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# Supporting Change and Changing Support

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36 Years of USAID  
Assistance to Niger

**DRAFT**  
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## Table of Contents

Niger Today: A Work in Progress .....	1
Overview of Major USAID/Niger Results.....	2
Supporting Change and Changing Support .....	3
What Worked and Why .....	6
What Didn't Work and Why .....	11
Tough Questions, Tough Answers .....	14
Message From the Director .....	16

# Niger Today: A Work in Progress

The Kennedy Bridge across the River Niger stands as a symbol of America's commitment to Niger. On August 3, 1960, Niger's Independence Day, America's offer to build that bridge initiated a development partnership that has lasted thirty-six years. For more than three decades, America has collaborated with Niger to improve the quality of life and promote economic growth in what is one of the most challenging environments anywhere.

Niger's physical environment is harsh and unfriendly, characterized by a blistering climate, inadequate rainfall, eroded soil, and long distances between farmland and markets. The land is so parched and infertile that only ten percent of it is suitable for growing anything at all. Food production has been erratic, partly because of frequent droughts, and has actually declined on a per capita basis over the last two decades.

Today, Niger's average annual income is \$270—less than it was in 1960—and about the same amount the average American spends annually to heat his water. Nigeriens live on the edge of survival. The average Nigerien earns about one dollar a day, has no clean water to drink or bathe in, and must walk miles to gather enough firewood—the only fuel available for most—to cook a meal. In a traditional culture that places high value on males, a woman wants to have as many sons as possible and will have an average of eight children. Fully one-third of Nigerien children die before age five. The family's daily struggle for life means that only twenty percent of children have the luxury to attend school. This exacerbates the vicious cycle of poverty, since opportunities for advancement are denied all but the rich.

Compounding these problems, Niger's population has more than tripled since 1960 (*see Table on page 4*) and will double again in twenty years. As throughout Africa, the problem is not one of space but that of an exploding population competing for dwindling natural resources. Despite continued support from donor countries, the health status of Nigeriens remains one of the worst in the world, as is emphasized in the table on the next page. Endemic disease, chronic epidemics and an appallingly low vaccination rate make the children of Niger some of the most vulnerable in the world.

Unfortunately, the development partnership linking the United States and Niger was seriously shaken in January, 1996, when a military coup deposed the democratically-elected government. This event has led to a re-examination of what America's role in providing assistance to Niger can and should be. Our thirty-six years and a half-billion dollars may seem like ample time and money to have made a dramatic impact—but has it? What follows is the story of how Niger has changed, how our development assistance has changed, and how we can ensure that the United States finds a way to share its bounty with those with whom we have a common destiny.

Endemic disease, chronic epidemics and an appallingly low vaccination rate make the children of Niger some of the most vulnerable in the world.

# Overview of Major USAID/Niger Accomplishments

## **Economic Reform**

Many farmers and new rural entrepreneurs produce more thanks to the free market pricing of agricultural products. Barriers to agricultural exports, such as taxes and bribes, were removed which in turn reduced overall marketing costs making some products so profitable that it created a boom (e.g., in the onion industry).

## **Family Planning and Health**

The Government of Niger recognized that they could not pay for health care services for all Nigeriens and with that realization came a move to decentralize services making regional and local health personnel responsible for management of their daily operations.

Contraceptives were illegal prior to USAID's entrance into the family planning arena but due to our policy reform efforts they were made legal and available throughout the country in public and private health care facilities.

A computerized national health information system was developed to collect and analyze critical surveillance information enabling the Ministry of Health to plan for the future and better manage health crises. Recognized throughout Africa as a model, the system proved essential for managing the 1994 and 1995 meningitis, measles, cholera and yellow fever epidemics.

## **Natural Resource Management**

An institution we created, with support from many donors, promoted policy reform and supported community-based and nongovernmental activities, which led to the widespread adoption of modern natural resource management techniques.

After a reformed code changed forestry agents from police into extension agents, significantly more forest land was controlled by rural people, which resulted in more trees being grown than before.

## **Microenterprise Development**

USAID demonstrated that the poorest people need not be left out of private sector development efforts because the informal credit and savings systems that already exist can be formalized, thereby improving their access to loans.

Three USAID credit and savings programs are almost self-sustainable. There are now 65 credit unions with over 12,000 members who have more than \$600,000 in savings. Credit unions, cooperatives, and commercial banks have loaned more than \$17 million with better than ninety percent reimbursement rates.

## **Food Security**

The U.S. has saved tens of thousands of people from starvation at a fraction of the cost of importing emergency food aid through Food for Work mitigation activities.

which increased food production and held back desert encroachment.

The Government of Niger's early warning and disaster response system is better able to identify and prioritize people at risk of starvation without help from foreign experts.

## **Democracy and Governance**

The democracy and civic education projects educated approximately 100,000 Nigerien women and men on their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society and instructed them on how and why to vote.

By training 16,000 poll workers and 800 election observers, the standard of fairness and transparency during elections and voters' confidence in the electoral system increased. These workers reported election illegalities and challenged the military Government with the fraudulent election results.

## **Education and Training**

Thanks to USAID's training programs, more than 500 Nigeriens have benefitted from America's system of higher education—the world's finest. The technology they observed and the cultural values they were exposed to have created a cadre of technically prepared and optimistic Nigeriens. Steeped in the belief that anything is possible, these are the people who will bring a brighter future to Niger.

# Supporting Change and Changing Support

Why would the United States decide to spend so much money in a remote corner of the world that at first glance, has little to do with American interests? Many Americans would find it difficult to pinpoint Niger on the world map, to name the capital city or even to distinguish between Niger and Nigeria. Many, too, would argue that money could have been better spent on attacking our own formidable problems at home. While most Americans are willing to give to people in difficulty, they also want to see things change as a result of what they've given.

