

Life on the edge: vulnerability in the Sahel

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Locusts, drought, crops crumbling into dust: in 2005, the Sahel was hit by a catastrophic food crisis. Eight million people were affected. Two years on, drought has eased in this arid strip south of the Sahara, but its people still live in the grip of extreme vulnerability. Their condition is a crisis in itself and a near-guarantee of more humanitarian disasters in the region, whatever the force or frequency of future shocks. Aid donors need to recognise this vulnerability as the root cause of the Sahel's rolling crises.

What causes vulnerability in the Sahel?

Vulnerability is different from poverty. Vulnerable people are susceptible to hazards, from which they are unable to recover, and permanently live on the brink of disaster. A range of complex factors determines the nature and degree of vulnerability. These factors are both **immediate** and **structural**. Development interventions generally focus on immediate factors such as rapid population growth, degradation of pasture and arable land, market instability and a lack of access to essential services. Far less attention is paid to the structural causes of vulnerability, which include the following:

Eroded livelihoods Vulnerable people are trapped in a vicious cycle of endangered livelihoods, debt and depletion of assets, such as land or livestock. Many in the Sahel rely on markets for cereals to eat. According to the famine early warning system (FEWS NET), poor farmers and herders in parts of Niger annually buy 60 per cent of their food from the market. Even in a 'good' year, the price of food fluctuates greatly. Poor people without food stocks have to buy grain when it is most expensive, forcing them to rely on credit or sell off assets. Long-term food and livelihood security can be reduced this way, and vulnerability to future shocks increases.

This can render people's strategies for coping with economic distress unsustainable. Many people migrate within Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and also on to Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. But this is a high-risk move that threatens the very family and community ties that form a crucial safety net during crises. Livelihoods can fragment as migrants are forced

to generate immediate income by selling off their animals or other assets. Locally and internationally, unskilled, cheap and often landless labour is increasingly flooding the market and forcing down wages.

Marginalised peoples The social and political marginalisation that makes certain groups unable to provide for themselves is often overlooked as a cause of vulnerability. **Pastoralists** are an important example. Despite some recent advances in legislation (such as Niger's pastoral code), national policies remain stacked against their way of life, which is often viewed by governments as outdated and unsustainable. In particular, land rights policy restricts pastoral access to natural resources and thus herders' ability to cope with climatic fluctuations.

Similarly, **small-scale farmers** are marginalised by policies favouring 'modern' agriculture, which usually involves large-scale mechanised production. But attempts to increase productivity, particularly where credit is involved, are risky for farmers in the Sahel, who do not have the reserves to cope with crop failure. In the cotton-growing areas of Burkina Faso and Mali, the high cost of inputs such as fertiliser has increased farmers' vulnerability. When crops fail or prices drop on the world market, farmers reliant on credit are in trouble, especially those using their land as collateral.

Women are less likely than men to own land, be able to read and write and have access to healthcare, and will earn less for the same day's work. Many women also face enormous financial pressure and social insecurity when

KEY MESSAGES:

- Many people in the Sahel live in a state of extreme vulnerability to environmental, economic and political risk.
- Both immediate and structural factors lie behind vulnerability in the Sahel. These should be the starting point for action and policies to reduce susceptibility to drought and other shocks.
- Aid must be boosted to match need, and long-term commitments made to match the long-term nature of the problems.
- New approaches drawing on a range of resources and actors are necessary in addressing chronic vulnerability.
- Sustained investment is needed to build resilient livelihoods for pastoral herders and smallholder farmers in the Sahel.

their husbands and sons migrate, as is happening more and more in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Migration also increases the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Exclusion from decision-making Vulnerability is closely associated with a lack of power. While decentralisation is an important step in devolving power to rural populations, many people remain excluded from decision-making. In the poorest Sahel countries, illiteracy and poverty prevent many from accessing the information they need to hold their leaders to account, locally and nationally.

How has aid worsened vulnerability?

Years of development and humanitarian responses have failed to make a dent in the causes of vulnerability. The implications are that aid has either been inadequate, inappropriate or dwarfed by other factors such as the adverse impact of international trade.

