



Save the Children



Policy Brief

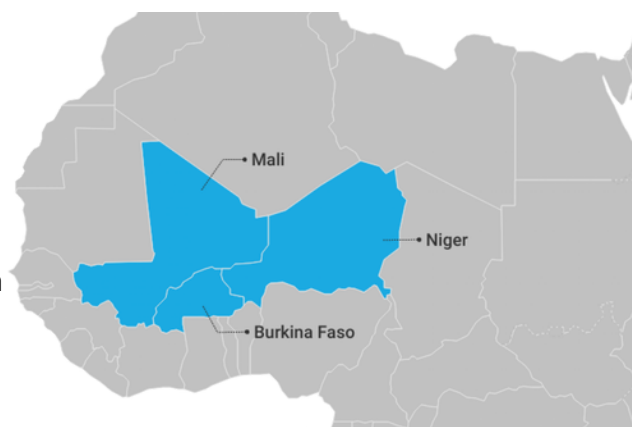
**THE IMPACT OF THE FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL CRISIS
ON CHILDREN IN BURKINA FASO AND NIGER**

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Introduction

Humanitarian needs in the Central Sahel region are growing much faster than the response capacity, with the region experiencing multiple complex and protracted humanitarian crises. The crisis impacting the region is often referred to as a “forgotten crisis”. Each year, countries in Central Sahel[1] see increasing numbers of people, including children, affected by the food and nutrition crisis. In 2022, the region experienced the worst food and nutrition crisis to date with 7.34 million people facing Crisis or worse (CH Phase 3 or above) levels of food insecurity.[2]



2023 projections are grim, but the upcoming June to August lean season will see a slight decrease in people facing high levels of food insecurity. However close to 20,000 people in Burkina Faso are still projected to be in Catastrophe (CH Phase 5) [3].

Conflict and instability are a recurring theme in the Sahel and West Africa with violent events becoming more frequent in recent years and the dynamics behind them increasingly complex. Each year, Sahelian countries sink deeper into crisis with populations, in particular women, girls, and children being at the front line and struggling to survive all kinds of violence. COVID-19 and its containment measures have had a significant impact on the socio-economic situation in Niger and Burkina Faso, particularly on women and young people who were already suffering from the lack of income-generating opportunities. This has led to an increase in unemployment and a decrease in household income. More recently, the effects of the war in Ukraine[4] have spread in a pernicious way, particularly to regions already affected by a difficult security situation. This is also the case in Niger and Burkina Faso, where prices of staple foods and fertilizers have increased.

According to the study on the impact of food crisis on children education and child marriage, conducted to inform the development of this policy brief, 68% of respondents in Burkina Faso and Niger believe that the war in Ukraine has contributed to higher prices of agricultural products. In addition, in both Burkina Faso and Niger, climate change (increased flooding in Niger and drought conditions in Burkina Faso) has jeopardized the way of life for local people because of the inaccessibility of pastureland. Scarcity of resources, lack of economic prospects, and growing demographic pressures have led to tensions between farmers and herders, which often develop into violent inter-communal clashes. This has resulted in a further deterioration of food security and a rise in humanitarian needs and challenges[5]. For this brief, Save the Children commissioned a study informed by data collected in the two countries between May to November 2022. A total of 630 people were interviewed, of whom 264 (42%) were from Burkina Faso and 366 (58%) from Niger. The majority of respondents were between 18 and 49 years old, with 22% being 17 years old or younger. The gender distribution of the respondents is almost equal between men (53%) and women (47%).

This policy brief aims to provide a better understanding of the impact that the food crisis has had on child marriage, early school dropouts, and wider child rights issues in two countries in the Central Sahel region; Burkina Faso and Niger. The study reveals that communities in Burkina Faso and Niger see a direct link between the food and nutrition crisis and protection challenges faced by children including an increase in school dropouts and early marriage.

[1] For the purpose of this brief Countries in the Central Sahel region are: Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali

[2] Global Network Against Food Crises (May 2023) *2023 Global Report on Food Crises: Joint Analysis For Better Decisions*, Pg.45.