The answer is that by investing in Niger we are investing in our own future. Niger is part of the mosaic that constitutes Africa—a region of the world that we increasingly depend upon to share its abundant natural resources—and Africa's integrity and security are important to us. It is shortsighted to think that Americans could secure peace in a world where some countries cannot provide enough food, adequate health care, or gainful employment for their people. If Niger is unable to restore democratic institutions and rise out of its overwhelming poverty, it risks creating a desperate population devoid of hope and a situation not unlike what is unfolding in Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda and Zaire.

The story of USAID in Niger is very much the story of USAID worldwide. With a goal of promoting economic growth and social development in Niger, the U.S. had to weigh what we could best provide from our own storehouse of expertise. Whereas we knew more or less what was necessary to help Europe recover from World War II, what investments were required to develop a country like Niger was considerably more problematic. In 1960, with the successes of American technology, we began our assistance to Niger with the intent to share those successes. We felt we had the technology and the vision to remake the world in our image. However, we found that in practice our successes were not easily transferable to this very different setting. We still had much to learn about the relationship between culture and technology, between ways of living and ways of working.

In the early 1970s, the development challenge was complicated by the first of a series of droughts which devastated the Sahel—the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. Pictures of starving children opened the floodgates of donor support, including those of America. Development efforts went into trying to make Niger 'drought proof' by developing drought-resistant cereals and production methods. Then Secretary of State Kissinger felt that it would be less costly to invest now rather than repeat the expensive emergency bail-out programs. This focus on providing technology at the level of the individual farmer was coupled with a similar approach in health care, where USAID funds flooded the country with village health workers—thirteen thousand of them. The poorest of the poor were to be the direct recipients of our assistance. Nonetheless, while many peoples' lives were changed, we found that the gains made were not totally sustainable. The next drought in 1984 wiped out many accomplishments.

USAID's basic approach to development soon took another turn. USAID, the World Bank and other donors concluded that more attention had to be given to getting the policy agenda right. Without a national policy framework that favored economic growth, there would be little hope to succeed in the development arena. It was becoming apparent that economic policy reform is the platform from which all development efforts must be launched. If the policy framework is wrong, sectoral investments will soon wither. Consequently, USAID and other donors spent consid-

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erable effort encouraging the Nigerien Government to rid itself of economic policies that discouraged competition and stifled private initiative

The major lesson that USAID in the 1990s learned from the 1980s is that policy reform is very difficult to plan and carry out. Policy reforms cannot be changes on paper, in laws that are never enforced, or in job descriptions for positions that are never filled. Policy reform goes hand-in-hand with on-the-ground implementation. At this juncture, USAID assistance started becoming more collaborative—instead of providing the wealth of money and technology we may have, we began to work together to achieve common goals. This is easily stated, but is very difficult to actually accomplish.

Following the end of the Cold War, USAID policy took another fundamental change in direction. In an attempt to capitalize on the world's new found support for democracy, USAID helped bring transparency to political systems and increased accountability to government functions. The Nigerien people enthusiastically embraced these reforms in spirit and in deed.

USAID has continually learned from its experience, but the last five years have shown a particular emphasis on implementing these lessons. To do this, USAID developed partnerships between organizations in the U.S. and those in Niger. In America, our development partners were universities, private voluntary organizations, for-profit firms, and selected individuals who had specialized skills. Without these partners, USAID could not have begun to tackle Niger's objectives. In Niger, our programs were carried out in partnership with the Government—at least up until the coup—the private sector, local private voluntary organizations, and individual Nigeriens.

In the last few years, our focus sharpened and emphasized the achievement of three strategic objectives. The first targeted the health needs of the Nigerien family, specifically family planning and the maternal and child health requirements of women and children. The second concentrated on microenterprise development and

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**Basic Development Indicators for Niger**

INDICATOR	1960	1975	1995
Population (in millions)	2.9	4.7	5.9
Life Expectancy	36	39.9	47
Infant Mortality Rate	181	167	120
Under Five Mortality Rate	n/a	287	318
Fertility Rate (%)	7.1	7.1	7.2
Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (%)			4
Gross National Product (\$ per capita)	n/a	230	230
Adult Literacy Rate (%)	1	8	14
Children in Primary School (%)	male: 7 female: 3	male: 20 female: 14	male: 27 female: 21
* Contraceptives were legalized in 1988 and their use before that time was thought to be negligible. Sources of data: World Bank and Niger Demographic and Health Survey (1992)			

increasing farmers' access to productive resources through the use of decentralized financial services. The third area targeted natural resource management, the widespread adoption of practices that improve the conservation and productive use of Niger's forest, fields, waters, and pastures.

As we fine tuned our investment strategy over time, the challenge of bringing countries like Niger into the modern world became further complicated by the fact that these countries were moving targets—their environment, demographic mix and the rapidly changing world economic milieu further complicated the task. Environmentally, the period from 1960 to 1997 has seen decreasing rainfall and the desert moving southward about four miles per year. Lake Chad, which lapped the eastern Nigerien town of N'guigmi in the early 1960s, has retreated a hundred miles. Productive grazing land in the north was rapidly disappearing. The Tuareg, normally nomadic pastoralists, are having ever more difficulty maintaining their herds, supplementing their very basic standard of living with banditry, directed both against foreigners and other Nigeriens. In the south, villages that once could support themselves are being swallowed up by the desert and abandoned, dumping their populations into other parts of Niger and West Africa.

