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Villagers Perceptions of Famine and Food Security in Niger

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I. Background

Over the past few years, USAID/Niger has been rethinking its disaster assistance strategy in Niger. Since 1966, the U.S. government has provided food relief on a fairly large scale, at a considerable cost, for 2 major droughts and 3 regional food shortages. To better address the issue of recurrent need in Niger, the Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Project was designed in 1992 to strengthen the Government of Niger's capabilities to assess and effectively respond to disasters from a developmental perspective.

As part of the project design, work was initiated to elicit people's own views and understandings related to famine, as the most widespread type of disaster in Niger, and to document the indigenous coping strategies that people employ in times of emergency and food insecurity. Disaster assistance has been largely conceived, defined and implemented by outsiders. This work was a purposeful attempt to reverse that process and begin with the people who live the reality. Likewise, most of the work on vulnerability assessment to date has focused on vulnerable regions, levels of cereal production, and groups of people classified as farmer, herder and urban resident. This study focuses on the household and individuals within the household as being affected differently and responding differently during food insecure times.

The objectives of the study were three: (1) to understand how 'insiders' define famine and their food security situation; (2) to better understand local perceptions of vulnerability; and (3) to document indigenous coping strategies. Rapid, informal surveys were conducted in three departments in Niger which are chronically deficit in cereal production -- Zinder, Diffa and Tillaberi -- areas where USAID had distributed food aid in 1991.¹ During the dry season of January and February, 1992, 52 focused group interviews were conducted and 139 individual interviews with 87 men and 52 women. An open-ended format was used to listen and learn from people.

II. Findings

A. Definition of Famine

While there is some confusion among disaster analysts as to what constitutes a famine (definitions range from mass starvation to any major food shortage), there is no such confusion among rural Nigeriens. Famine is defined as a time of total destitution. Such periods are viewed as conceptually different than any other period or type of production year in terms of scale and level of suffering. Respondents characterized famine years as times of total production failure when there is no primary or secondary crop harvest and no pasture for animal grazing.

¹ Field work was conducted by Eva Koeninger in Zinder, Stryk Thomas in Tillaberi and Steve Anderson in Diffa. The author conducted supplemental field work in the Zinder Department and with Iddal Sidi-Mohamed Iddal interviewed Twaregs in the Tera and Tillaberi regions.

These periods are also described as a time of market failure when foodstuffs are unavailable and/or people have no money to purchase food. In contrast to such disaster years, people characterized poor production years as periods when there may be hunger and suffering but people are able to manage. Villagers made the distinction between years when they sell livestock to purchase grain and famine years when it is more economical to eat ones animals due to the negative terms of trade.

During the focused group interviews, village elders spoke vividly about the famines that had struck their regions and that today serve as markers of historical importance. Pastoralists did not signify the same level of famine history which may be due to their movement patterns and lessened dependency on locational production parameters or nuances of the interview process and linguistic subtleties. Famine chronologies were documented in 22 sites in the Departments of Zinder (central Niger) and Tillaberi (western Niger) as found in Table 1. These accounts record a famine on a frequency of about once every 10-12 years, particularly for Western Niger. While approximate, the dates do indicate that famines are rarely a single-year event.

Several of the famines carry the same name across Niger while others have more localized names and interpretations. From these names, we see what probably were extreme responses of the time including such socially unacceptable and extreme behavior as 'keeping one's coin to oneself' (not sharing); 'avoid your wife'; 'turn your back on others and eat in secret'; 'send your wife away'. Other famine names vividly portray the suffering of the time: 'a hunger that makes a hole in the stomach'; 'to be skinny and drawn out like a rubber band'; 'a great dryness'; 'clothing fell off thin bodies'. Other names refer to new foodstuffs that were introduced that kept people from starving and in some cases, resulted in changes in eating habits: 'the year of the manioc flour'; 'the time when people ate kulikuli from Nigeria'; 'the year of the red sorghum'; ' the time that free food was distributed.'

The elders spoke of various destitution measures they or their relatives resorted to during these famine times including begging, drinking goats blood, eating crickets, millet bran and inedible foods such as calabashes and cram-cram, smuggling, selling animals, sifting sand for stray millet seeds, forced migration, stealing, selling or mortgaging land. Few people spoke about death as resulting from a famine. This may be due to the interview format, or, it may mean that famine is seen in terms of social upheaval, rather than mass starvation, which is similar to findings from Sudan (de Waal, 1989). Respondents typically characterized famine in terms of unfavorable lifestyle changes relating to concepts of self-identity and dignity, for example, women and children having to scavenge for food (cultural norm is that the husband is to provide); dependence on others; loss of land and/or animals; and forced migration.

Also, while outsiders tend to view famine as triggered by drought, villagers attribute the famines of the mid-century to crickets correlating with a higher rainfall period that resulted in crop devastation by locusts. People speak vividly about the declining rainfall since the 1960s, increasing population, and subsequent ecological changes including the disappearance of certain species of flora and fauna.

