

FOOD SECURITY IN THE SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA: WHERE DO WE REALLY STAND?

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INTRODUCTION

Food security in the Sahel and West Africa is a challenge rooted in structural issues exacerbated by a succession of recent crises. The region, already weakened by decades of armed conflict, political instability, and recurrent climate shocks such as droughts and floods, is experiencing further deterioration. With a rapidly growing population, the urgency to ensure sufficient and nutritious food access is increasingly critical. Today, families spend up to 50% of their income on food, leaving little room for other essential needs such as health and education. Food prices in the region remain among the highest in developing areas, rendering populations, especially the poorest, extremely vulnerable. Many struggle to meet their basic nutritional needs, a situation worsened by weak local agricultural production, which is largely insufficient to meet growing demand.

Despite certain initiatives, the production of improved seeds, essential for increasing agricultural yields and strengthening resilience against harsh climatic conditions, remains insufficient. The lack of specialized professionals in this field and the difficulties farmers face in accessing such seeds greatly limit their capacity to optimize production. Furthermore, financial support for agricultural research in the region is notoriously inadequate. Local researchers, who are crucial for developing new seed varieties and improving agricultural practices, suffer from a severe lack of the necessary resources to carry out their work.

INVITED PANELISTS

Dr. Abdoulaye Mohamadou, Executive Secretary of the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS);

Simone Zoundi, Promoter of the Food Products Exploitation Company and President of the National Federation of Agro-Food and Processing Industries of Burkina Faso (FIAB);

Philipp Heinrigs, Economist at the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO);

Ollo Sib, Senior Advisor in Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation at the World Food Programme (WFP) Regional Office for West and Central Africa;

Sibiri Jean Zoundi, Director of the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO);

Gilles Yabi, Executive Director of WATHI (moderator).

Note : QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present the main findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- The areas most affected by food insecurity are currently governed by military regimes, notably in the tri-border region (Liptako-Gourma). This area has been the scene of numerous crises over recent decades, worsened by changing climatic conditions such as prolonged droughts. In 2023, countries including Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and northern Nigeria were particularly impacted, significantly affecting agricultural production. For example, cereal production in the region reached approximately 76 million tons, a slight decline of 1% compared to the 2022 campaign, mainly due to arid climatic conditions. In southern regions, tuber and root crop production increased to around 205 million tons despite persistent challenges. However, the food situation in the Gulf of Guinea countries is deteriorating, exacerbated by inflation driven by local currency depreciation. It is also crucial to note the rising poverty in these regions, with about 30.1 million people requiring immediate assistance, a figure that could rise to 44.5 million if appropriate measures are not taken. Overall, approximately 86.5 million people are threatened by poverty and food insecurity despite potential food availability, highlighting the major challenges in access for millions in one of the world's poorest regions.
- The Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) actively collaborates with its partners to implement various initiatives aimed at ensuring effective monitoring and robust data production in the region. Among these initiatives, the Regional Prevention and Management of Food Crises (PREGEC) framework covers all countries in the region and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), enabling quarterly assessments of the agricultural and food situation. Additionally, we use a tool called the Harmonized Framework, involving key regional partners and the World Food Programme (WFP), to assess food vulnerability at the regional level. The Food Crisis Prevention Network (RPCA) brings together primary actors twice a year: in December, after the rainy season in Africa, and in April at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) headquarters in Paris, to evaluate the situation ahead of the lean season. We also use seasonal forecasts to anticipate weather conditions and flood risks in the region, while monitoring specific threats such as conflicts and other crises through various information surveillance tools. These combined systems allow for better understanding and response to the complex challenges related to food security and resilience in our region, in close collaboration with our partners to ensure effective and coordinated responses.
- The different tools used help track food production, identifying zones of abundance and scarcity, thus providing a crucial indicator for assessing food and nutritional security. Simultaneously, we monitor markets to evaluate food product availability and prices. For example, countries like Ghana or Liberia, traditionally considered less at risk, may be affected by monetary fluctuations and security issues influencing local production and market access. It is essential to consider not only the regional situation but also international market dynamics, as our countries are often major food importers. Through partnerships with organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), we have access to data on international food prices. Currently, although global prices show signs of stabilization after previous crises, they remain often high and inaccessible to a large part of the population. In West Africa, much of the food needs are met through markets, particularly in urban areas where about 90% of needs are purchased from markets. This trend is also reflected in rural areas, albeit less pronounced, with roughly 50% of food needs met through markets.
- The availability and price of food on the market depend on multiple factors, including transportation and storage costs, as well as losses throughout the supply chain. Furthermore, access to healthy food remains a major challenge. Healthy food must not only meet energy needs but also provide nutritional diversity, including essential micronutrients. A balanced diet rich in vegetables, fruit, meats, and fish is often more expensive than a diet based solely on energy requirements. This reality is even more pronounced in West Africa compared to other regions of the world. Insufficient dietary diversity and micronutrient deficiencies are associated with approximately 25% of global deaths and many non-communicable diseases. In West Africa, food prices generally remain higher than in other regions with comparable development levels, making access to adequate food particularly costly for many populations. The cost of a healthy diet, including more meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit, is often higher than that of a basic diet meeting only energy needs. This disparity is greater in West Africa.