[3] *Ibid.*

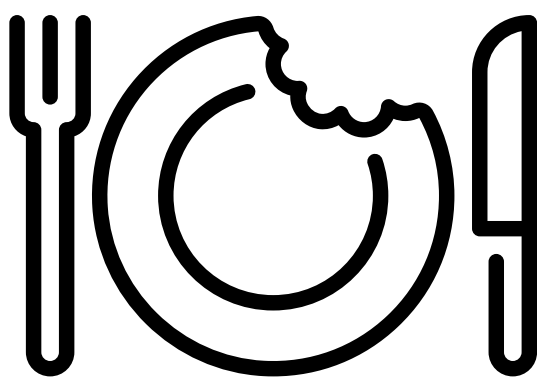
[4] <https://www.afd.fr/fr/actualites/afrique-la-guerre-en-ukraine-decouple-la-crise-alimentaire>

[5] At a press conference with the President of the Swiss Confederation Ignazio Cassis, who came for a three-day visit to Niger, Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum spoke about this food crisis. The second is the food challenge linked to the very unfavorable results of the last rainy season.

Drivers of food insecurity in Niger and Burkina Faso

Worsening insecurity in the Central Sahel has hampered agricultural activities and limited farmers' access to agricultural inputs and labor, forcing many rural households to abandon their fields to become simple laborers or traders in urban centers.

81% of respondents in Burkina Faso, who continued farming despite the security challenges, stated that by far the most prominent reason for lack of income/lack of production is the lack of access to agricultural land for security reasons. In Niger, respondents identified the lack of financial means (50%) and not having access to land due to lack of available land or available land being too remote (51%) as the two main hinderances to continue farming. Security was also a frequently mentioned reason in Niger. In both Burkina Faso and Niger, insecurity affects large parts of the countries.



"In Djibo, attacks by armed groups have forced people to abandon their fields. They are exposed to a food crisis that could be less felt if people had the opportunity to exploit their fields".

(Man, Djibo, Burkina Faso)

There is a well-established correlation between a country's exposure to land conflicts and their level of vulnerability to food insecurity. In Burkina Faso, 36% of people surveyed for this study reported that land conflicts existed in their village, while in Niger the percentage was 76%. Land conflicts take different forms such as fights between populations, blocking of access to arable land as well as destruction, appropriation, and burning of property. However, land conflicts are mainly expressed in conflicts between populations (60% mentioned blocking access to cultivable land) as well as blocking the passage of livestock.

Displacement because of insecurity also poses a major barrier to food security. With people moving in search for food, sometimes far from their families and social environment, there is an increasingly high level of social vulnerability, that impacts access to school and health services too.

The study has also demonstrated that climate change is further contributing to food security challenges for the most vulnerable populations in Niger and Burkina Faso. Almost all respondents noticed changes in the amount and frequency of rainfall in their villages. In Burkina Faso, 70% of respondents said that they had experienced less rain in the last year/last months, which has led to droughts, while in Niger, 79% of respondents said that they experienced more rain, leading to floods. In Niger, prolonged rains and flash flooding led to 327,000 people, farms, and croplands being flooded.[6] Other changes mentioned include uneven distribution of rainfall, lack of arable land, delayed rains, increased wind and heat. Subsequently, the main consequence of climate crisis on people's activity is reduced agricultural production- mentioned by 86% of respondents in both countries.

[2] OCHA, 10 Nov 2022: <https://reliefweb.int/node/3905431>

Community perceptions of the humanitarian response to the food crisis

Every year communities in the two countries witness an increasing number of people affected by the food and nutrition crisis.

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"Faced with this difficulty of eating, families are forced to go to villages where humanitarians distribute food aid and cash transfers"

(Girl, 15, Originally from Abala, Resident in Maradi, Niger).

”

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For months, Burkina Faso has been facing rising food prices. Local markets are being supplied less and less and basic necessities are almost untouchable because of the extreme rise in prices.

Similarly, a man from Kollo, Niger, testifies:

"Food prices have risen surprisingly in Kollo and elsewhere. It's the same song everywhere. Commodities have increased and in some areas, prices have even risen by more than I do not know how much percent".

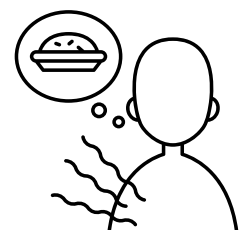
Communities are hoping for a solution to the food crisis, with Nigeriens being more optimistic than Burkinabes (74% in Niger versus 58% in Burkina Faso). The majority expect change to come from NGOs (74% in Burkina Faso and 66% in Niger). However, a significant percentage expects change to come from the government (33% in Burkina Faso and 52% in Niger). One respondent said: 'The government first, and then the NGOs come in support'.

In Burkina Faso, 95% of the population expect support in the form of job creation in to respond to the food crisis. In Niger, expectations are lower with 66% expecting job creation.