Respondents principally ascribe the devastation caused by drought or crickets to the will of God. These periods of suffering are seen as Allah's admonishment for any number of social and moral ills including the breakdown in morality and inattention to rituals. Drought is seen as a warning sign from Allah that society needs to mend its ways. A reaction to such a warning was displayed in Zinder during July when the lateness of the rains was blamed on women's immorality and improperly attired women were attacked on the streets.

In general, famines of the early twentieth century are considered more severe than recent disasters. People explain this as being due to the lack of transport, roads, assistance and options during earlier years, "There were no vehicles in which to either leave or bring in food." By the 1950s, road access and transport opened up and other foodstuffs became available, including new dry-season crops such as cassava and food aid.

Respondents characterize the ideal income/production strategy as one of saving and building surpluses and reciprocal relations in good years so as to have reserves on which to draw during deficit years. Today, however, the overall economic and ecological decline is said to constrain this. In the Ouallam region of the Tillaberi department, for example, villagers stated that there have been too few good years since the famine of 1984 (such as 1988) so they are unable to buildup insurance supplies of cereals, livestock, or liquid assets leaving them even more vulnerable to production shortfalls.

From these interviews with rural people, we see that famine is perceived as the outcome of failed production (all crops and pasture) and purchasing power. This is an abnormal situation but one that occurs relatively frequently in Niger. Even more regular are annual production shortfalls which while never reaching the magnitude of a famine, place considerable stress on particular households and, when persisting over several years, result in crisis for those families.

An interesting question is what is normal in these situations. In Northern Nigeria, Mortimore (1989), talking about the resiliency of the Sahel, refers to "uncertainty-as-the-norm" where embedded in normal is great irregularity and uncertainty that people adapt to. Normal production, as defined by our respondents, refers to a cycle of some good and bad years. Even in good production years, rural producers are not self-sufficient in food production. Food needs are met through purchase. From a two-year IFPRI household survey in three agro-ecological zones of Western Niger, we find that 75-85% of farm families are net purchasers of grain in good years and that 34-49% of annual consumption needs are met by purchase (Hopkins and Reardon, 1992). The highest level of purchases are made in the hungry season when prices are also the highest necessitating a certain income level to be able to acquire the needed foodstuffs. 30-60% of these net crop purchases are paid with off-farm income including migration earnings, petty commerce, casual labor, herding for others, crafts, selling gathered products such as fuelwood, wild foods, fodder and services that include metalsmithing, construction, transport, religious counsel, carrying water, healing/medical attention, etc. Most are typically small-scale with low income generation capability so a household must engage in multiple activities.

B. Perceptions of Vulnerability

People speak about the differential impact of famine. They make the distinction between people who are chronically vulnerable, regardless of the year, and those who are at risk only in production deficit years. The chronically vulnerable include "those with small power", that is, the elderly without families to look after them, widows, the handicapped, women-headed households and large families with many noncontributing members. Availability of labor emerged as people's principal indicator of vulnerability and a major reason why they want large families. Respondents made a clear distinction between those who are able and willing to work and the lazy.

Villagers define nonchronic vulnerability, those who become at-risk in production deficit years, as (1) individuals with insecure land rights since land may be reclaimed at any time, even with a standing crop; or (2) individuals whose land holding is small in relation to household size; and (3) individuals who do not own any animals. While everyone suffers during a famine, old people and infants are said to suffer the most.

Besides these responses, the research uncovered several other factors that appeared to be directly linked to levels of vulnerability including (1) geographical isolation that restricts access and diversification; (2) length of residence as it relates to security, access to resources and social networks; (3) interethnic discord that marginalizes certain groups; (4) access to and extent of common property resources that supply fuel, food and fodder either for home use or income generation.

Despite two decades of declining yields, rural Nigeriens continue to live in marginal areas out of attachment to the land and in the belief that the future will be different. Having land -- or in the case of pastoralists, having livestock -- is fundamental to one's existence and identity, "without land, one has nothing". Also, there is the enigma of the unknown and the recognition that there is little land left for the taking. A common phrase is, "where would we go?" Many rural producers see their lives as a cycle of times when they are better off and times when they are not. As there have been other bad years of disease, famine and war, so there will be again...As one old noble Twareg said, "this too will pass". When asked how they might improve their situation, respondents largely saw their options as being one of two possibilities:

- (1) through livestock, either as animals to herd, to milk, to fatten and sell; a donkey for transport; or camels for commerce.
- (2) through commerce where possibilities ranged from small-scale sugar and cola nut marketing to larger-scale caravan-type trade.