The wrong strategies Poverty reduction strategies (PRSs) in the Sahel have relied on market liberalisation to stimulate economic growth, with the assumption that this will increase wealth for all. But in Burkina Faso and Mali, where cotton is a key crop, resource-poor farmers have been unable to trade their way out of poverty in the face of continued US cotton subsidies. Moreover, there are no specific strategies addressing vulnerability and no welfare systems in these countries.

Too small a pot Aid commitments to three of the world's poorest countries are too low. The very poorest, Niger, is 71st in terms of total aid per capita yet is in the bottom five countries on the UN Human Development Index, along with Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Sierra Leone. Nor has debt relief plugged the gap. Total aid and debt relief to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2004 was less than that to Tanzania alone. It is hard to see how current international aid levels valued at US\$40 per person per year will restore damaged livelihoods in the Sahel.

Overemphasis on food aid The stock response to famine has been food aid and distribution, a strategy that has undoubtedly saved lives, but does not address the central causes of the crisis. Food aid is both expensive and slow to deliver. USAID in-kind or "monetised" food aid (grain sold on local markets to raise cash to fund other programmes) dumps US\$1.2 billion worth of surplus food on developing countries. This means large portions of the aid budget support US shippers and packers, and such food aid distorts local market prices. The Sahel has been a major recipient of this kind of aid.

The Sahel Working Group (SWG) is an inter-agency network focusing on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It was formed to identify and implement solutions to the chronic vulnerability and hunger of communities, as highlighted by the 2005 food crisis. The SWG shares information, commissions research and coordinates programming and advocacy messages. Participating agencies include Action Against Hunger, British Red Cross, CARE International UK, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Oxfam GB, Relief International, Save the Children UK, Tearfund and World Vision UK.

Mismatched emergency and development goals Cyclical emergency responses run in parallel with long-term development strategies, yet the two efforts, even when managed by the same agency, donor or government department, are rarely coordinated. Humanitarian assistance is generally aimed at saving lives and helping people get back to where they were before disaster struck. But in the Sahel, that would mean leaving people in a state of dire poverty and vulnerability. The idea of a continuum in which people are expected to move from a state of emergency into rehabilitation, and then participate in development, is inappropriate in the Sahel, where emergency conditions persist in the long term and structural factors contribute to those emergencies. The projected effects of climate change in the region will only worsen this situation. The desire for a rapid response to a crisis also frequently means that humanitarian actors from the North bypass local institutions to distribute relief. This approach undermines long-term development efforts to build local response capacity and encourage real accountability between local communities and government.

What needs to change?

The Sahel Working Group is calling for donors, governments and NGOs to agree a new strategy for building resilient livelihoods in the Sahel. This strategy should inform all aid activities, including PRSs, direct budget support, NGO programmes and bilateral/multilateral donor work:

- The international aid community must commit substantially more resources to fund a new strategy for the Sahel.
- New ways of addressing cyclical crises are needed: food aid should be just one instrument amongst several, including social protection and disaster risk reduction to tackle poverty, food insecurity and vulnerability.
- Cyclical, short-term emergency interventions should be replaced by long-term responses to chronic vulnerability.
- Underlying vulnerability, not shocks such as drought, should become the trigger for action.
- Programmes, strategies and budgets must be designed to cope with inevitable drought cycles.
- Policies and programmes must reduce the vulnerability of local livelihoods, in particular pastoralism, recognising its contribution to the region's economy and food security.
- There are many success stories from the Sahel, which need to be built in. They show how investment in land, soils, and water combined with stronger institutions can generate more secure and resilient livelihoods for poor people.
- The gap between emergency and development responses needs to be bridged.

Action Against Hunger (www.actionagainsthunger.org)

British Red Cross (www.redcross.org.uk)

CARE International UK (www.careinternational.org.uk)

Christian Aid (www.christian-aid.org.uk)

Concern Worldwide (www.concern.net)

Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk)

Relief International (www.ri.org)

Save the Children UK (www.savethechildren.org.uk)

Tearfund (www.tearfund.org)

World Vision UK (www.worldvision.org.uk)