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THE REGIONAL FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION WORKING GROUP (WEST AFRICA)

Advocacy note on the immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the food and nutrition security in West African countries and the Sahel.

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

All the countries of West Africa and the Sahel have currently reported cases of COVID-19 and most Governments have taken specific measures to prevent it from spreading and limit the harm this 5th pandemic is liable to do in the region. However, these measures, which are necessary to slow down the spread of the pandemic, have an adverse effect on many economic sectors, including humanitarian operations, and could have a short-term and middle-term impact on nutrition systems, with significant socio-economic consequences in the region should these measures be maintained or intensified.

This note, drafted by the regional FSNWG¹ aims to highlight the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods and the food and nutrition security of the region's populations and to call upon all stakeholders to take immediate and concerted action. To fulfil that aim, the note presents urgent recommendations liable to help to ward off and lessen the indirect impact of the COVID-19 crisis, on a region which is characterized by an exceptionally high level of nutrition insecurity with a projection of nearly 19 million² people affected by a food crisis between June and August 2020 and more than 7.4 million³ less than 5-year-old children at risk of acute malnutrition before the arrival of the pandemic.

A second note analysing the impact of the crisis on food and nutrition security in the mid-term and long term will be drafted in a second stage.

The legitimate focus on the health crisis defuses attention away from a well-known and alarming fact : the marked deterioration of food and nutrition security in West and Central Africa despite generally satisfactory levels of agricultural production.

¹ The FSNWG is the regional food and nutrition security working group which gathers several humanitarian actors involved in West and Central Africa so as to devise sectorial analyses, improve coordination and technical approaches in the field of food and nutrition.

² Countries in the West African region, harmonized framework, projected figures for the June-August 2020 hunger gap

³ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, Chad, Senegal



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AN ALARMING AND UNDERFUNDED FOOD AND NUTRITION SITUATION

The results of the analysis of the March 2020 Harmonised framework show that, unless a proper response is organised for the June to August 2020 period, 19 million people in the CILSS-CEDEAO space and Cameroon will suffer from severe food insecurity. The needs are 80% higher than in 2019 whereas funding only cover 50% of the needs on average.

Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Mali, Chad and Cameroon are by far the worst hit countries. This deterioration of food security results from several factors among which recurring droughts in West Africa's Sahel, economic uncertainty in Sierra Leone but above all insecurity in the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad basin region along with the crisis in Cameroon which both lead to huge numbers of people being displaced.

The deterioration of food security must be viewed as part of an already challenging environment with multiple weaknesses such as a high incidence of childhood diseases, very weak health systems and high levels of acute malnutrition with nearly 3 million⁴ less than 5-year-old children who will suffer from its most severe form in 2020. The situation is particularly alarming in the Lake Chad basin region as well as in the countries of the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali et Niger) which are faced with a rise in civil insecurity threatening access to basic social services.

The measures taken by governments to slow down and prevent the spread of the disease include, among others, closing borders and restricting movement inside the countries themselves and in public transports, curfews, quarantines, and sometimes market closures. Those measures disrupt households' economic activities the way markets normally work and reduce work opportunities. This situation threaten livelihoods, which could on the one hand make it more difficult for people to access a basic minimum diet (in the absence of a rich and diverse one), and on the other hand impact the nutritional status of mothers and young children.

The 2020 analyses, programmes and response plans remain more than ever on the agenda since this health crisis will make the needs more severe. The vulnerability of the beneficiaries will only worsen. **Maintaining the response to humanitarian needs remains the first priority.**

⁴ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, Chad, Senegal

Potential impacts and immediate consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on food and nutrition security as well as on livelihoods.



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At this stage, developing precise scenarios about the middle and long-term evolution of the pandemic and its impact on food security and livelihoods is a complex exercise. There are many differences at the local, national, regional, and global levels that must be taken into account. Besides, the measures introduced by governments to contain the pandemic in several of the region's countries are liable to become tougher and are difficult to anticipate. However, considering the evolution of the pandemic in the first countries to be affected as well as its current spread in West Africa and the Sahel, the pandemic is expected to spread quickly in the three months to come. In these conditions, some international and national measures could stay in place and even become tougher in the face of this scourge. Which might be much more disruptive for some sectors of activity and among them humanitarian aid, socio-economic activities, and basic social services in the region.