- International responses and those of local governments have been significant but remain insufficient given the scale of the problem. Efforts to combat food insecurity face several major challenges. Although national response plans exist, they struggle to meet the growing needs of the population. These plans, established by governments and their partners, aim to assist vulnerable people during the lean season. However, not all individuals identified as food insecure necessarily receive the necessary aid. One of the strategies employed is the integration of social protection programs, which are expanding despite budget constraints. These programs, such as school feeding initiatives, play a crucial role not only in nourishing children and developing their intellectual capacity but also in stimulating local economies by relying on local production. For example, in Cape Verde, school canteens are supplied with local products, creating a market for regional producers. Food distribution by organizations like the World Food Programme (WFP) has evolved. Currently, about 60 to 70% of aid is provided as cash transfers, allowing beneficiaries to purchase local products, thereby supporting the local economy and better meeting nutritional needs. However, challenges persist, notably in scaling and coordinating initiatives. While many actions are in place, they have yet to achieve sufficient scale for significant impact. Moreover, integration and coordination of efforts among stakeholders are often insufficient, limiting the effectiveness of responses.
- In terms of agricultural production, West Africa has made significant progress over the past decade. Countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali have invested in irrigation and the use of selected seeds, leading to notable yield increases. However, despite these advances, productivity remains a challenge due to the limited use of agricultural inputs. Displaced persons, whether refugees or internally displaced, represent a significant portion of aid beneficiaries. With millions displaced, often due to conflicts or difficult economic conditions, the need for continued, effective assistance is critical. Agricultural production in West Africa has steadily increased in recent years, although this is often underreported. This positive growth is frequently overshadowed by rising demographic pressures, which absorb much of the production gains. Countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali have made notable progress in agricultural production, particularly in specific crops like rice. Similarly, Gulf of Guinea countries including Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria have experienced significant increases in the production of roots, tubers, and cereals. Key factors contributing to this growth include substantial investments in water supply, especially following the 2008 food crisis. These investments have improved yields in areas where water resources are managed.
- However, agricultural productivity remains a major challenge in the region, mainly due to the limited use of improved seeds and fertilizers. Less than 10% of farms use enhanced seeds, and fertilizer application is also limited. The Russo-Ukrainian crisis has highlighted the region's dependence on imported agricultural inputs, emphasizing the need to strengthen local production of these resources. Another important challenge is agricultural financing. Although some countries have increased public investment, private financing, particularly from financial institutions, remains limited, especially for smallholder farms that make up the majority of producers. For example, in Senegal, fewer than 6% of farmers have adequate access to financing to support their production. Furthermore, the marketing of agricultural products remains difficult, largely due to insufficient transport and storage infrastructure. For instance, about 40% of cassava production in Ghana is lost before reaching the market, primarily due to inadequate storage conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Intervening across the entire supply chain is crucial. It is essential to improve agricultural productivity, better manage processing costs, and strengthen distribution infrastructure. This includes targeted investments in the production and distribution of essential products, which will help reduce prices and improve nutrition in the region.
- Promoting the integration of the regional food market is key. By leveraging agrifood complementarities between countries, economic synergies can be created. This involves facilitating trade, harmonizing regulations, and creating a favorable environment for regional food producers.
- Strengthening regional cooperation to address seasonal variations is essential. Mechanisms for information sharing and coordination between countries must be established to mitigate production

