



Niger 2014 / Sean Sheridan

A STRATEGY FOR RESILIENT FOOD SECURITY IN NIGER

Findings from a Strategic Resilience Assessment

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Nigeriens engaged in livestock rearing, agriculture, seasonal migration, and petty trade are facing increasingly frequent shocks and stresses. Despite receiving billions of dollars of international aid over the last 40 years, the increased intensity of these impacts is compounding widespread food insecurity. To inform the development of a new country-level strategy, Mercy Corps conducted a Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS). STRESS enabled stakeholders to unpack Niger's complex systems to determine the impacts of shocks and stresses on vulnerable groups and identify the resilience capacities critical to maintaining progress toward food security.

Summary

The Niger STRESS process focused on the vulnerabilities of men, women, and adolescents whose food security depends on the agropastoral system. This system is changing dramatically: pastoralists are becoming agropastoralists or wage workers, people living in rural areas are moving to towns and cities, and soil fertility is decreasing while



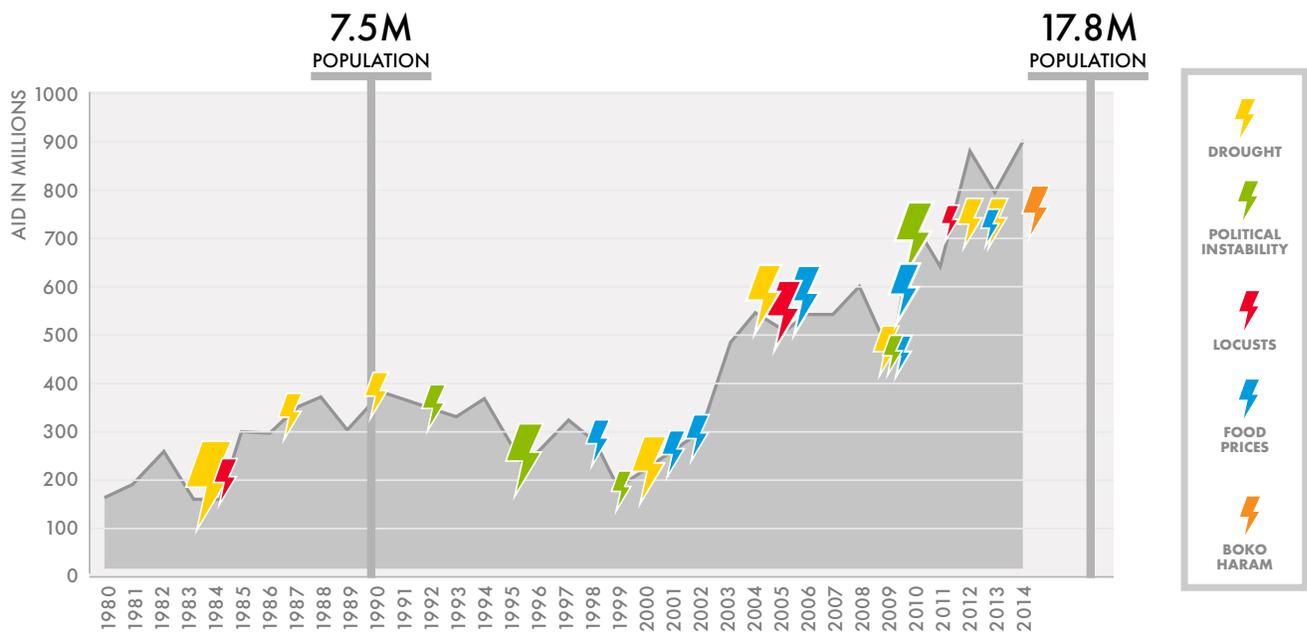
human fertility remains the highest in the world. With a burgeoning youth population (7 in 10 Nigeriens are under the age of 25), demand for both cultivable land and social services outpaces supply. Adaptations in rain-fed agriculture are not keeping pace either, though there have been significant improvements in small- and large-scale irrigation, particularly for vegetables with a high market value. Still, the majority of people working within the agropastoralist system must purchase more than half of their food from markets, as household production is becoming less viable. If harnessed well, Niger has a comparative advantage in livestock farming with vast potential markets in neighboring countries and possibilities for expanding value-added industries through processing agriculture and livestock products. Moreover, migrant workers continue to make a significant contribution to revenues throughout the country.