The next three months (April-May-June) correspond to a key period for the preparation of the farmland and the pastoral transhumance that rural households greatly depend on. The measures put in place already have a very restrictive impact on seasonal migrations (from cities to the countryside), pastoral transhumance and access to pastures and water in the dry season.

In West Africa and the Sahel, the COVID-19 pandemic risks having a serious humanitarian impact for a population which is already affected by a multi-faceted crisis. The immediate potential impacts in the three months to come might be :

→ **Severe constraints and restrictions regarding food aid and humanitarian operations.**

Preparing operations to provide food aid for the millions of people suffering from acute food insecurity during the hunger gap will be done in the next three months. There is inadequate funding to address the 2020 food crisis, even without COVID 19. Response plans, when there is any, are by and large underfunded. Governments' measures restrict or slow down the movement of people and goods at the local and regional levels and represent operational and programming challenges for humanitarian actors. Even if most organisations are reviewing procedures and methodological approaches to ensure an adequate response while taking COVID 19 into account and contributing to preventing it, the impact of the measures will likely delay logistics operations and the necessary targeting to provide food aid to the 19 million people⁵ suffering from food insecurity (Phases 3-5 of the cadre Harmonisé analyses) during the hunger gap. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis may urge governments and donors to focus on the health response and thus considerably reduce the funds available to respond to the food and nutrition crisis. The situation is particularly alarming for displaced people, refugees, marginalized groups, and the populations living in conflict zones;

⁵ Those figures include Cameroon.



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Potential impacts and immediate consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on food and nutrition security as well as on livelihoods.

- **Reduced access to markets, seeds, tools, and inputs for millions farmers** who will have to prepare their fields before the arrival of the rainy season, as well as obstacles to the mobility of seasonal workers and stock breeders and their access to pastures and water for cattle. It could be difficult for households to ensure the agricultural season starts normally while governmental and non-governmental actors could have difficulty ensuring the support usually provided for agro-pastoralists at the beginning of the agricultural season, by bringing input, training and timely technical support at their disposal. This could therefore have a direct and middle-term adverse impact on households' livelihoods beyond the coming hunger gap;
- **An adverse impact on the way food systems work** : farm exports, imports and food value chains (access to inputs, production, transformation, storage, transport and distribution) could be hit hard if appropriate measures are not taken. The closure of markets, shops and firms could result in higher international and sub-regional price volatility affecting: consumers' purchasing power, the terms of trade for some producers and pastoralists, and resulting in rising losses and production waste, and a loss of revenues for stakeholders in supply chains. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the analyses (like 'Fill the Nutriment Gap') conducted by 4 countries in the region (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) had shown that 2/3 of households could not afford nutritious food, which contributed to unhealthy food practices, and malnutrition. Price hikes for staple foods risk making this situation worse. The slowdown of imports of basic commodities, linked to an overall slowdown of the global economy is highly likely. indeed, the region greatly depends on imports, in particular for some basic staples like the rice which mostly comes from Asia but also oil. The slowdown of international maritime transport already results in a container crisis and there are already long delays in the supply of goods that usually arrive at Lomé, Abidjan, Dakar, and Cotonou harbours which may entail additional costs;
- **Deterioration of the supply of preventive and curative services against malnutrition** : the already weak capacities of the health systems in the region could be further limited by the increasing demand for care within the health facilities and the increasing risks of infection for health workers that could result from the pandemic. Health systems therefore risk no longer being in a position to cope with the growing demand and to provide basic health and nutrition services to prevent and treat acute malnutrition.
- **Disruption to the supply chain** : discontinuing the manufacturing of vital nutritional products (ready-made therapeutic products) as well as their transport to health facilities because of the limits to movement imposed by Governments represents a major threat to the continuity of services to treat mothers' and children's acute malnutrition.
- **Decrease in / lost of employment opportunities in the formal and informal economies** : a fall in revenues and a deterioration of livelihoods for millions of people in urban centres and in the countryside are to be expected, following the prolongation of restrictions to the movement of people and goods. Lockdown measures could make the economic impact on households all the worse in an exponential way. This would cause a sharp deterioration in economic conditions and adoption of negative coping strategies for more vulnerable households. The added impact of the consequences of COVID-19 could worsen the living conditions of 57 million people expected in Phase 2 between June and August 2020 and cause the most vulnerable to switch to Phase 3 to 5. This shift would negatively impact the already fragile nutritional status of women and children: the number of cases of malnutrition could soar dramatically by the end of the year if no adequate action is taken.



