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## Malnutrition in Children Living in Niger, Africa

In a crisis that has been building for months, an estimated 3.6 million people, one fourth of the population, are in danger of starving to death in the West African country of Niger. The famine, which resulted from successive years of drought and a devastating plague of locusts, was predicted as early as last November, but the slow response of the international community prevented it from being avoided.

The United Nations called repeatedly on the international community to come to the aid of Niger, but its appeals went unheard. The international community was paying little or no attention to the growing disaster in West Africa. It wasn't seen or heard of in the everyday news, so very few people knew about the growing famine. As the months passed and the condition of the people in Niger worsened, the cost of ending this humanitarian disaster grew to extremes. According to the United Nations, when the appeal was first made in November of 2004, donating \$1 per day per person would have averted the crisis; now, relief agencies will have to spend \$80 per day per person to help only the worst of the malnourished. Why such a drastic change? In November of 2004, the number of starving people was minimal. The number increased with time. In November, had the money requested been given to Niger, proper action could have been taken to prevent the full blown famine. However, the money wasn't given to Niger, and there was no way to prevent the famine.

By recent estimates, over one million children, about one fourth of the starving are at risk of dying of hunger in Niger, which ranks second to last in the world in terms of human development and child mortality. 20% of the children will die before the age of five in Niger. The poor health conditions, lack of clean water, and high rates of disease that define everyday life in the country have only accelerated the growing crisis. In Niger, no one is obese. The food supply isn't sufficient enough for anyone to be over weight.

The crisis is far from over. On August 3, the World Food Program tripled its emergency appeal for Niger's escalating food crisis from \$16 million to \$57 million, needed to save 2.5 million people from extreme hunger and malnutrition, according to WFP

Most families in Niger are fairly large, especially in rural areas. It would not be uncommon to see extended families living together. In most rural houses you will often find parents, their children and their spouses, many grandchildren, and occasionally some other relatives living under the same roof. Children are very important to Nigerien families. Parents believe that children will provide for them in their old age. Therefore, you will often find anywhere from five to ten children in one family.

Due to wide spread Christianity in Niger, the vast majority of families have only two parents. Child marriages are also slowly disappearing, but girls are still encouraged to marry young. Because of early marriages, most women get pregnant early in life and have many children before the age of thirty.

With life expectancy in Niger is only 46, older children are often left to take care of their younger siblings when their parents pass away. The children become responsible for the family's livestock and land; they are also held responsible for earning money for food since their parents are no longer around to work.

The average cash income of a family in Niger is little to none. The average annual income is only \$200 per year. That means the average family lives on \$.55 per day. In many cases the father of the family is only home on the weekends. He will make the trek to an urbanized area and spend the week working there.

Unless one is a male, they probably have never, or will never, attend primary school. While the boys are getting an education, the girls are at home working. The girls are often in charge of the livestock, if the family has any. They also cook most of the meals (when they have food), and they keep the house clean. Most likely, HIV/ AIDS, malaria, or some other chronic disease has infected someone in the family. The young girls of the family would care for those infected as well.

As I stated earlier, one million children are at risk of dying from under-nutrition. This is because the diets of children in Niger are very insufficient, and they do not contain the recommended requirements of vitamins, minerals, and/ or calories that every child needs everyday. The vast majority of children in Niger don't even consume half of the nutritional requirements needed to sustain a healthy, long life.

Good nutrition during infancy and childhood is crucial. The nutrition one receives as a child will affect them for the rest of their life. When a child is between the ages of one and twelve, the required intake of kilocalories per day ranges from 1300 – 2200. Kilocalories are what the body eats to ensure proper growth. Kilocalories are also the energy provider for basal metabolism, or the amount of energy required for the body to maintain life-sustaining activities. Your protein needs are between 16 grams and 46 grams per day. The body uses the protein to meet the demands of the growing muscles. As you grow out of the stage of toddler hood and into early adolescence, your need for minerals increases as well. Due to the fact of increased bone growth, calcium requirements jump from 800 grams a day to 1200 grams daily.