shocks, ensuring stable and reliable food supply throughout the year.

- Diversifying funding sources for the agricultural sector is necessary. States should explore alternatives such as creating dedicated national funds, encouraging local private investments, and developing innovative financial mechanisms tailored to the agricultural context to support the sector.
- Using data to target food policies is vital. By analyzing the costs of healthy diets, governments can identify nutritious and essential foods that remain inaccessible to many citizens. Awareness programs should be promoted, particularly in schools and communities, to encourage balanced diets.
- Investing in pastoral infrastructure is important. Enhancing the sustainability and resilience of the livestock sector requires developing improved pastures and appropriate water points. This will reduce dependence on transhumance, stabilize livestock practices, and strengthen local food security.
- Modernizing livestock practices is essential. The adoption of advanced techniques such as genetic selection, effective herd health management, and sustainable waste management practices will not only improve the quality of livestock products but also contribute to preserving local ecosystems and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

QUOTES OF PANELISTS

“The security situation in the Sahel has exacerbated poverty and constitutes a threat factor to food security.” Dr. Abdoulaye Mohamadou, Executive Secretary of the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS)

“In the northern Sahel, countries such as Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger were affected by very long dry spells in 2023, which impacted cereal production with a 1% decrease compared to the 2022 campaign.” Dr Abdoulaye Mohamadou, Executive Secretary of the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS)

“It is necessary to better monitor prices and food markets to understand the accessibility of the environment. It is imperative to monitor more products. Previously, the focus was only on cereals to track price developments, but a broader analysis is needed. Furthermore, in the implementation of public policies, it is essential to identify the entire chain to have an impact on the final consumer price.” Philipp Heinrigs, Economist at the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO)

“In many West African countries, 20% of expenditures concern the purchase of cereals, and about 25% of expenditures are on fruit, vegetables, meat, and fish. Public policy action to reduce prices on these items would therefore have a significant impact.” Philipp Heinrigs, Economist at the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO)

“Over the past two decades, food security in the Sahelian states has been a major concern on national agendas. Many situations have been assessed, notably regarding cereal production, which is a priority.” Simone Zoundi, Promoter of the Food Products Exploitation Company and President of the National Federation of Agro-Food and Processing Industries of Burkina (FIAB)

“Several million people are forcibly displaced, whether as refugees or due to the absence of valid identity documents. This number is immense, and these people heavily depend on humanitarian assistance to survive.” Ollo Sib, Senior Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor at the World Food Programme (WFP)

“Nowadays, strong emphasis is placed on school meals, which are increasingly seen as a way to provide children with quality meals made of local products. This return to healthy and local food aims to improve students’ nutrition while supporting local farmers.” Ollo Sib, Senior Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor at the World Food Programme (WFP)

“It is necessary to raise awareness among populations about work methods and behaviors that allow the state to achieve food sovereignty, notably in the agricultural sector.” Simone Zoundi, Promoter of the Food Products Exploitation Company and President of the National Federation of Agro-Food and Processing Industries of Burkina Faso (FIAB)

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