Economically, Niger has gone through a cycle of boom and bust. As the third largest producer of uranium in the world, Niger was economically strong in the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, when the price of uranium collapsed, most government revenues disappeared. While there is current gold and oil exploration, no one knows whether sufficient quantities of either will be found to bring Niger's economy back to a more secure footing.

The political scene has experienced swings as well, and it is these that most affect the current relationship between the U.S. and Niger. In 1974, a military coup overthrew the post colonial government left in power by the French. In 1991, the National Assembly dismissed the military government, leading in 1992 to a new constitution, and in 1993 to the first multi-party elections and the inauguration of the first democratically-elected president. Unfortunately, Niger's first democracy only lasted until January, 1996, when it was overthrown by another military coup. Presidential elections were held within six months, but these were flawed by widespread fraud.

U.S. legislation enacted to discourage the overthrow of democratically-elected governments requires that USAID assistance, with certain exceptions, be terminated when such a coup occurs. Faced with a legal requirement to terminate direct, bilateral assistance, the USAID Administrator determined which exempted humanitarian programs it would continue to support through nongovernmental organizations. Changing our programs to work within these new conditions demonstrates our desire to continue to support the efforts of the people of Niger to improve their own quality of life while supporting U.S. national interests in Niger (*see page 15*). Before we will be able to work directly with the Government again, Niger must restore to its people a genuine democracy, as evidenced by free, fair, and honest elections. It is our hope that the present government will realize that no sustainable and healthy economy can flourish without true democracy, firmly rooted in a spirit of tolerance and compromise.

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# What Worked and Why

USAID has helped Nigeriens  
to mobilize their own  
resources in pursuit of more  
secure and prosperous  
livelihoods

Over the years, our programs have enjoyed success and suffered failure— often times even a bit of both within the same activity. As we enter a new era in our development partnership with Niger, it is important to reflect on those activities that had significant impact so that in the future we can capitalize on our successes.

## **Economic Reform**

Our economic reform program has become the keystone of our development effort in Niger. It has generally focussed on agricultural policy, since the majority of Nigeriens are farmers. One reason why farmers cannot meet Niger's food needs, even when the rains come, has been a set of regulations, including price controls on grain and high export taxes. The need to pay bribes to corrupt police and customs agents compounds the problem. These factors have not only limited the amount of food available within Niger, but they also reduce the amount available for export earnings that could be available to the country as a whole. Through policy dialogue supported by a cash transfer program, we have been able to open up the cereals trade, eliminate the hobbling export tax, and reduce bribes paid to police and customs agents.

One of the most serious problems was that of corrupt officials demanding bribes. Attempting such a reform at a time when we suspected that overall corruption was on the rise—the national currency had just been devalued by half, late salary payments were commonplace, and the number of illegal checkpoints were increasing—was viewed with skepticism by some. Nonetheless, through a multi-faceted information campaign and legal sanctions, the Government, with USAID's help, supported the truckers' right to refuse bribes. Truckers, too, became empowered with the knowledge that they could control the illegal demands of corrupt officers. Statistics show that the amount of bribes paid by truckers fell dramatically. Unfortunately, immediately after the recent coup demands for bribes soared. While corruption is still not as bad as it once was, without democracy, the courage to challenge authorities seems to be fading.

## **Family Planning and Health**

After several years of trying to change the Nigerien health system from the outside, it became clear that needed changes in health policy would have to come from within. Thanks to a committed effort by a few Nigeriens working in the health sector, a concerted effort by USAID, and support by a variety of other development partners, a dynamic public health movement is evolving. A three-pronged approach was devised to achieve mutual goals. The first was a major effort to train Nigerien health care professionals in the United States. Second was providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Health, where foreign experts worked side by side with their counterparts to develop new ways of doing business. The third approach was a program offering substantial cash transfers to the Government of Niger in return for policy reform. These funds could then be used by the Ministry of Health to implement the policies on the ground. Among the more outstanding accomplishments in health care reform were the legalization of contraceptives, reorganization of the Ministry of Health and subsequent decentralization of health care services, and a computerized national health information system.

Before 1988, public discussion of family planning was taboo and the sale of contraceptives was illegal. Contraceptives were available at some private clinics for women who could afford them, but the majority of women who wanted to space their births and plan their families could not do so. As a result of USAID efforts, contraceptives were legalized in 1988 and made available in all public health clinics. Our projects have since provided family planning and HIV/AIDS information to the general public in addition to specialized training for health care providers. Nigeriens can now obtain contraceptives from a wide variety of sources in both the public and private sector.

Change from within resulted in health districts and even clinics being given the responsibility to make decisions about how best to use their resources and provide services. The USAID-supported Quality Assurance project is a good example of how the Nigerien health system can transform itself. Using the unlikely tools of 'Total Quality Management', developed for the U.S. auto industry, the Tahoua department has empowered district health workers to tackle both large systemic problems and small operational ones with equal intensity and commitment. This approach at the field level has made a difference in the lives of thousands of women and children by increasing contraceptive use, tuberculosis treatments and immunizations as well as increasing visits to clinics by decreasing time spent waiting for services. The effort has been so successful that it is being copied throughout Niger and West Africa.

In the past, donor-supported health programs—including those of USAID—focused on treating only one disease or another (i.e., diarrhea or malaria), and did not take the total needs of the sick child or his family into account. Niger is now in the forefront of a new effort to integrate diagnosis and treatment of sick children. In places where the new system has been taught, children are much more likely to receive appropriate treatment. Lessons learned in Niger are already being applied elsewhere and are an important part of a global initiative between USAID and the World Health Organization to improve children's health.