A 17-year-old girl from Dori, Burkina Faso, also stresses the need for assistance:

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Currently, many populations are in need of assistance and urgency. If nothing is done I think it will be catastrophic because many populations can barely eat. This is the case in several localities in Burkina Faso where the lack of food is the daily life of the populations. Some are forced to eat only one meal a day when it is possible to have them.



Community coping strategies to the food crisis

Communities in both countries use a variety of common strategies to cope with the challenges they are facing due to food crisis. The majority of people are falling back to consuming less popular and cheaper foods while 34% of people shared that they have to go days without eating.



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For some families, the number of meals has been reduced from three to one. For other families, it is the reduction of the quantities to be prepared.
 (Father of a family, Dori, Burkina Faso)
 ”

Of concern are even more grave strategies being adopted by communities including families that reported that they had turned to consuming their seed stock for the next season, and in some cases, families felt compelled to sell their land and female livestock, which indicates the gravity of the situation. The study also found a decline in spending on fruit, meat, and milk. For children and pregnant women, the combination of the increasing negative coping strategies to the food crisis and resultant poor nutrition poses a serious threat to their health and wellbeing as they generally require better quality and quantity of meals. Many suffer from malnutrition and undernourishment.

In Niger, 12% of respondents said they would "cut back on essential non-food expenditures such as education and health" (compared to 4% in Burkina Faso) with some families stating that they would even withdraw their children from school. As a result of the food crisis, school or children's schooling is no longer a priority. Parents are more concerned about meeting food needs than schooling. They are prioritizing children's survival to their education.

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“Before thinking about school, you have to think about your stomach. A person with an empty stomach; It is a head without an ear. Currently the priority is to find something to put under the teeth” (Man, 42, Kaya, Burkina Faso).



• The impact of the food crisis on child marriage

For many years, Niger and Burkina Faso have been among the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with Niger having the highest[7] rate worldwide (76%). According to this recent study, girls are increasingly at risk of early and forced marriage due to food insecurity.

When parents find it difficult to provide for their children, they feel embarrassed and perceive this as a failure in fulfilling their responsibilities. Families report searching for rich and socially well-to-do men who could provide for their daughters. Some parents see early marriage for their daughters as a way of providing them with stability.

Currently, parents are unable to feed their children and some do not hesitate when they have the opportunity to release a child. It is true that you will see few fathers who will recognize this but marriage is an opportunity to free your child. In a way, it's one less person to feed".

(Man, 22, Dori, Burkina Faso)



Girls continue to be seen as a financial resource to their families. Community members reported that having a daughter to marry off would be like having a “resource” to deal with uncertainty and that, in addition, her family would have fewer household expenses since it would become her husband’s job to look after her. Increasingly, parents are forced to create strategic alliances with families in order to house their daughters quickly.

A quarter of respondents in both countries said that early marriages have increased in their village/municipality because of the food crisis. 11% of respondents in Burkina Faso (mainly in Djibo) and 34% of respondents in Niger said that parents are right to give away their child in marriage when they have difficulties feeding their family.



"Not many will recognize that it was because of poverty that they took their daughter out of school and gave their daughter in marriage".

(Man, 41, Originally from Markoye and resident of Dori, Burkina Faso)

Child marriage is a recurrent problem in the Sahel, and even outside the context of the current food crises, the majority of girls are married before they reach the age of 18. The study shows that the older the age of the respondent, the more likely respondents are to think it is acceptable for them to get married before turning 18. However, the study suggests that in the context of the crises, girls are likely to be married earlier[8], reducing their time to be a child and threatening their lives and health as they are more likely to experience domestic violence, have early pregnancies, difficult deliveries and less likely to stay in school[9].

[7] <https://www.unicef.org/media/111396/file/Child-marriage-country-profile-Niger-2021.pdf>

[8] <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/child-marriage-rise-horn-africa-drought-crisis-intensifies>

[9] https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/global_girlhood_report_2020_africa_version_2.pdf/

• The impact of the food crisis on education

"Food before education":

Insecurity and crises in Burkina Faso and Niger have made it difficult, if not impossible, for children to access education. Rising food prices also severely affect family budgets.



Today what concerns our parents is the meal to give to the children and less their schooling. In any case, with the attacks by armed groups, the school has been very affected, it is no longer a priority, the food crisis has just confirmed this"

(Girl, 16, Dori, Burkina Faso).



