

Brady Jeffery, Student Participant
Hill City High School, Iowa

Malnutrition in West Africa

In the West African nations of Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Cape Verde and Mali over half a million people are affected by drought. The ones starving are the poor and unemployed. In January a huge storm killed tens of thousands of livestock on which almost everybody depends on for making it through the hungry season. Then in July, late, low rainfall postponed the start of the cropping season and even eliminated it in some areas. Still suffering from a bad harvest in 2001, the natural disasters have emptied the grain reserves and required families to leave out meals to cope with the food shortages. Many people are forced to borrow money to pay for food that they can find in local markets. The 2002 harvest was 23% less than the previous years. A recent food evaluation showed that many families have eaten their seed reserves and have nothing to plant next year. Damana lies south of the 14th parallel that cuts across the Sahel region on the Sahara desert and that, experts say, is often an area affected by food shortages. "That area is always precarious, the zone most at risk," states Seidou Bakari, head of Niger's national food crisis unit. Last year swarms of locusts stripped crops and grazing vegetation across the Sahel as the region suffered its worst invasion of the insect swarms for 15 years. And while adequate rain fell in many parts of the Sahel, rainfall was more patchy and ended prematurely on the northern fringes of the region, which are virtually semi-desert. Even though the village of Damana has not had a treatment center for malnourished children set up near by, people there have been hit by this year's food emergency. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Action against Hunger, and UN agencies have already recorded an alarming rise in cases of malnutrition in children under five in Niger, Mali and Mauritania. MSF says that in some districts of Niger, one in five children are at risk of serious malnutrition. Many villagers in Niger have resorted to scavenging wild plants to survive because their granaries are empty. Also in Mauritania, the government is estimating that one third of the population, about 900,000 people, face food shortages and are selling their core assets to survive. The Mauritanian government has appealed for 110,000 tons of food aid in November, but the country's director of food security, Ould Zein, states that only 50 percent has been received so far. In Mali, Action Against Hunger find that one in three under five years old are already suffering from malnutrition. They have called on the international community for help. In Senegal their cereal production last year was down 27 percent from previous year's record output. Various efforts have been made to help the neediest.

Niger has been especially hard hit. In 2004, one of the worst droughts in recent years combined with a locust invasion and deep-rooted poverty have had a disastrous effect in Niger. The UN is estimating now that one-third of Niger's 12 million people is affected by the drought. Almost 2.5 million people are being identified as extremely vulnerable and require food assistance immediately. More than 80 percent of Niger's 12 million people rely on the farming and the cattle for food throughout the year. The market price for cattle and other livestock has plummeted as herdsmen have tried to sell their undernourished animals in order to raise cash to buy grain to keep their families fed.

A typical family in Niger has three members. My family is in the agricultural business. They have one three year old child who is malnourished. She is the only surviving child of two previous births. The mother is 25 and will die by the time she is 46 years old if she has an average life expectancy. She must collect firewood each day for cooking. However, she does have access to a well for water. Neither the mother nor the father can read or write. The family has very little access to health care because there is less than 1 physician per 1,000 people in Niger. Things do not look too bright for this family.

Citizens of Western African nations need our assistance. Individual countries such as Niger and organizations such as the United Nations, International Food Policy Research Institute, Save the Children, and the World Food Programme are doing the right things, but need more financial support.

Many UN agencies have appealed to the US to donate \$81 million to help buy food for the hungry and treat the sick in the hunger stricken Niger, which is the second poorest country in the world. But regardless of the media attention, only half of the \$81 million has been donated. "A food crisis of such a scale is unacceptable in the 21st century," says UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Gen. Annan and other senior UN officials want to see a 10-fold increase in the UN's worldwide emergency funds so that aid agencies can get a jump-start on their relief efforts. At the end of March, UN agencies appealed to the US for an additional \$38 million of food aid for West Africa to deal with the shortages, but the FAO says donors had been slow to respond.

In March, the government of Niger set up a program to sell basic foods at controlled prices in some of the country's worst hit areas, although they say more needs to be done. The food crisis, nonetheless, did not stop the government from introducing a new 19 percent value added tax on basic goods and services in March that pressed food prices even further up. However, six weeks of nationwide protests eventually forced the government to compromise, and the tax was finally removed from wheat flour and milk. According to the government of Niger, about 40 percent of the country's 10,000 villages have suffered severe losses to their agricultural production. For some farmers their entire harvest has been wiped out. About one third of the country's population, or about 3.9 million people, will not eat properly this year says the government of Niger. Food is not the only aid needed. Fresh supplies such as seed corn are needed by the farmers so they can start sowing it before it is too late.