Before we became involved, one of the principles of Nigerien politics was that all health care was to be 'free'. In a country where revenues are barely sufficient to pay salaries, let alone purchase drugs or pay for operating costs, this is impractical. Along with other donors, USAID introduced the idea of user fees for health services. By charging patients a reasonable fee for services rendered, hospitals and clinics are able to buy drugs and other supplies. Patients are willing to pay the fees because they see the results—better care, more services, and improved facilities.

Finally, in a project spanning more than a decade, the Ministry of Health, with USAID support, has developed a national health information system that is the envy of the rest of Africa. The system of data collection and analysis provides the Ministry of Health with the critical surveillance information it needs to plan for the future. The best examples of this came with the meningitis, measles, cholera and yellow fever epidemics of 1995 and 1996, during which up to date and accurate data made the evaluation and crisis management process possible. The health information system has proven itself useful beyond the Ministry of Health—other government ministries, nongovernmental and United Nations organizations use the data and analysis for their own planning purposes.

### **Natural Resource Management**

Holding back the encroaching desert is an up-hill battle in Sahelian West Africa. Using innovative approaches to natural resource management, USAID has helped Nigeriens to mobilize their own resources in pursuit of more secure and prosperous livelihoods. The introduction of windbreaks, innovative ways to prepare fields for planting, modification of laws permitting farmers to form cooperatives, and commu-

### **Brave New Onion**

After the elimination of the export tax and reduced illicit payments along the trade route that his onions travelled to market, Bougi spear-headed the creation of a farmers' marketing cooperative. He and his neighbors formed a group to sell their onions directly to the foreign exporters who came to buy them. The group built a storage facility for the onions and, not long after, another donor built a road into the village making onion transport much easier. In return for his vision and energy, Bougi is now the biggest onion farmer in the area and well known across the borders as an entrepreneur expanding his onion business to buy and sell fertilizers to his neighbors. Bougi is so respected among his peers and the district government administration that he is included in all important administrative decisions—like tax collections and reductions—affecting the future of the farmers.

*USAID Economic Reform Program*

## Ask the Question, Solve the Problem

Faced with many malnourished children in their area, health workers in Madoua turned to their clients for help. They had tried everything from food enrichment recipes to adjusting the patient flow in the clinic, but kids were still undernourished and dropping out of the nutrition program. When asked why she was so erratic with her clinic visits, Fati, the mother of a severely malnourished child, said that "distance" was her main problem. Because only certain health services were offered on certain days, she would have to walk miles everyday in order to receive all the services that she and her sick child needed. The health team asked other mothers how they would solve the problem. As a result, the clinic now provides integrated services allowing women like Fati to come any day and receive all of the health services she and her children need at one time.

USAID Quality Assurance Project

nity-based forest management are among the most significant contributions we have been able to make.

USAID/Niger was ahead of other donors in West Africa in moving our program from agriculture and rural development to working with communities in agroforestry, natural forest management and local forestry activities. 'Top down' policy reforms in combination with 'bottom up' field support by volunteers and nongovernmental organizations have had a lasting impact. One widely acclaimed activity was the introduction of windbreaks—trees to stop the wind from blowing the soil away—in an isolated valley in central Niger. Crop production increased by twenty to twenty-five percent as trees grew and the effects of wind erosion were tempered. Local incomes increased as the rural population harvested branches for village consumption and for sale as poles and firewood.

Working hand-in-hand with nongovernmental organizations and the Nigerian Forest Service, USAID encouraged new approaches to clearing fields before planting. Instead of completely removing all of the newly-sprouted and often woody growth, farmers learned 'farmer-managed natural regeneration'. The benefits of growing new trees in cultivated fields are now so widely recognized that some farmers have even converted some cropland to managed woodlots. We have also supported Peace Corps volunteers in encouraging other innovations like *zai* or *tassa*—soil pits dug to reduce erosion and collect rainwater. These pits concentrate manure and other organic matter which help farmers increase crop yields three-fold.

The Cooperative League of the USA, a bastion for small American farmers, was allowed to organize cooperatives in Niger without state control. The law was modified to allow farmers to form free associations and to organize for commercial activities. These cooperatives are developing into independent financial establishments—in effect, farmer-owned banks.

One person's perseverance can make a difference. Early on, a USAID forester's vision of community-based forest management was considered unworkable by other donors. Instead of abandoning the idea, his tenacity ultimately resulted in a breakthrough forestry and land use planning project. The project enhanced the capacity of the Forest Service in land use mapping, inventory and monitoring. Experimenting with new field techniques, this same project turned 'useless brush' into a valuable community resource. USAID has shown that when these resources are managed in a cost-effective and ecologically sustainable manner they can renew themselves continuously.

### Microenterprise Development

USAID has shown that microenterprise development can work even in poor rural settings. Niger's banking sector has deteriorated over the past ten years so that there are now fewer banks making loans to farmers than there were before. USAID recognized that farmers could not help themselves in the improved policy environment if they did not have access to timely, affordable credit. We responded to the situation by creating semi-formal financial services and women's economic groups, and securing policy reform to allow groups to freely organize.

Following the advice of Ohio State University, several semi-formal financial services—credit unions, semi-formal rural banks and cooperatives—were created. Nigeriens are increasingly willing to put their money in savings accounts, repay loans, and invest with their time, energy, and money to build institutions of their own. One offshoot of this effort has been greater economic resources for women. After failing to be able to get involved with the men's cooperatives, women formed ninety-two cooperatives of their own. In just the last two years, \$600,000 worth of loans have been made, with more than ninety percent, on-time repayment. Urban

and rural Nigeriens are joining credit unions and cooperatives to improve their lives, and at the same time, get good training in working in democratically-run organizations. These are the institutions which form the basis of a democratic society.