Millet is often times the staple food in most Nigerien children's diets. In some cases, children don't even have that to eat. When trading livestock for millet, the price used to be one goat for every bag of millet; now, you would have to trade four goats for the same bag of millet. Because of the drought and locust infestation, millet is now in short supply. Lack of water and those pesky little insects have ruined the millet crop. Goats, however, are not in short supply. That is the cause for inflation. Goats will eat anything in sight, and you will often see them digging through garbage piles eating whatever they come across. Millet is no more than birdseed. People pound it into grain for porridge and flour for pasta. Although millet is very good for you, one cannot survive on millet alone.

For the 32,000 severely under-nourished children, 160,000 moderately under-nourished children, and the 800,000 under-nourished children younger than five, who all live in Niger, these nutritional requirements are nearly impossible to meet. That is because the drought and locusts have eaten and destroyed all of their crops. Because Niger is land locked, international trade is not very common; trade within Niger isn't common either. Access to roads, rail roads, and airports is very limited in the country because of its poor infrastructure. All of the children in Niger are living on millet and goat milk. If they kill the goat for meat, they wouldn't have any milk. Their diets lack the adequate amounts of fruit, vegetables, meat, and protein, and too often they don't get enough calcium from the little goat milk they do have.

Malnutrition plays a major role in a family's home life. If the people are hungry, they will get sick; and if they are sick, they can't work. This makes it hard for a family to make a steady income. If the parents are supposed to be out in the fields working, and one of their children get sick, they will not be able to work because they have to stay behind to care for the sick child. If they aren't working, that means

they aren't getting paid or preparing crops. And if they aren't getting paid, then they won't have money for food, water, etc.

Stefanie Savariaud, an information officer with the United Nations World Food Program, spoke about her experience in Niger. Here is what she had to say:

“The situation is still critical, especially for children under five. They are the ones you've seen in all of the pictures—and they are the ones that are suffering the most, because they are the most vulnerable. There are some centers being set up where you see really malnourished children. Sometimes you go into one and meet a mother and her child is there; and the day after that the child is dead. A lot of malnutrition is linked to lack of food, but it's very important to stress that this is not only about hunger. Access to health care and medication is also an issue. Today I went to a center in Tillaberi—a government center. They were saying that a lot of children there die of malaria, around thirty cases a day. So it's a range of problems that are the issue; not from today, or yesterday, but problems that have always been there.”

### **What are some of the problems that seem to plague Niger?**

The first problem is that you've got 82 percent of the population depending on food coming from their own fields. And in Niger, only 15 percent of the land is suitable for agriculture. Also, people depend on rain to water their crops. There is no other way to water their crops, given that there is no electricity or tap water for irrigation. The poor quality of water is another serious issue—it infects the children with diseases. Niger has no way to store what fresh water they have from the rainy season, so when the rain does come the water becomes very unsanitary.

What is most important to stress is that the Sahel and Sahara are regions where people are coping with very little. So when there is a shock like the drought or the locust invasion the thin line of survival gets thinner. That's why people have nothing left; they live on very little to begin with.

### **The United Nations made repeated calls for international aid to address the crisis early on, but they were ignored. For the people who saw the famine building, how does it feel to see the international community wait for a crisis before responding?**

People who have been working in Niger for a long time say that it's extremely difficult to raise attention between crises. And in Niger crises are recurrent; it's only more severe this time. But there are always crises and the World Food Program is constantly under funded. It is very frustrating. Experts knew that the crisis was coming, and they recorded the appeals and the dates they were made.

### **What can young people in the U.S. do to prevent crises, like the famine in Niger, from occurring in the future?**

So the first thing is to follow what is going on in the region—to get beyond the images and understand the problems in an overall context. It's important to understand the reasons for the famine, including how people live and cope with tough conditions every day.

It's very important to deal with the emergency now, but after it has passed we should pay attention to different sectors that cause some of the problems—like lack of irrigation and infrastructure. I think we have to try to get the bigger picture.

What is extraordinary is that Niger is the second poorest country in the world, but until a few weeks ago, there wasn't any interest from NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). But all that has changed; now a lot of NGOs are coming in, such as World Vision, C.A.R.E., Catholic Relief Service, Mercy Corps, and a few others. Many international organizations are currently working to improve the devastating situation in Niger. Two of the most well known organizations working in Niger are Doctors Without Borders and UNICEF. However, these aren't the only two over there. Many smaller organizations have been over there as well. The first of the helpers arrived in Niger in November of 2004, but there weren't very many. The foreign aid started to increase in early April of 2005 and by July there were many organizations offering assistance. Even with all of the help, you can't save everyone, and there isn't enough money to do so. In March of 2005 an appeal was made by the United Nations asking for \$16 million to be spent on foreign aid for Niger; that appeal resulted in about \$1 million in contributions.