According to a report from the International Food Policy Research Institute, the number of hungry children in Africa will increase by about 3.3 million by 2025 if the current policy and investment trends continue. The report also projects the number of hungry children in Africa would decrease dramatically to 9.4 million by 2025 if policies and investments were put in place today to accelerate agricultural productivity and economic growth, reduce population growth rates, and improve access to education, health care, and clean water. Sound policies and increased investments targeted to these areas can strengthen food security and reduce child malnutrition considerably across the continent. Investments in roads and information and communication technologies, such as telephones and the Internet, can lead to more efficient markets and improve farmers' productivity, while modern crop, land, and water management practices would encourage more sustainable agricultural production. If current trends continue, child malnutrition in Africa is expected to grow from 38.6 million to 41.9 million by 2025. Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Burkina Faso, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan, will account for the sharpest increase. Using state-of-the-art computer modeling, this report projects the supply, demand, price, and trade of 32 major food commodities for five regions of Sub-Saharan Africa and two regions of West Asia and North Africa through 2025. An integrated water-food model is also included to assess current and future water resource availability in Africa. The study evaluates the impact of various policy and investment scenarios, including trade liberalization and increased investments in agricultural research, water, and education, on food security and malnutrition. The report provides policy options for African policymakers and the international donor community as they gather at the Millennium+5 Summit in New York City to assess progress on the Millennium Development Goals.

Save the Children is continuing to expand its emergency response to the food shortage crisis in Niger and Mali, two of Africa's poorest countries. In Niger, Save the Children focuses its current activities on assisting 3,000 children and their families in southern Niger where food shortages are most acute. In the next two months the agency also will distribute cereal, oil and vegetables to about 20,000 families with malnourished children. Three Save the Children aid planes have arrived in Niger with more than 70 tons of essential supplies to support beneficial feeding for severely malnourished children and

those recovering from malnutrition. Critical supplies that Save the Children is providing in Niger include tents and other essentials to set up remedial feeding centers for starving children as well as emergency health kits, supplementary feeding kits, 20 tons of ready-to-eat food such as biscuits or porridge and 16 tons of a new product called “plumpy’nut,” a ready-to-eat food that tastes like peanut butter but is prepared with all the nutrients a moderately malnourished child needs to avoid severe malnutrition. Save the Children also is distributing water filters, rehydrating salt, 500 mosquito nets and kits for rapid malaria testing. Save the Children is also starting to set up relief efforts in Mali where as many as 1 million people are suffering from malnutrition. They are planning to launch a two-month food distribution program among children and families in the GAO region, located in the northern part of the country, where poverty rates are among the highest in the world.

World Food Programme (WFP) has tripled the number of people being fed through its Niger emergency operation to over one million, as a severe hunger season takes hold in one of the world’s poorest countries. In Mali the combination of drought and locusts has resulted in a 42 percent decrease in agricultural production compared to last year. About 2.2 million people, 20 percent of the population, are expected to suffer from food insecurity if WFP’s operations are ended due to a lack of funds. WFP aims to support about 450,000 vulnerable people in Mali who have been affected by last year’s drought and locust invasion. The agency has only been able to reach 86,500 of the people who are in need of food aid because of a critical funding shortfall. These people have been given food in return for work on projects designed to help farmers rehabilitate their land and improve productivity. The situation in Mali is not yet catastrophic, but unless action is taken immediately to ensure food is available to the people affected, it has the potential to develop into a problem beyond the means of the government and its partners. A timely intervention supported by funding from the international community could save lives. In order to avoid long-term dependency on food aid, WFP intends to phase out free food distributions outside the refugee camps after two months and replace them with assistance designed to target the most vulnerable and encourage self-reliance. These will include Food-for-Work projects designed to preserve or create roads, schools, and health centers, and free school meals to encourage children to continue their education. Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau are struggling to overcome the devastating effects of war, which has ravaged social and economic infrastructures as well as agricultural production. In Liberia, over 22,500 refugees have been repatriated and over 186,500 internally displaced people (IDPs) have resettled in their areas of origin since repatriation and resettlement began in October 2004. WFP’s operations have contributed a great deal to the stabilization process in Liberia, with over 80,000 ex-combatants demobilized. However, funds shortages have meant rations for refugees, IDP’s, and returnees living in camps have been reduced by 30 percent, and planned expansions of projects such as Food-for-Work have been limited. In Guinea, WFP aims to support income-generating projects to help refugees and former combatants as well as local populations where they settle. Yet, fund shortages have meant that general rations for refugees in camps have been reduced by 20 percent, while activities such as Food-for-Work planned to start in January 2005 are still on hold. Sierra Leone is making significant strides towards stability and reconstruction nearly three years after the first post-war presidential elections. Over 500,000 refugees and displaced people have resettled in their home communities, national rice production is at 80 percent of pre-war levels and thousands of children are going back to school. Yet again rations had to be reduced by WFP in May.

The family has been helped out by the organizations and the government but they still do not have enough food or supplies to be satisfied. Malnutrition in West Africa is going down slowly but is still a big problem. The United Nations, International Food Policy Research Institute, Save the Children, and the World Food Programme have helped out a great deal and they will continue to help the people of West Africa until the problem is resolved. The government of Niger is also helping them as much as they can. All the people that help will probably be helping them for a long time to come.

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