



Suzanne Ouedraogo, 60, lives in Fanka village, Burkina Faso, and receives cash-for-work as part of the 2012 Sahel food crisis response. Photo: Pablo Tosco/Intermon Oxfam.

LEARNING THE LESSONS?

Assessing the response to the 2012 food crisis in the Sahel to build resilience for the future

In 2012, the Sahel was once again hit by a severe food crisis affecting more than 18 million people. The region's governments, donors and aid agencies were determined to avoid mistakes made in the response to previous crises. But while their response was better in many respects, there were still some critical shortcomings. The poorest families and communities suffered most, as deep-seated inequalities made some people far more vulnerable than others. While continuing to address the enormous humanitarian and recovery needs in the region, we also must all learn the lessons from the 2012 response and develop a new model that will allow better prevention and management of future crises. The growing momentum around the concept of resilience offers considerable potential to achieve this, but only if all actors work together to turn rhetoric into action that brings lasting improvements for the poorest communities across the Sahel.

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SUMMARY

In 2012, the Sahel region of West and Central Africa was once again hit by a severe food crisis as drought reduced food production, drove up food prices and exposed millions of already chronically vulnerable people to another year of hardship and hunger.

At its peak, over 18 million people across nine countries were affected, and more than 1 million children's lives were at risk because households could not obtain enough food. In Chad, women were forced to dig in anthills to find grains, while across the region, hundreds of thousands of families were forced to cut down their meals to just one a day.

The crisis was certainly on a large scale, but it should not have been unexpected. Recurrent drought has become a feature of the Sahel's changing climate, and the 2012 crisis came shortly after similar drought-related crises in 2010 and 2005, as well as a food price crisis in 2008. Many communities are now chronically vulnerable—230,000 children die of causes related to undernutrition¹ even in a 'good' harvest year²—so even relatively small shocks can have huge impacts.

The humanitarian response to previous crises in the Sahel and, more recently, in the Horn of Africa had been widely criticised as 'too little, too late'. At the start of 2012, when the crisis began to unfold, many governments, donors and aid agencies were determined not to make the same mistakes again. They were resolved not only to making a more effective response to this crisis, but also to doing more to help communities build their resilience in the face of inevitable future shocks and crises.

This report considers how governments, donors and agencies performed in their response to the 2012 crisis, and the lessons that must be learned to improve future responses. It draws on extensive interviews with Oxfam staff, other agencies, donors and government officials; focus groups with communities in three countries; the views of civil society organisations in six countries; and the latest research on food security and resilience in the region.

The analysis reveals that, although the 2012 response was better in many respects than the response to previous crises, there were still some significant shortcomings that need to be addressed.

Mixed performance

Looking back at the 2012 response gives no grounds for complacency. While the early warning systems provided the information needed for an early response, there was still disagreement about the likely severity of the crisis. Some donors, such as the European Community's Humanitarian Office (ECHO), acted earlier than in previous years, but overall, donor funding was no more timely than before. By the beginning of July 2012 and the peak of the crisis, the UN appeal remained just under 50 per cent funded.³

'We've only harvested four sacks of millet this year, compared with the 20 we can get in a normal year. But it's a long time since we had a normal year. We go from one catastrophe to another, because of either too much water or too little.'

Ramata Zore, Taffogo, Centre-Nord region, Burkina Faso, April 2012)

Unlike in earlier crises, most governments in the region did react to the early warning signs: Niger, for example, appealed for support six months earlier than it did during the 2010 crisis. Yet significant technical, financial and political barriers remained, and support provided by donors and international NGOs failed to strengthen national capacity and leadership of the response. In Senegal, for instance, the domestic focus on the presidential elections prevented an early response; elsewhere, national governments were often marginal players, with donor funding largely bypassing state systems.

So, despite some improvements, millions of people still did not get the help they needed. On the one hand, more children received treatment for acute undernutrition in the region than ever before, and the World Food Programme (WFP) alone reaching between 5 and 6 million people with food and nutritional assistance. On the other hand, 5.6 million people did not receive the seeds, tools and fertiliser they needed to plant for the next harvest, making it even harder for them to recover from the crisis and build up some reserves to mitigate the impacts of the next crisis.

Getting it right next time round

In 2013, the first priority is to recognise that the crisis is not over. Across the Sahel region, 10 million people still urgently need help to feed their families and rebuild their livelihoods. However, as of 5 April, the UN appeal for 2013 was just 24 per cent funded. The international community is still failing these people unless it takes urgent action to deliver aid that is swift, sufficient and sustained.

That is the most immediate priority. But governments, donors and aid agencies must also get better at preventing and managing future crises. The concept of resilience offers potential to do this, but only if it looks beyond the immediate causes of recurrent crises.

All of those involved in dealing with food insecurity in the region—including Oxfam—must use existing know-how to help communities build resilience as effectively and sustainably as possible. It is vital to increase investment in small-scale agriculture, local and national food reserves, and social protection programmes, as well as scaling up efforts to prevent and treat undernutrition. It is also necessary to tackle key structural challenges that weakened the 2012 response, just as they did previous responses. This report recommends that action is taken to address three such challenges:

- Develop a shared understanding of vulnerability to food insecurity so that support is targeted to the poorest and responses can be launched rapidly;
- Break down barriers between humanitarian and development actors so that long-term and emergency programmes effectively support each other;
- Invest in strengthening the capacity of national and local actors so that governments can deliver large-scale, sustained support to their citizens.

‘What we learnt from repeated, massive humanitarian interventions in the region is: it is imperative to change the way we respond to the crises in the Sahel.’

