



## **Niger communities say they will run out of food before next harvest, joint study shows**

### ***Seven leading aid agencies call on donors to act now to prevent humanitarian disaster***

*Niamey (Niger), March 21, 2012* – According to a recent field study conducted in communities in western and eastern Niger, between 70 and 90 per cent of people estimate their food stocks will run out before the next harvest, creating an imminent ‘hunger gap’. A full 100 percent of families surveyed say they have already reduced the amount of food consumed each day because they do not have enough to eat.

The study was conducted by the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) and the Emergency Capacity Building Project (a coalition including CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Plan International, Save the Children and World Vision), with input from the World Food Programme and the Government of Niger. It is the latest in mounting evidence pointing to a potentially massive humanitarian disaster in the Sahel if the world does not respond quickly with urgently-needed assistance to those already in crisis, and mitigation activities to prevent more families from going hungry.

“In the villages we see more and more mothers not being able to feed their children more than once a day. We can’t wait any longer. We can’t wait until it becomes one meal every second day, and those children are starving, and suffer crippling, life-long effects from malnutrition,” said Johannes Schoors, Country Director of CARE Niger. “Many families haven’t recovered from the 2005 and 2010 crises. They need help now.”

While in a typical year the hungry season, when people usually start cutting back on meals, does not usually start until May or June, the surveyed communities in Diffa and Tillabéri said that this year it has already started, and that the situation is already critical and will get worse. Key findings of the assessment include:

- 100 percent of families indicated that they have already reduced portions and number of meals eaten each day.
- Between 70 and 90 per cent of people estimate their food stocks will run out before the next harvest.
- Farmers and pastoralists said last year’s harvest was twice as bad as 2009, when a catastrophic drought and high food prices led to a country-wide humanitarian disaster.
- One-quarter of communities said children are dropping out of school because families left in search of work, the school canteens closed, or the children must work.
- People are forced to sell their animals to buy food, but this is flooding the market and causing livestock prices to plummet.
- 97% of the communities indicated serious problems as a result of decreased fodder production for their animals.
- Approximately 80 percent do not have enough seed stocked to plant for the next season, putting people at risk of hunger for next year as well.
- Nearly one-third of the population is still in debt from the last widespread crop failure in 2009.

Instability in neighbouring countries is making things worse, communities said. Remittances have plummeted since people cannot move freely for work, a typical coping strategy, and refugees from conflict in Mali have crossed into Niger, putting additional strain on families already facing food shortages.

"People are arriving exhausted, hungry and in need of the very basics. But Niger is struggling to cope with the influx of refugees and the extra strain is pushing families to the brink of survival," said Chris Palusky, World Vision's Food Crisis Response Manager for Mali and Niger. "Poor villages have been overwhelmed with people, some expanding seven-fold in just a few months, with refugees forced to live in overcrowded homes and makeshift shacks. Time is running out to support host families before they themselves reach breaking point. A large and speedy response will not only save lives but strengthen communities who are already bearing the brunt of this disaster."

Some 13 million people are at risk from a food crisis in the Sahel region of West and Central Africa, including one million children at risk of severe malnutrition. Erratic rains and an attack of pests and locusts destroyed entire harvests in 2011, leaving families with nothing to eat through this year's hungry season. High food and fodder prices are leaving people with few options. In Niger alone, more than six million people are at risk of hunger; nearly two million of those are in critical need of food and assistance now.

"People in Niger are facing a multifold crisis. This year, we're witnessing a lethal cocktail which is putting enormous strain on households across the country. Following several crisis since 2005, their coping mechanisms have reached their limit and already pushed thousands over the edge," said Samuel Braimah, Country Director of Oxfam in Niger. "The worst can be avoided and thousands of lives will be saved if we act now. It's that simple."

**Based on the results of the assessment, the seven agencies recommend the following:**

- Donors must provide funding now to implement immediate support for families already in desperate need and to prevent more people from tipping over the edge into crisis. We know from experience that waiting will lead to needless deaths, loss of livelihoods, and a costlier response.
- We must act quickly to scale up interventions to address food security and malnutrition, particularly for the most vulnerable: children under the age of two, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and the elderly. The specific needs of pastoralists must also be addressed.
- This is a chronic emergency with long-term causes. Any response must work with local governments to integrate risk reduction measures to help families be more resilient to food shortages and drought and prevent them from falling into crisis.

The full report can be downloaded at [www.acaps.org](http://www.acaps.org).

**ENDS**

**For further information, and to arrange interviews, please contact members of the Emergency Capacity Building Project (a coalition including CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Plan International, Save the Children and World Vision):**

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