence base around the scale and severity of the crisis. But agencies' ability to respond on a large scale to crises that do not generate media or donor interest remains critically limited. MSF is funding its large Niger response from funds reallocated from donations to the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Conclusion

By early August 2005, a significant humanitarian response to the Niger crisis seemed to be getting under way. But merely blaming donors for failing to respond early is not good enough. All the actors involved – including the Niger government – need to take a critical look at their own responsibilities. There is a need to examine the quality, credibility and effectiveness of early-warning and assessment analysis, and particularly the appropriateness of the actual responses proposed. Humanitarian actors need to examine their own capacity to respond to crises at a global level, and development actors in Niger need to look at their preparedness and willingness to recognise and respond to crisis levels of suffering regardless of whether these are chronic or acute. Given these uncertainties about information and capacity, it is also vital that the scale and extent of food insecurity and possible crises in Mali and Mauritania continue to be closely monitored.

This Briefing Note suggests a number of reasons why the crisis was not 'called' earlier. At the level of the international system as a whole, the relationship between the host government, donors and agencies means that failures of analysis tend to become magnified and reinforced. A prevailing and often hard-won consensus view is hard to break, especially when the evidence base is weak. If the test of good humanitarian action is that it should be timely, proportionate, appropriate and effective, the response to the crisis in Niger has to date arguably failed on all counts. It is of course easy to be critical from the outside and with the benefit of hindsight, and the constraints faced by individual agencies have to be acknowledged. But the system as a whole must surely be judged not to have performed as it should. In the longer run, it is essential to learn the lessons from this experience. What matters most immediately is that the response in Niger and elsewhere in the affected region is reoriented as a matter of urgency. The signs are that donors and agencies alike have now recognised the need to do so.

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For agency updates, UN appeals and press coverage, see ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int) and AlertNet (www.alertnet.org/thefacts/countryprofiles/219018.htm).

For real-time tracing of funding flows to Niger, see OCHA's Financial Tracking System (http://ocha.unog.ch/fts/index.aspx).