Our microenterprise programs are models for the donor community and have succeeded because two basic rules for financial service delivery were adhered to: (1) repayment of credit was the top priority—if they don't pay take them to court, and (2) poor people *can* pay interest, so interest was set at a sustainable level.

### Food Security

Rainy season flooding, locust attacks and crop-eating grasshoppers are commonplace along with chronic drought and famine, making food security a priority for Nigeriens. Between 1968 and 1973, they faced disastrous famine conditions and lost much of their livestock. Famine struck again in 1984. With each drought comes greater environmental damage, making it even more difficult to grow sufficient food for the exploding population. Because some regions of the country are perennially in need, people have developed elaborate ways of fending off starvation and enabling their own survival. By selling off their animals, cutting trees for firewood, borrowing money at high interest rates, or even sending family members to work elsewhere, they survive until the next crop is in. Although these ways of coping are often effective in the short run, they eventually can destroy the social fabric and physical health of the family and community.

Our major contributions include the creation of a famine early warning system, the constitution of an emergency fund, village-based famine mitigation projects, and help controlling locusts, birds, rats and other pests. The 'famine early-warning system' allows the Government prepare for disasters and famines. The system collects information from all parts of the country and assesses the data well in advance of an impending need. Advanced warning of food shortage not only helps Nigeriens, but also serves American interests by avoiding costly, last minute emergency food airlifts.

Historically, donors imported relief food and simply gave it away to the people who needed it the most. Not only is this practice costly, it can have a destructive effect, luring people into dependency on food they do not grow on their own. An innovative emergency fund was set up to buy and deliver cereals to communities at risk. In return for the food, the community was required to develop projects that would help prevent future effects of any drought, and to ensure more productive crops in the future. Some communities planted windbreaks or dug *demu-lunes*—small half-moon shaped trenches to prevent the water from washing across the field so fast that it carries top soil away with it. In some villages where the desert is encroaching, this method has been so widely adopted that there are now trees and grass ringing the village to hold back the sand. More than five hundred projects of this kind were developed around the country in 1996 alone.

Women's dry season vegetable gardening proved to be one of the most popular mitigation projects. The women were provided tools and seeds and they did the rest by hand, including deepening wells to accommodate the demands of the new gardens. Produce grown was first eaten at home and then excess was sold in the market, generating income for clothing and other essentials.

Each year, locusts, grasshoppers and other pests destroy at least twenty to thirty percent of the grain before it is harvested—enough to feed at least two to three million people. By supplying essential equipment and environmentally-safe materials as well as training local workers, we have assisted the Government in destroying these pests and protecting the food source of many people.

### How a Little Goes a Long Way

Trying to make ends meet, Biba began making and selling doughnuts to her neighbors. Having limited funds to invest, Biba could never buy more ingredients than she would use that day. Because flour and oil prices fluctuated, her minimal profits from yesterday were often insufficient to buy today's ingredients. She decided to join a women's credit group that she had heard about and borrowed \$150. With that money, she bought a stock of ingredients for making her doughnuts and also a cow for fattening and selling later. The next year she borrowed again—about \$130—and bought more ingredients and a sheep for eating on *Tabaski*, a traditional celebration day. Now able to pay her children's school fees and provide for her family, she has become a leader in the cooperative credit program.

USAID Rural Organization  
Development/Cooperative League  
of the USA Project

## Standing Up for Their Rights

As soon as Sani stood up and confronted the district tax official he was certain of his arrest. Sani was fed up with paying taxes to a system that offered people like himself little in return, but allowed tax collectors to live well. Sani and his neighbors had pleaded with the authorities to help them build a school for their children, but years passed and nothing happened. Confident in the knowledge of his rights after attending weekly radio club meetings, Sani delivered his challenge to the official—no school, no taxes. Before long, others in the audience offered their support and soon the tax collector was outnumbered. Fully within their rights, the citizens demanded and got a return for their tax money. The children in Sani's village now go to their own school.

## Democracy and Governance

As Americans, we take our right to speak out, our right to vote and our confidence in free and fair elections for granted. Democracy and good governance in Niger are new concepts. Niger, like many countries, has had a difficult time moving from traditional community-based democracy to full-fledged democracy as a modern 'nation state'. The one-party rule, in place since the colonial period, resulted in little opportunity to develop the ideology and practice of democracy. It is only since 1991, when the National Conference formed representative national democratic institutions, that a new path to democracy was cut.

Despite the current setbacks, we believe that democracy has taken root in Niger and will ultimately succeed. We played a leading role in promoting democratic culture by educating Nigeriens about the fundamentals of democratic society and energetically supporting the electoral process. By using radio to disseminate information, all levels of Nigerien society were touched by the project, from judges and lawyers who gained respect for the adherence to the 'rule of law' principles to the individual voter who cast her ballot in one of the secure, padlocked ballot boxes USAID helped make.

USAID trained eight hundred election observers for the recent balloting. These courageous individuals acted on what they had learned and seen to confront the military government with indisputable evidence of fraud. What has been imparted here will be usable in future elections, making it more difficult to conceal malfeasance. We also provided judges with legal reference material that was otherwise unavailable, supporting their quest for a lawful society.