Shocks and stresses often drive each other, originating in one system and moving quickly through others, reinforcing a cycle of vulnerability and poverty that perpetuates food insecurity. For example, climate change is intensifying frequent droughts, variable rain, and higher temperatures. These pressures are increasing competition for grazing pastures and arable land, and ground water resources many not satisfy long-term demand given current or projected trends. Domestic and international conflicts are also reducing people’s capacity to earn a living, particularly in areas that combine agriculture and livestock farming and on the borders with Nigeria and Mali where ideological conflict has spilled into Niger. Sociocultural practices restrict women and girls’ access to markets, means of production, and education, and high levels of early marriage and pregnancy perpetuate a vicious cycle of malnutrition. Consequently, the resources and strategies households depend on for stable access to and utilization and availability of food must function interdependently to be effective, crossing social, ecological, and economic systems.

Major Shocks and Stresses in Niger

- Drought
- Rainfall variability
- Livestock disease outbreaks
- Degraded agricultural and pasture land
- Diminishing water sources
- International conflict
- Seasonal and annual food price increases

A HISTORY OF REPEATED SHOCKS



Net official development assistance and official aid received in Niger since 1960 (Source: World Bank)

Resilience Capacities

To surmount shocks and stresses within this complex context, Nigerien men, boys, girls, and women must have access to appropriate resources and apply risk-mitigating strategies that support their ability to maintain progress towards development goals. Through STRESS, Mercy Corps identified priority resilience capacities, broadly categorized into the buckets below, that Nigeriens can use in the face of key shocks and stresses to offset food security impacts. These are designed to compliment ongoing development strategies. Constraints within systems—including formal and informal barriers, which obstruct or disincentivize the use of resilience capacities—must also be addressed. Partnerships will be essential to transforming institutions into supportive structures, ensuring even the most vulnerable agropastoralists are able to employ resilience capacities.

› **Increased capacity of women and girls to influence and make decisions.** Women and adolescent girls have less access to productive resources, mobility, and decision-making, exposing them disproportionately to shocks. We must go beyond improving income to ensure women are less vulnerable and gain influence and decision-making power. Increasing gender equality within the household can secure women’s influence over critical decisions (e.g., when food stocks are used during the lean season, ability to invest in their own livelihood activities as a resilient source of income), which support their ability to cope with or adapt to Niger’s frequent shocks. Strengthening organizations—from grassroots to national levels—that facilitate discussion on delicate cultural and developmental issues and improve and enforce policies on marriage and family are essential to reinforcing these cultural shifts.

› **Improved stability and social cohesion.** Systems that promote stability from local to the national levels are essential to ensuring Niger has the capacity to manage multiple shocks and stresses simultaneously. Inclusive representation in state institutions among all ethnic groups and regions of the country is critical to promoting stability and avoiding fallout from international conflicts spilling over the borders with Mali, Libya, Chad, and Nigeria. Food security efforts should preserve and build on well-established Nigerien traditions supporting strong social cohesion (including across ethnic groups) that provide families with an immediate safety net to deal with shocks, while promoting local stability. Government and religious authorities should strengthen male and female youth groups (e.g., fada, tontines) with conflict mitigation skills to prevent and manage local resource conflicts and support the integration of refugees and internally displaced people.



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› Increased Agency and Good Governance

To build resilient food security, Nigerien men, women, girls, and boys must understand the multidimensional and interconnected nature of the risks they face and possess the right resources and strategies to anticipate and deal with them. However, Nigeriens must also address the social variables that influence their willingness to apply those strategies, as well as hold local leadership and government accountable to ensure these opportunities exist. Given Niger’s long history of outside assistance and high exposure to shocks and stresses, the development community must support citizen demand for good governance practices and institutional transformation.

› **Improved access and use of adapted financial services.** Lower-risk, adapted credit schemes that enable both male and female agropastoralists to generate income during the off-season (e.g., cyclical inventory credit, warrantage) can help them: 1) smooth risks posed by fluctuating food prices; 2) invest in risk-reducing inputs (e.g., improved seeds, non-agricultural activities); and 3) offset production losses from drought or other climate stresses. For women, financial services that support access to timesaving technologies for production (e.g., irrigation, tools) are key to reducing their risk. Savings products and financial education that promote household seasonal planning and budgeting can support agropastoralists in making informed financial management decisions that reduce their vulnerability to shocks. Crop and livestock insurance products that integrate services (e.g., improved inputs, market and weather information) can also help agropastoralists cope with and adapt to increased production risks.