David Gressly, UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator⁴

Yet that cannot be all. Ultimately, governments, donors and aid agencies must also tackle the inequalities that lie at the heart of crises present and past, which make some people much more vulnerable than others. These entrenched inequalities also prevent the benefits of economic growth reaching millions of people, particularly women, who are often socially and economically marginalised and politically excluded.

Helping the Sahel's poorest communities escape the vicious cycle of hunger and poverty will be no easy task in the face of enormous challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, population growth, urbanisation, and growing insecurity, with the crisis in Mali underlining the potential consequences of exclusion and under-development. But it can and must be achieved, and 2013 provides a critical opportunity for a breakthrough. National governments, regional bodies, donors, UN agencies, and national and international NGOs all have a responsibility to help communities in the Sahel to seize this opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a deeper and shared understanding of resilience

- **National governments and ECOWAS** should demonstrate stronger political will to deliver pro-poor development strategies, committing to targeting and transferring resources to support the poorest and most vulnerable people, with the support of the international aid community.
- **All actors** must seek to develop a deeper understanding of what makes poor people more vulnerable to shocks and stresses and what builds their resilience, conducting gender- and child-sensitive analyses as a basis for developing appropriate pro-poor policy solutions and resilience measures. They should develop new programming approaches and public service provisions that are better targeted to the specific needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as children under five, women and pastoralists. The AGIR Sahel Framework should be used to establish greater political consensus and ensure that future national and regional policies are driven by those considerations.
- **Governments across the region** should work together with key regional actors to develop more effective food security analyses based on early warning systems that fully integrate understanding of risk and vulnerability. Specifically, they should:
 - continue to develop the Cadre Harmonisé as a standard region-wide basis for projections of food insecurity;
 - advocate and fundraise for the development of HEA baselines and outcome analysis across the region to assist better understanding of vulnerabilities, of needs in times of shock, and better response targeting.

'The leadership of our regional organisations must be recognised. These organisations must in return commit to mobilising their own resources to implement their policies and harmonise their interventions at all levels.... Nowhere in the world has resilience been achieved exclusively through development co-operation. That is why we are asking the co-operation agencies to develop an approach that supports our action, standing behind us and with us.'

Mamadou Cissokho, Roppa
Honorary President and Civil
Society Representative to AGIR
Sahel⁹

Break down the humanitarian-development divide

- **Donors** should fast-track the development of resilience strategies and plans for more integrated approaches across the humanitarian-development continuum. These strategies and plans should:
 - support national resilience plans and actively seek to strengthen national and local capacities, including civil society;
 - integrate concepts of risk and vulnerability into funding decisions and programming, and include innovative funding mechanisms and support for key pro-resilience policies such as safety nets and food reserves;
 - set out plans to deliver internal change to fulfil these ambitions.
- **Agencies** seeking to address immediate needs and root causes of food and nutrition crises must review their current programming approaches in order to:
 - develop a single flexible programme that bridges the humanitarian-development divide and place concepts of risk and vulnerability at the heart of programmes, undertaking the organisational changes required to make this happen;
 - provide focused support to communities that fosters innovation, experimentation, adaptation to climate change and diversification of livelihoods;
 - mobilise civil society and affected communities to influence government decision-making, and hold duty-bearers to account.
- **The UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel** should seek to play an important role in efforts to mobilise the wider UN system to be proactive in supporting resilience. At a national level, the Humanitarian/Resident Coordinators should commit to working with national governments to convene all key actors—at all levels and across the humanitarian-development continuum—to create an effective platform from which to help build resilience.

Build national and local capacity to deliver resilience

- **Governments across the region** should work with others to develop resilience plans and frameworks that include a specific focus on:
 - developing programmes to support small-scale farmers and pastoralists—with goals of sustainability and long-term resilience;
 - seeking to overcome barriers that prevent women farmers benefiting from agricultural programmes;
 - establishing or scaling up social protection;
 - providing additional support to set up or reinforce local food reserves;
 - prioritising effective undernutrition prevention programmes and put in place integrated programmes that tackle its underlying causes.
- **Donors** should respect commitments made under the Paris and Accra Declarations on Aid Effectiveness, and actively seek appropriate ways of increasing aid that is disbursed through state budgets to reinforce national and local ownership and capacity.

- **UN agencies and international NGOs** should take stock of approaches used so far during emergency and development programmes to establish more effective measures for reinforcing capacity through long-term partnerships. They should also work together with national governments, local bodies and civil society groups to develop country preparedness plans for responding to future food crises, including steps to accelerate scale-up of the response.
- **OCHA** should seek to align its funding mechanisms with national response plans as far as possible and introduce multi-annual UN appeals as a standard tool to improve forward planning and predictability of humanitarian assistance. Additional national-level funding mechanisms, such as emergency response funds, should also be considered as a potential additional source of funding for local NGOs.

NOTES

Links last accessed March 2013 unless otherwise specified

¹ Malnutrition is used in more common terminology to refer to under nutrition. In this report, we chosen to use the term under nutrition, since manutrition can also refer to over nutrition or obesity. There are a number of different types of under nutrition: acute (severe or moderate), chronic, weight deficiency relative to age (underweight) and vitamin and mineral deficient.

2 IASC (2012) 'Plan de reponse face a la crise alimentaire et nutritionnelle au Sahel', http://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/2012_FSN_Sahel_Strategy_Paper_FR.pdf

3 OCHA (2012) Sahel Crisis: Funding Status as of 2 July 2012, as according to UN FTS <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/FundingUpdates%2004JUILLET2012.pdf>

4 UNOCHA (2012) 'Humanitarian Actors request 1.6 billion dollars for harmonized response to the needs of Sahelian populations in 2013' <http://reliefweb.int/report/mali/humanitarian-actors-request-16-billion-dollars-harmonized-response-needs-sahelian>

5 OECD (2012) op. cit.

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