The enthusiasm shown by literate and non-literate villagers alike for the civic education activities was palpable. Legal assistance centers educated and counseled people on laws that affect their daily lives and school-based civics curricula prepared youngsters to take an active role in a democratic society. One particularly popular activity was the rural radio clubs. These groups gathered each week to listen to a different broadcast message, in their own local language, followed by debate and discussion. For some, these gatherings provided the first opportunity for rural Nigeriens to have their voices heard. Radio club meetings turned out to be an effective format for disseminating democratic values and principles as well as discussing key women's issues, a highly significant in-road in a country dominated by male-oriented values. Although the gains have been modest, our program has made a lasting impression on people who will be influential in ensuring the return of democracy to Niger. Because of our firm and consistent support for the democratic transformation of Niger's political system, the U.S. is already soundly established as the preeminent defender of democracy. The source of greatest support to the nongovernmental organizations and the political parties who constitute the main defenders of democratic principles.

# What Didn't Work and Why

In a portfolio as large and diverse as the one USAID has had in Niger, there will always be activities that are less successful. It is important to look at programs that didn't live up to expectations—as well as weak areas in otherwise strong programs—so these lessons can be applied both in Niger and other countries.

All USAID projects in Niger over the past decade were, to a greater or lesser extent, involved with policy reform. Ultimately, these projects achieved the desired reforms, but it took far longer than expected. The results, therefore, have not had sufficient time to realize their full impact. For example, the successes of economic reform, listed in the previous section, were tempered by being too little and too late to ameliorate the current major economic crisis.

In the mid-1980s, when USAID/Niger shifted a major portion of its portfolio to 'non-project assistance'—cash transfers used to leverage policy reform—this form of development assistance was widely perceived to be 'easier' than traditional project assistance. It was thought that one only had to identify the particular policy reforms desired, attach a value to each one, and sign an agreement. The government could 'easily' make the necessary policy reforms and the funds could be released, resulting in a win-win situation. It didn't work that way.

The main problems were that (1) not enough time was spent developing the 'conditions precedent' for achieving policy reform (i.e., the specific actions needed to be undertaken so USAID could know whether the reforms had occurred) (2) insufficient effort had been made to ensure that government counterparts and agencies were committed to the policy reforms, and (3) USAID procedures were too inflexible, failing to easily recognize that policy reform had occurred, even if the exact conditions precedents had not been met. In a number of instances the list of conditions precedent had to be formally amended, with agreement from Washington for the project to proceed.

## Economic Reform

The factors above played a role in delaying needed economic policy reform. If certain reforms had happened sooner, their impact would be greater than is seen today. In hindsight, we and the other donors, including the World Bank, probably should have done a better job coordinating our economic reform programs in the 1980s. We also should have been stricter on the reforms we pressured the Government to enact. Even this would not have guaranteed success since the most powerful stakeholders for the policy reform measures stood to lose the most—the bureaucrats who might lose their jobs, the public agents who would lose a source of illicit income, the largest businessmen who would have to pay more taxes in a reformed system. The winners would have been the rural poor—the small producer, the informal sector entrepreneur, and the consumer in the long run, those who generally have little political clout.

## Family Planning and Health

Good health is the result of a variety of factors that are outside the control of health professionals—housing, nutrition, economic status, and education to name a few. There are very few specifically health-related activities—immunizations being an exception—that will make a difference in health statistics for an entire nation. This is

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particularly true where the non-health factors, like harsh environment, marginal nutrition and poor household economics, play a major role in determining health status

Despite thirty years of assistance in health, Niger's statistics remain the worst in the world. Over the past ten years, all health projects have been partial successes and partial failures. The first project, started in 1976, focussed on developing rural health workers. Over thirteen thousand were trained and sent into villages to work. Some of them are still at their posts today, mostly where they have been supported by U S private voluntary organizations. But this project is widely viewed as a failure, in part because conditions changed markedly during its tenure. When it began, Niger had a strong economy based on high prices for uranium, but then collapsed early in the 1980s. The government might have been able to support these workers in the field had revenue remained high. The 1984 famine also forced health care workers to sell their medical kits to keep from starving. By the time it was over, donor attention had turned elsewhere and the workers were not re-supplied. Although not recognized at the time, there was an even bigger issue. In the enthusiasm stemming from the World Health Organization's declaration of 'Health for all by the year 2000', neither donors nor host countries recognized that rural health workers needed a support network—for supervision, re-training and re-supply—if they were to continue to function over the long term.

A project was designed to address that issue—to strengthen the management and policy-making capacity of the central Ministry of Health so it could support service delivery in the field. Neither the project designers nor the recipients recognized the difficulties inherent in policy reform, and the desired changes took far longer to implement than intended.

Another project was developed to train health workers, to ensure that family planning would be available. Like the other projects, it was hindered by unpredictable events, ranging from labor strikes to currency devaluation and a meningitis epidemic. Difficulties surfaced surrounding the acceptability of family planning by health care providers and significant political resistance to family planning advertising interrupted progress, but these obstacles were overcome. The greatest threat to the success of these activities is that they were dependent on a single donor—USAID—and, when that assistance was reduced the effort flagged, and may ultimately be abandoned.

### **Natural Resource Management**

Difficulties administering and implementing natural resource management programs were encountered. Technical support and government agencies were often occupied trying to satisfy numerous policy conditionalities as well as programming and managing donor funding. They were so busy 'managing' that their ability to consistently track the changing behavior of farmers and to regularly re-assess their policy reform agenda were compromised.

For example, in the process of encouraging the widespread adoption of sound natural resource management practices, 'farmer to farmer' visits clearly had an impact. More could have been done to support such hands-on training. Had these visits been supported at an earlier stage and encouraged more widely, it is likely that the acceptance rate by farmers would be higher.