› **Improved productivity and access to regional markets for agropastoralists and pastoralists.**

Adapted livestock strategies (e.g., animal health, herd management) and supporting agroecological approaches (e.g., pastureland rehabilitation, water management), especially those targeting female agropastoralists, are critical to improving productivity sustainably. This must be met with investments in market infrastructure (e.g., road network, accessible slaughterhouses, extension services) to expand access to profitable regional markets beyond Niger and facilitate livestock producers' ability to adapt away from traditional practices vulnerable to drought cycles, animal disease outbreaks, and degraded rangeland. Similarly, increasing agricultural production in the face of desertification and water scarcity must involve sustainable irrigation, cropping, and agroforestry practices, which maintain soil quality, make efficiently use of water resources, and promote biodiversity. To leverage profits amidst market uncertainty, use of value-adding techniques (e.g., processing, drying) and appropriate storage facilities should accompany investments in yields.

› **Improved access to productive rural and urban employment.** Given increased drought, rainfall irregularity, and water scarcity, improving food security solely through the agricultural and livestock farming sectors is unlikely. Strengthening alternate employment sources over the medium and long-term is a key resilience capacity at both household and country levels. Niger must improve its financial services and adopt new economic development strategies (e.g., infrastructure, vocational training, policy coordination, market development) that stimulate private sector growth and generate jobs for both skilled and unskilled workers in both



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› **Improved Migrant Paths**

Migration continues to be an important economic strategy to offset lower yields and the lengthening lean season. With more markets, employment opportunities, and trade in urban areas, food security is higher there than in rural areas, but the two remain highly interconnected. Increasingly men and young women look for domestic labor in urban centers. Improving access to information regarding risks and labor opportunities, creating recognized work certificates and affordable money transfer services, and enforcing protection services can strengthen the benefits of migration for household food security. Lastly, international migrants—primarily young men crossing borders into Cote d'Ivoire, Algeria, Libya, and Nigeria—need safer short- and long-term migration paths.

rural and urban areas, with a strong focus on male and female youth. Public and civil sectors must help cultivate citizen engagement and keep watch over the labor market to ensure all workers' rights are protected.

- › **Improved access to and use of integrated natural resource management systems.** Increasing decentralized government structures and civil land tenure organizations' capacity to reduce degradation and improve resource management (e.g., integrated planning, conflict-sensitive zoning for agricultural and pastoral lands) will help agricultural and livestock sectors manage climate-related impacts and reduce local resource conflict. Maintaining traditional resource management institutions and value systems that reinforce social cohesion can facilitate transitions within the agropastoral system, but these institutions must better address systemic land tenure barriers that reduce women's ability to deal with shocks and stresses. Developing water resources responsibly with low and high-cost capture projects is essential. Key decision-makers must have access to technologies aimed at better understanding the long-term viability of pumping underground water.
- › **Improved access to basic social services (e.g., education, health, social protection).** Niger's history of frequent shocks often manifests as ongoing psychological stress within households. Stable, quality health and education services increase vulnerable groups' capacity to absorb and adapt to these shocks and stresses. Community solutions (e.g. education campaigns for girls and women, community health counseling, responsible management of community sanitation) will undoubtedly address some local public service needs, but they cannot replace basic social service infrastructure. Couples must have access to family planning information and affordable contraception, social attitudes around family size must change, and development organizations, local leaders, and authorities must participate in the cultural transition required to stabilize population growth.
- › **Improved access to social protection and disaster risk reduction programs.** Social safety net schemes that help women, men, and youth recover from multiple shocks and stresses are critical to preserving key household assets and minimizing backsliding into vulnerability. Market-oriented, State-led emergency response policies need to support effective local practices (e.g., community grain banks that mitigate shocks to production) and market-oriented solutions for managing fodder deficits and animal feed price spikes. These State-led emergency responses (e.g., commercial destocking, cash transfers) during larger scale droughts or other crises must also be more quickly mobilized and accurately targeted.

A Strategy for Resilient Development

Building resilience to shocks and stresses—by ensuring access to and use of layered absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilience capacities—will take time. Mercy Corps' strategy for tackling the root causes of poverty and food insecurity in Niger through resilient development is accordingly long-term. Ultimately, improving food security requires social change around individuals' practices and access to information. Given decades of outside assistance, operational approaches need to facilitate and empower locally led social change and increased agency. Improving citizen organizations from village to national levels is critical. Our STRESS findings are informing these discussions—from improving food security strategies to advocating for policy shifts—among government, civil society, private sector, donors, and other NGO partners.

We are now conducting additional research into key trends revealed during STRESS (e.g., groundwater resource management), which promise to deepen our understanding of vulnerability and enable us to hone resilience capacities for specific regions within Niger. As Niger navigates future risks and opportunities, we will revisit the STRESS to ensure building resilience for women, girls, men, and boys remains at the forefront of Mercy Corps' relief and development strategy.

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Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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