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Localized deficit production, high food and fuel prices increase food insecurity

Despite above-average aggregate cereal production across much of West Africa during the 2007/08 agricultural season, localized production deficits and above-normal price increases in some areas are leading to early increases in food insecurity. This will likely cause a more difficult lean season and an increased need for assistance, especially for poor households in northern Nigeria, southeastern and northwestern Niger, and in urban and periurban areas. Persistent above-average staple food prices in Niger, Nigeria, and Mauritania, rising fuel costs across the region, and civil insecurity in Chad, Niger, and Mali are likely to exacerbate food insecurity among populations in these areas. Depending on how high prices rise, and how local governments, the commercial sector, and international donors respond, the number of food insecure people in West Africa may increase until at least the next harvest in October 2008.

Joint markets and food security assessments in West Africa's eastern, central, and western zones in February and March indicate that, midway through the post-harvest period:

- cereal prices remain average or below average in Mali and Burkina Faso, due in part to government restrictions on grain exports;
- rising international grain prices are particularly affecting poor households in urban and periurban areas of import-dependent countries such as Mauritania;
- cereals prices in many markets in northern Nigeria are above average, due in part to localized poor production, industrial demand, and trader speculation;
- cereal prices are high on several markets in eastern and northwestern Niger, due to localized below-normal production, civil insecurity, trader speculation, and the absence of normal cereal flows from Nigeria (due to high prices) and Burkina Faso and Mali (due to export bans);
- prices in some markets in Chad are above average levels, due primarily to continued civil insecurity; and
- prices for maize and rice are increasing throughout the region because of below-normal local production and high international market prices.

In the eastern zone (Niger, Nigeria, Benin, and Chad)

Prices for locally-produced staples are above normal in many markets in this zone, particularly in northern Nigeria, where below-normal production is affecting the food security of rural and urban households in states including Jigawa, Yobe, Zamfara, Katsina, Kebbi, and Plateau. Continued increases in staple commodity prices in these areas will further restrict food access for households, causing high or extreme levels of food insecurity and an early and more difficult lean season beginning now. Similarly, some pastoral and agropastoral households in Niger face rapidly degrading pasture conditions and localized production shortfalls, compounded by increased cereals purchases from Nigeria in January 2008, and restricted flows of imports from countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali. Reduced food availability in these areas of Niger is likely to cause continued increases in food prices, exacerbating food insecurity for: 1) households with below-normal grain production, 2) poor households in agropastoral areas in the east and northwest (Ouallam, Fillingué, Doutchi, Loga, Tahoua, Keita, Gouré, Tchintabaraden, Abalak, Mainé Soroa, and Nguigmi), and 3) those affected by civil insecurity, especially in rural areas of Agadez, Arlit, Tchirozérine, and Bilma. Reduced food availability and increasing prices on Niger's markets could also be particularly difficult for nomadic pastoralists, who are likely to have problems reconstituting their food stocks when they return to the pastoral zone with the arrival of rains in the agricultural zone in May and June. In Niger's major crop-producing areas – such as Maradi – good 2007/08 harvests are helping to maintain grain price increases that are similar to those of the five-year average on most markets.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues alerts to prompt decision-maker action to prevent or mitigate potential or actual food insecurity. FEWS NET is a USAID-funded activity. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the view of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

In the western zone (Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, and Cape Verde)

As this zone is highly dependent on international imports, food security is more closely tied to international price trends, particularly for urban and periurban households. Senegal's poor 2007/08 production season and Mali's export bans have significantly reduced the availability of and increased prices for staple grains on most markets in Mauritania, increasing food insecurity among market-dependent households, especially those in urban and periurban areas. Cereals price increases are also reducing terms of trade for pastoralists and agropastoralists, for whom animal sales constitute a significant coping strategy. These households will face a harsher-than-normal lean season until at least October. For households in rain-fed agricultural areas in south-central and southwestern Mauritania, a fourth consecutive year of poor production, lack of imports from Mali, generally poor market access, and rising prices are now causing food insecurity to deteriorate to extreme levels. Similarly, in south-central agropastoral areas of Mauritania, below-normal production and pasture conditions are causing food security to deteriorate. In southwestern areas bordering the Senegal River, households also face a reduced capacity for off-season and irrigated agriculture, causing food security to deteriorate as they run out of food stocks and turn to markets – where prices are high and increasing – to source their food needs.

In the central zone (Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire)

Availability of and prices for locally-produced grains are normal or above normal for this time of year in this zone due in part to average or above-average 2007/08 production and government decisions to engage in subsidized sales of food security stocks, limit commercial price increases for staples, direct surplus production to deficit production areas (Burkina Faso), and impose unofficial export bans (Burkina Faso, Mali). However, prices are likely to increase throughout the zone as transport costs increase, and households will turn to substitute commodities (millet, sorghum, and corn) as rice prices increase or availability decreases. While trade restrictions have helped to maintain availability of and low prices for grains in countries where they are implemented, they have reduced purchases on assembly markets and restricted the movement of goods, which could act as a disincentive to next season's production in Mali and Burkina Faso. Some households in this zone also experienced shocks (flooding, early end of rains) last season that will result in an early lean season beginning now in the Center South and Yatenga regions of Burkina Faso. Other areas will face a more difficult lean season starting in July (Central East region of Burkina Faso), when available household stocks and resources for government interventions have run out and prices are increasing following seasonal trends. Food availability is above-average in the major production regions of Burkina Faso (Boucle de Mahoun, Cascades, and Haut Bassins), as well as in the Sahel and North regions of the country, due to above-normal production and a lack of trader activities resulting from their inability to export grains.

Rural producers in Mali have relatively easier access to grain this year, due to existing stocks from the last two harvests. For structurally food insecure households in northern and northeastern Mali, however, and for those facing civil insecurity in the north and northeast, higher-than-normal and increasing market prices are likely to reduce food access and increase food insecurity through at least September. In addition, if the 2008/09 agricultural season begins poorly, producers are likely to continue to hold on to household stocks, further decreasing cereals availability.

Recommendations

- Target cash for work, food for work, grain banks, subsidized grain sales, microfinance programs, etc. to already food-insecure populations in the region and provide targeted food aid to below-normal production areas in July and August.
- Facilitate public/private sector market-oriented coordination efforts to improve short and long term food availability.
- Improve cross-border trade and regional market integration efforts through regional organizations such as ECOWAS, CILSS, and UEMOA before the normal lean period begins in June.
- Reinforce and tightly target monetization programs with cereals such as rice and maize and other products like milk to increase their availability.
- Provide sufficient supplies of seeds in deficit areas and fertilizers in high maize and sorghum production areas, especially in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali in May and June.