For different reasons, an early attempt at introducing improved cereal seeds around the country failed miserably. The government-run seed production and distribution facilities were not sustainable. Although seed production did increase where facilities were funded, we should have turned to nongovernmental organizations to train and finance private farmers and cooperatives to produce improved

Some learning here, 1st of 2002

seeds on their own farms as was later done with onion and cowpea seeds

A wealth of good research in cereal production has been conducted at several institutions but there have been difficulties in making the findings available in a form that is suitable and affordable for the local farmer. An extension service is needed one that has close links to the farmer as well as the researchers

Non-project assistance can be a powerful instrument to accompany and complement other types of program assistance. The Government, however, was preoccupied with political transitions and uncertainties. Both USAID and Government officials found it difficult to engage the attention of the policy-makers in order to sustain the comprehensive and complex dialogue required. In addition, progress in preparing and achieving policy reforms was more rapid than progress in certifying that conditionalities had been met. In the end, these delays undermined efforts at further policy reforms and related program activities

### **Microenterprise Development**

The early years for the microenterprise development program produced three examples of how not to do credit programs. The Ministry of Agriculture tried to improve livestock production by a live animal credit program, a guaranteed milk production loan program, and a guarantee fund for intensive animal fattening. All were good ideas, but the Nigerian bureaucracy proved to be a poor choice to manage the programs. Each program received negligible reimbursement—guarantee funds were depleted for the milk program and the in-kind animal loan program was terminated. The animal fattening program was compromised by the failure of the bank in which remaining guarantee funds were placed. Having learned the lesson later programs did not use the Government of Niger for disbursement. Here is a case where we were too quick to import the model that worked for us in the U.S. without sufficiently studying its applicability in Niger

### **Food Security**

Good data are critical for managing the national food security situation. One of the greatest single constraints is the unavailability and inaccessibility of good data to refine the early warning system and identify people at risk of starvation. Agricultural agents often lack the means to collect data and information on local economies is frequently non-existent, especially for informal, 'off the books' cross-border trade with Nigeria. The early warning and response systems have only been in place a few years and a considerable amount of work is needed before they are fully functional

Donor coordination remains weaker than it should be. Ideally, all donors would coordinate their efforts with the Government to reach a consensus on an appropriate response to food needs and then coordinate that response. Unfortunately, each donor program has a different perspective on the use of food aid and the necessity to coordinate with every other donor which led to inefficiencies in response to food crises

### **Democracy and Governance**

Until the coup, the women's legal assistance clinics functioned well. They provided much needed legal services and advice to village women and men. Their clients had confidence in their independence from government interference and grew to trust the field staff. In one village, close to eighty people used the services each month. During the presidential elections the clinics' board of directors suddenly decided to publicly support the military junta. When this surprising alliance occurred, the monthly clinic consultations dropped to five, showing a major loss of confidence in the services being provided

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# Tough Questions, Tough Answers

Why is Niger,  
after thirty-six years  
and a half billion dollars in  
USAID development aid,  
still ranked as poorest  
country in the world?  
And, why should America  
remain involved?

No one questions that the average Nigerien family is still seriously affected by poverty and disease, as it was in 1960 when USAID began here. One would have hoped, that after many years and many millions of dollars, the Nigeriens' human condition would have visibly and measurably improved. However, there is evidence to suggest that the human condition has worsened for many since Independence. America's contribution, significant as it may seem, was only a small part of the investment. The French, Germans, Canadians, and international financial institutions have been even larger donors. In 1994, for example, USAID only provided \$26 million dollars out of \$376 million in total donor support. Despite this investment, Niger today ranks as the world's poorest country in the United Nations Development Program's annual index. Despite the successes reported earlier in this document, the questions stand: *Why is Niger, after thirty-six years and a half-billion dollars in USAID development aid, still ranked as poorest country in the world? And why should America remain involved?*

There are many reasons why the enormous commitment, not just from America but from other donor countries has not shown as much progress as we would like to have seen. First, Niger's resource base is the Sahara Desert with a fringe of scrub brush. There is far less quality land and water resources per capita in Niger than for even its poorest neighbors. For the population as a whole, this means an unremitting struggle to produce enough food to survive. The rapidly growing population competes for dwindling natural resources. Between 1972 and 1996, there were two major famines and numerous requests for emergency relief and food aid were made. Given its endemic poverty combined with reoccurring drought, three major outbreaks of locusts, and chronic measles and meningitis epidemics in just the last ten years, the people of Niger are truly living on the edge. In short, the resources Niger has available are meager at best.

Next, the policy environment to promote growth has been weak. Though we succeeded in changing some agricultural policies to promote exports, the all-encompassing World Bank financial reform programs were slow to start. When a government commits to a free market the economy improves, leading to a better quality of life for all. Regrettably, Niger has been slow to embrace these reforms.

Thirdly, a self-interested and powerful minority was hesitant to accept macro-economic reforms. By controlling salaries, access to employment, the legal system, and the administrative services, this small clique of elites avoided imposing austerity upon themselves. Corruption is a problem, albeit less pervasive than in some other countries. In the future, tough actions will be needed to deal directly with the worst corruption and to correct the self-serving systems, everything from tax policies to salary scales.

While it is an unpopular theory in certain development circles, strong evidence suggests that Niger's growth was also adversely affected by the external environment for the past thirty years. It has suffered significant set backs to its terms of trade with its primary trade partners, Europe and North America. Prices for its primary exports, uranium and agricultural products, have fallen in relation to its primary imports, manufactured goods and energy. European countries 'dumping' their meat products have destroyed the coastal markets for Sahelian beef. The oil shocks of the 1970s and 1980s hit Niger particularly hard. The volatility of the neighboring economy in Nigeria can result in wild swings in Niger's economy.

