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There are frequent shortages of food and water due to the dry harsh climate in Sahel West Africa. This picture shows Fulani herders in Mali whose interests conflict with those of farmers. CC BY-SA 4.0

Experts Study Ways Out of the Food Crisis in Sahel West Africa

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By Jaya Ramachandran

PARIS, 19 April 2023 (IDN) — The Sahel and West Africa region is facing a chronic food and nutrition crisis, with 29.5 million people currently needing immediate food and nutrition assistance. This number could reach 42.5 million people by June-August 2023 if appropriate measures are not taken.

Furthermore, 107.5 million people currently under food pressure could fall into crisis if appropriate measures are not taken, notably in Nigeria (64 million), Niger (7.3 million) and Burkina Faso (5.1 million).

The Food Crisis Prevention Network (RPCA) has, therefore, stressed the need to provide immediate assistance to people threatened by the crisis and to commit to structural responses to prevent food and nutrition crises.

Some 160 government ministers, senior officials and other experts joined the three-day closed-door meeting in person at the OECD Conference Centre in Paris and by videoconference. It was held under the auspices of the Commissions of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA).

The experts noted that cereal production for the 2022-2023 agropastoral season, estimated at more than 77 million tonnes, is 6% higher than the average for the past five years and 8% higher than last year. However, per capita production is 2% lower than the average for the last five years in the Sahel and Gulf of Guinea countries.

Tuber and root crop production is estimated at 212 million tonnes, 10% above the five-year average and 3% above last year. Cash crop production is also up, except for cotton, which is down 12% on last year.

Fodder availability and livestock watering conditions are relatively satisfactory. However, in some areas, access remains constrained by insecurity and the limitation or even prohibition of transhumance in some countries.

The functioning and supply of markets are satisfactory except in the insecure areas of Liptako-Gourma, the Lake Chad Basin and some localities in the northwestern states of Nigeria. Inflation remains a concern (18% on average in the region). It is fuelled by persistence in education and health. It now extends to northern Togo and Benin.

The nutrition crisis also persists in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad, where nearly 16.5 million children under the age of five are acutely malnourished. Seven countries (Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Chad) have mobilised CFA francs 663 billion (USD 1.1 million), i.e. 66% of a total budget of CFA francs 1 004 billion (USD 1.64 million).

The upward trend in needs and the scarcity of resources to finance them are considered a further reminder of the urgent need for a paradigm shift in managing food and nutrition issues.

Taking stock of the financial pledges of the April 2022 High-Level Meeting on Food Crises, Network Members welcomed the commitment of partners, which has enabled the mobilisation of EUR 4.75 billion for emergency and development actions to date, 1.8 times the initial commitment.

Reviewing the various structural response initiatives to food crises, Network Members encouraged ECOWAS, UEMOA and CILSS to strengthen the capacity of the reserve to play its role in stimulating the region's agri-food systems. The Members of the Global Alliance for Resilience (AGIR) Senior Expert Group (SEG) commended the efforts of the Government of Guinea-Bissau in implementing its country resilience plan.

Similarly, in the face of environmental uncertainties affecting agri-food systems, the Members of the Network invited regional actors to strengthen the development of innovative risk management tools. In particular, they encouraged them to optimise and accelerate the scaling-up of adaptation strategies in the face of crises and multifaceted risks, including instruments dedicated to anticipation (observatories and other monitoring mechanisms) and prevention.

The Members of the Network welcomed the efforts made by countries on the security front to operationalise the HDP Nexus process in the Sahel and West Africa region and in Cameroon. They encouraged CILSS to strengthen its support to countries for inclusive diagnoses with a view to identifying and implementing national roadmaps.

Members congratulated Benin and Côte d'Ivoire for the progress made in the self-assessment exercises on their capacity to manage food issues. They encouraged them in the national validation of their results, as well as in the implementation of plans to improve food and nutrition governance. They also congratulated and encouraged civil society organisations in their initiatives to monitor and question the application of the Charter for the Prevention and Management of Food Crises and, more generally, on food and nutrition issues.

As a result of their work, the Members of the Network:

» Reiterated their recommendations made at the 38th annual meeting of the Network to States on the urgency of i) accelerating the mobilisation of resources for the financing of national response plans, particularly in Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone including facilitating access to insecure or hard-to-reach areas, ii) strengthening policy instruments and measures to support the population's purchasing power in the face of persistent inflation.

» Recommend that CILSS, ECOWAS, UEMOA and the Member States (i) set up a sustainable financing system for national information systems on food and nutritional security, (ii) define and implement approaches and instruments dedicated to improving the effectiveness of the response to food crises.

»Reiterated their recommendations to ECOWAS and UEMOA on the urgent need to i) strengthen dialogue with their Member States with a view to significantly reducing barriers to regional trade and cross-border transhumance and; ii) accelerate the strengthening of the intervention capacities of the Regional Food Security Reserve and national stocks, including its sovereign financing.

»Reiterated the recommendation made to States and their intergovernmental organisations at the 38th Annual Meeting on the need to invest decisively in inclusive structural responses to reverse negative food and nutrition trends in the region, including the development of the fertiliser and irrigation.

»Called on partners to mobilise and engage in a long-term partnership with governments to address the underlying causes of chronic food and nutrition crises.

Members agreed that the 39th annual meeting of the Network would take place from 5 to 8 December 2023 in Praia, Cabo Verde, with the theme of “Transformation of Diets, Markets and Prices in the Sahel and West Africa: Implications for Agricultural and Food Security Policies”. [IDN-InDepthNews]

Photo: There are frequent shortages of food and water due to the dry harsh climate in Sahel West Africa. This picture shows Fulani herders in Mali whose interests conflict with those of farmers. CC BY-SA 4.0

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