Doctors Without Borders admits nearly 250 severely under-nourished children to their makeshift hospitals in Niger on a weekly basis. Since January of 2005, they have admitted over 21,000 children. Between August 8 and 14 DWB admitted 1,053 children for emergency nutritional treatment. These children received milk with added vitamins and minerals, medicine through iv drips, and the ones who were old enough to chew received plumpy nut bars. Plumpy nut is about the best thing a child could eat if they are suffering from severe under-nutrition. It is packed with essential vitamins and minerals; if a child is able to get one, they are almost guaranteed they won't die. On August 22, DWB announced that food and aid was not getting to the ones who need it most. That is because they live too far away and cannot come to the aid, and the aid cannot get to them.

UNICEF, the United Nations Children Fund, is in Niger doing the same thing as Doctors Without Borders additionally. They are also bringing education to those who need it. They feel educating people will help them learn how to live better lives.

I think it is great that there are so many organizations and people working to aid the people of Niger, but I think they should be working together. It seems like they are all doing their own separate things. If everyone worked together as one, I think they could get more ground covered. They could work together by putting all of their donations into the same fund. It doesn't have to be an existing one; they could start a new fund. That way all of the money people give will go to helping the people of Niger. If all of the organizations get together and come up with a plan I think more lives could be saved. If they all take the same aid and supplies around the country everyone will be treated equally instead of some places ending up with a lot of food while other areas are getting nothing. If they all work together they could get to the more remote areas of Niger that aren't currently being helped.

Improving malnutrition could help Niger tremendously. If people aren't hungry they will be able to work, and if they can work that means they will be able to earn money to sustain a family. However, it will be somewhat difficult to eradicate hunger in Niger until Niger gets better infrastructure. The main cause of the famine was lack of water and again lack of infrastructure. If farmers in Niger were able to use irrigation systems they could water their crops. If they could water their crops, they would have their food supply for the family and the animals, and if there is enough left over they could sell their harvest as a cash crop. Everyone could benefit from better infrastructure.

In conclusion, I think the crisis in Niger will improve. However, it will only get better if the international community steps up to help them. For the time being, the United States is focusing mainly on our own natural disaster, hurricane Katrina. The war in Iraq has also distracted many people from

paying attention to the famine in Western Africa. We should focus our attention on our own country, but we shouldn't lose sight of what is happening in other parts of the world. The rain in Niger won't come until the end of October. It will be a few months yet before Niger will be able to harvest or plant anything. And even when it is time to plant, there is no telling what weather is up ahead for the next year. If the rain doesn't come or is late, another season of crops will be gone and more people will suffer from hunger.

The news coverage of the famine has helped increase the amount of foreign aid and money that has been sent to Niger. Although the famine in Niger was predicted as early as November 2004, it didn't receive news coverage until the very end of July. The first day it was on a national news channel was July 30, 2005. CNN had a five minute news clip on the famine in Niger. I can remember it quite well. The first time the clip was aired I was sitting in my terminal at LaGuardia Airport in New York City. I had been watching the news with Abby Falik when it came on. We were stunned at what we saw. July 30 marked the last day of the Global Citizen Corps training summit I attended. At the summit we had talked how world poverty doesn't get enough news coverage and how one rarely sees anything about it on television. Then, for the first time in a long time, we saw the pictures and heard the reports of starving people across the world. In the following weeks different news channels had it as their "top" story, but it soon faded and people lost interest in the problem. It hasn't been on the air or in newspapers or magazines since mid August.

I'm not a scientist or a genius; I have no idea how we can possibly save everyone from hunger in Niger. They aren't the only country suffering from lack of food and water. If we put all of our aid workers in Niger we could probably save most of the suffering people in that particular country, but that means the other impoverished nations won't have any help and their conditions will worsen.

However, there is hope for Niger, the amount of foreign aid is on a steady increase and more people are being saved everyday. Eventually, this disaster will be ended. If we all pitch in a little, we can help end this disaster that has occurred in already poverty-stricken Niger.

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