Finally, we and the rest of the donor community must bear responsibility for underestimating the magnitude of effort required to bring about sustainable development and how much it would cost. Cold War politics, the catalyst for financial support, had little to do with what was really needed for economic growth and social transformation. We were also guilty of over-estimating the power of our technology. To know how to quadruple grain yields was not as difficult as persuading a Nigerien farmer that it was in his best interest to invest the money to do so. Hopefully, we have learned from those mistakes.

Since the coup and the mandatory cut-off of U.S. foreign assistance, there has been intense discussion at all levels of what American interests really are in Niger. These have been determined to be (1) *Restoration of democracy*. Democracy is only lightly rooted in African soils. As we look across the continent, we see the results of despotism on the one hand, and the progress that democratic countries can make on the other. Without democracy, Niger has no hope of improving its human and economic conditions. (2) *Maintenance of the regional peace and stability*. The Tuareg have been at odds with central governments in Sahelian countries for a long time. The current peace accord is fragile and requires whatever support can be given to deter disaffected Tuaregs from turning to Libya, a regime that is truly hostile to American foreign interests. (3) *Mitigation of the effects of disease and drought*. Going beyond our humanitarian concerns, it is also in America's interest to try and help stabilize difficult situations. When these occur—and there have been many instances in Africa and around the world—people fall into despair and become vulnerable to despotism, religious extremism, and even chaos. We must do whatever we can to avoid these results.

For these reasons, in spite of the Government's faltering record on democracy, the U.S. must remain involved in Niger. Certainly, our level of assistance will be reduced—the 1997 amount will be less than seven percent of what we gave Niger in 1994. Similarly, the assistance must be redirected. Rather than provide support to and through the government, what we give—primarily for child survival, famine mitigation, and restoration of democracy—will be funnelled through private voluntary organizations, and will be directed at reaching people in need rather than building systems. In this manner, our commitment to the people of Niger will remain clear and we will be in a position to return, having learned from the lessons of the past, when the political climate permits.

### Reasons for Optimism

Even after confronting the challenges, we remain optimistic about Niger's prospects. Throughout our thirty-six years of working in Niger, individuals have been exposed to our set of values, our hope for the future, and our belief that anything is possible. Those we have come to know either in the U.S. or in their own country will bring fresh perspectives to solving their seemingly insurmountable problems. Concepts that underpin democratic society like equal opportunity, impartial justice and the protection of basic freedoms, are finding their way into Nigerien society. Despite the skeptics, American ideas have become implanted in Niger and in the end will provide the base on which to build a better tomorrow. It has happened in Eastern Europe and it will happen in Niger.

### Bringing America Home

Born into a family of nomadic herders, Boubacar could count on living a life little different than his parents and grandparents had known. By chance, and in direct opposition to his nomadic traditions, his parents sent him to primary school. A brilliant student, he completed secondary school and entered the civil service. Picked by USAID to study Range Management at Utah State University, Boubacar became the first person from his ethnic group—the Peuhl Bororo—to receive a doctorate in any discipline from any country. Inspired by lobbying successes of American farmers, he now organizes herders into political action groups and dreams of making them a force within the formal system. For Americans, the return on our investment reaps benefits far beyond our original intention.

USAID Education and Training Program

# Message From the Director

As we move to a new  
and different relationship  
with Niger, we need to  
remember not only our  
reasons for coming but  
also draw on our common  
aspirations for a better  
tomorrow

A visitor to Niger is hard pressed to find a village, even in the remotest corners of the country, where America's presence has not been felt—a grateful mother whose child was saved by a meningitis vaccine during the 1995 epidemic, a farmer using nutritionally-improved sorghum developed at Purdue University, or a family who was spared certain starvation by America's Food for Peace Program during the 1985 famine. It is hard to imagine that our development program in Niger, the force that enabled these and many other contributions, is coming to an end.

We think less often about how we Americans have benefitted from our Nigerian partners. I recall taking two visitors to Filingue, about seventy miles north of the capital, Niamey, so they could get a 'feel' for what the 'real Africa' was like. On the way, I stopped the car unexpectedly and announced that we were going to introduce ourselves to a group of people living in thatched huts one-hundred yards away—people we had never seen before. I wanted to show my guests what typical, unrehearsed Nigerian hospitality really was.

As the visitors uneasily walked along the path between rows of cowpeas, they wondered about the reception we would get. Their anxieties were quickly allayed when a cluster of kids rushed out to meet us, took our hands and led us to the village elder. A search of the village produced four dilapidated chairs, the best to be found. We had barely stabilized them in the dirt when someone showed up with *boule* (porridge) and someone else with a calabash full of peanuts. And so it went. Stories of grandkids were told and lies about spouses' foibles were swapped. You would have thought we were long lost relatives!

When it came time to go, our new friends emerged from those huts with everything imaginable under their arms—colored cloth, a tribal hat, a clay pipe, and more peanuts. The real joy of giving was written all over their faces. The thought of how any of it would ever be replaced probably never crossed their minds. Our visitors were overcome by emotion, never having imagined that people so different could be so generous with strangers they would never see again. There was a lesson for us in that exchange.

This story illustrates the ease with which Americans and Nigeriens can share across a vast cultural and technological gulf. As we move to a new and different relationship with Niger, we need to remember not only our reasons for coming but also draw on our common aspirations for a better tomorrow. The challenge before us is clear even if the solutions are not. Advancing our national interests without the help of a robust development assistance program will not be an easy task for those who follow us. Neither Americans nor Nigeriens give up easily, however, and through creativity, personal commitment and determination we will find ways to seize the opportunities before us.

—James M. Anderson  
Director, USAID/Niger