The impact of the current crisis is already being felt in many countries of the region and risks getting worse in the weeks to come. The significant decrease in Diaspora remittances, which, for some countries, account for up to 10% of GDP and are one of the main sources of income of the most vulnerable households, risks making the economic situation of the poorest households even worse. It is necessary to take urgent steps so that those immediate impacts may be anticipated, minimized and dealt with in order to limit the negative consequences on the livelihoods and the food and nutrition security of the populations of the region in the next few weeks but also in the next few months and years : the impact of the pandemic in the longer term will depend on these urgent steps too.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND THE PREPARATION OF ACTORS.

1. Strengthening the follow-up and the harmonised and concerted analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on food security and nutrition with a view to a rapid update of programmes and plans for a food and nutrition response taking into account the short and middle-term needs resulting from the impact of COVID-19 (States & Humanitarian Actors);
2. Accelerating the implementation of emergency food aid programmes targeting those who are already identified as vulnerable before the COVID-19 crisis, while enforcing procedures to reduce the risks of transmission. (Governments / Donors / Humanitarian Actors) ;

3. Ensuring through specific measures populations' access to humanitarian services; (Humanitarian Actors and Governments).

4. Adapting emergency nutrition aid to COVID-19 crisis and anticipating the pre-positioning of nutritional inputs at all the levels of the health pyramid and supporting national health systems to ensure the continuity of interventions to prevent and treat mothers' and under 5-year-old children's acute malnutrition (State, Humanitarian Actors).

5. Immediately releasing the funds necessary to the implementation of what is already programmed and allowing for greater flexibility in the use of funds as well as making procedures easier (State, Donors).

6. Rapidly raising significant additional emergency and post-emergency SAN funds at the national and international levels.

7. Take appropriate measures to trade and transport of food, inputs, and basic staples so as to safeguard and bolster food markets and national and sub-regional agro-pastoral productions to reduce the need for emergency food aid by taking effective support measures for the most vulnerable agro-pastoralists and limit speculation through a close follow-up of prices and transparent communication (States, regional Institutions, Technical and Financial Partners). Particular attention should also be paid to the production, transformation, transport and commercialisation of nutritious foods.

8. Maintaining the operational capacities of humanitarian actors by accelerating the operational preparation of the change in aid methods (cash, coupons, aid in kind) and in distribution mechanisms to keep up with the rapid evolution of COVID measures and market conditions. Privileging electronic payment as far as possible to limit the risks of infection (Humanitarian Actors and Governments)

9. Based on rigorous market analysis and a close follow-up of the prices of the main food staples, including nutritious foods, privileging interventions based on the market to support the local economy. Monitoring prices in rural areas can be updated by mobilising the network of organisations of cereal producers in the countries of the Sahel. (State , Donors).

10. Pursuing the effort of (vertical and horizontal) expansion of social networks to cushion the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. To provide immediate economic support for the most vulnerable households directly affected by the crisis especially in urban areas (households living on a day to day basis in the informal economy) by valuing humanitarian «know-how» in targeting tremes.

11. Strengthening close cooperation and operational coordination with the authorities for multisectoral responses that are efficient because of better coordination between the different humanitarian, development and state actors.

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