With the food crisis, any strategy that would sustain their children's survival is perceived as good. This includes child labor which is a violation of child's rights. It helps families to acquire money to feed their households, making the withdrawal of children from school in order to work quite common. Some parents (most of whom are IDPs) have taken their children out of school and put them to work. "School is less and less a priority, there is a hierarchy of priorities: finding food comes before education. Boys are engaged in income generating activities including gold panning, gardening, trading, etc. while girls are engaged in domestic work or exposed to negative coping mechanisms such as sexual exploitation in exchange for essential goods. What parents need most is an extra hand to increase the family's financial means.



Children are withdrawn from school to work in the fields or in the city. Despite complaints from teachers, parents feel that with the food crisis, it is the search for resources for family survival that is the priority, not the acquisition of a diploma.

(Boy, 17, Dori, Burkina Faso).

Field data from this study also showed that in some communities, the suspension of school meals had an impact on students' motivation to attend school and their ability to meet some of their dietary needs.



> The cessation of school meals has seriously affected the lives of children. They have become fragile and exposed to all kinds of diseases because they are not protected. Before, school meals allowed at least some of them to eat a quality meal.

(André, Teacher, Dori, Burkina Faso)

• The impact of the food crisis on education

The suspension of school meals has also had an impact on school attendance and learning. "A hungry stomach has no ears", as some of the interviewees said. Some teachers attribute students' learning difficulties to the food and nutrition crisis. Some of the testimonies in the report show that pupils often complain of headaches and stomach aches, and teachers noted that when the children eat a piece of bread or porridge, they no longer complain of the symptoms. The lack of meals in this context has an impact on the normal progress of school learning, including the drop in the level of attention and school grades as children are not able to attend class on an empty stomach.

This study also found that the food crisis is easily distinguishable from the security crisis in terms of children's concerns about schooling. When only faced with the security crisis, parents were concerned about their children's education to the point of focusing on displacements to relatively safe areas or enrolment in Koranic schools. But with the food crisis, the objective is no longer to keep children in an education system.

In march 2023, more than 7000 schools in Burkina Faso and Niger are closed[i] due to insecurity including direct attacks on schools which are common in both countries, but to a lesser extent in Niger. The security situation has caused teachers to flee and many displaced people to be unable to attend school. Many IDPs are fleeing to the cities where they think they will be safer, but children cannot afford to go to school in the city because it is expensive, and parents cannot pay. In an already difficult situation, the food crises further decrease children's chances of getting an education.

[i] National education clusters from Niger and Burkina Faso

Conclusions and recommendations

The study showed that communities in Burkina Faso and Niger see a direct link between the food and nutrition crisis and protection challenges faced by children including school drop outs and early marriage. These are becoming commonplace due to the increased difficulties faced by families to feed their families and depleting resources to send children to school. As the situation for children and their communities worsens by the day, so are the risks that compromise the futures of millions of children in Central Sahel. Urgent action is needed to address these growing risks.

Recommendations:

Governments in the Central Sahel should;

- Strengthen the extension of existing social safety net programmes to support food security and nutrition-sensitive livelihoods for households (including refugees and IDPs) in critical areas.
- Governments should immediately scale up investment to protect children from immediate and slow-onset impacts of the climate emergency and linked crises and support children experiencing loss and damage, with a particular focus on child-sensitive, shock-responsive social protection systems that can be adjusted to respond to crisis.
- Ensure free and direct access to gender-responsive humanitarian aid for the poorest populations so that they can feed their families and protect and prevent them from turning to destructive/negative coping mechanisms, such as forcing girls into marriage at an early age or children leaving school.
- Reinforce awareness-raising actions for the most affected communities on the harmful consequences of early marriage on children, particularly girls, for a change in behavior.
- Prioritize the response to the food and nutritional crisis with anticipatory actions as well as multi-year humanitarian response plans and flexible funds by targeting in the National Response Plans (NRP) the most vulnerable areas, in particular, those neglected or under blockade, the most vulnerable groups with specific needs, especially children.

Donors should increase funding to address the food crisis in the Central Sahel including by;

- Fully funding Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and scaling up humanitarian responses to address increasing humanitarian needs in countries in the region.
- Funding a multi-sectoral response to the food crisis that include increased funding to education and child protection.
- Increasing funding for early and anticipatory action to food crises in the region including by strengthening early warning systems and investments in preparedness actions.
- Support initiatives that address the root causes of the food crisis including efforts towards community-level conflict resolution, climate change adaptation, and Disaster Risk Reduction within affected communities.
- Commit to sustaining early recovery and resilience-building interventions that are flexible and tailored to the context of the food crisis and its consequences related to education and child marriage.



Cover Photo:

**Mariama malama, sitting in a refugee camp chatting with a Save the Children worker.*



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