C. Ways of Coping during Food Crisis

To cope during food insecure times, rural Nigeriens employ a variety of indigenous strategies, similar to those found in other African countries (see especially Watts, 1983; Corbett, 1988; Campbell, 1990). They may occur simultaneously as engaged in by different family members, and they flow in sequence from less to more dire responses to a food crisis.

- 1) reduced consumption -- fewer meals per day and/or smaller portions.
- 2) increased use of less preferred foods, including wild foods -- leaves, fruits, roots.
- 3) increased labor migration. Every year sees a proportion of the able-bodied labor force migrating to urban centers or neighboring countries for off-season work but numbers increase during food deficit years.
- 4) increase in casual labor.
- 5) increase in handicraft sales and petty commerce; mat making, in particular, is a famine mitigation strategy, especially for women.
- 6) call on reciprocal arrangements.
- 7) increase in dry season agriculture in areas where viable. Influx of laborers to these sites.
- 8) divesting small ruminants.

As found during the documentation of the famine chronologies, a household's final destitution measure is the total divestment of livestock, sale or mortgage of land and forced migration.

Pastoralists typically rely on the circulation of animals between friends and relatives through gifts and loans; herding for others; taking animals belonging to another into one's herd; selling jewelry and medicines, casual labor, farming and migration.

Women carry different responsibilities than men during food insecure periods. They commonly take over consumption responsibilities when men are on migration and during the hungry period, the two most critical periods. They gather wild foods, allocate reduced food supplies among family members, use their own income to feed the family (women's income traditionally is for herself), tap kin networks for assistance and gifts, reduce their own consumption, sell livestock, and work for others to obtain in-kind foodstuffs. Because women own the majority of small stock in Niger, anywhere from 50-80% of village sheep and goats, their role in famine mitigation, through divestment of their small stock, is likely to be even higher than assumed.

There is some debate in the literature regarding the prominence of mutual support systems today in providing for the needy during times of stress. It is commonly observed that inter-household transfers and loans increase in the early stages of a food shortage but dry up as the crisis deepens and becomes prolonged. During interviews in Tanout arrondissement, villagers described the system of interhousehold exchanges and loans as having a levelling effect resulting in all members of the community falling to the same level of need. In many areas, villagers stated that they no longer engage in personal loans since repayment is so uncertain.

Respondents expressed the perception that the traditional forms of assistance are decreasing due to Niger's overall economic decline, social decay and growing individualism. The following remarks are typical, "People just don't care anymore." "Traditions have diminished - most people are poor now." "When there is no harvest and no animals, then there is no tithing." One imam compared the past, when people united in communities as protection against the common threat of warfare and slave-raiding, to today, when people live apart and show little solidarity in work and charity. Household-level survey data indicate that, in aggregate, interhousehold gifts are small, but many small transfers occur with as much flowing out of the household as comes in through gifts (Hopkins and Reardon, 1992). It is estimated that only 2-7% of the cereal calories come from transfers.

III. CONCLUSIONS: What have we learned?

1. Rural Nigeriens view famine as conceptually different than any other period or type of production year.
2. The drought of the 1968-74 and 1984-85 were not unique. Historically, famines have been occurring every decade or so -- a phenomenon which is likely to continue. While respondents associate the famines of the early 1900s with greater individual suffering, the number of people vulnerable to famine today is greater due to both population growth and economic deterioration. Likewise, the ability to recover from drought is increasingly constrained by the overall impoverishment of the country. And, if the value of migration earnings is falling as villagers indicate, combined with stagnating off-farm income opportunities, the risk of famine is increasing.
3. While Niger has an agriculturally-based economy, people do not only rely on household production to meet their food needs. They probably never have. Aggregate levels of production are inadequate indicators of food security and vulnerability. The national early warning system (Système d'Alerte Précoce, SAP) recognizes this but in the absence of a valid, cost-efficient method for monitoring socio-economic variables, it is forced to rely on agricultural production figures. The new USAID-funded Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Project is expected to provide valuable support in this regard. Neither are broad population categories sufficient that define groups as farmer, herder, and urban resident. Farmers are herders (at least owners) and herders are farmers. Few, if any, pure production systems exist in Niger. Increasing attention must be placed on household-level differences and abilities to cope.
4. This research focused on famine which precluded our looking in depth at differences in types of production years, related impacts and decision-making. However, regardless of the year, it is clear that households and people within households employ multiple, and often different, mechanisms for meeting their food needs. Their ability to do so depends largely upon several factors:

1) asset level

livestock: number owned; specie; whether viewed as liquid asset that can be readily sold or productive resource that equates with lifestyle;

land: security, size of holding in relation to household size, quality

household composition: labor force available - number of contributing members and what they do. Is there a member who can go on exode; hire out for casual labor; an employed relative somewhere?

income-earning or exchange opportunities including migration; casual labor; availability of raw materials for craft production; land support capacity of wild foods, fodder, fuelwood to gather and sell; opportunities for petty commerce; remittances

2) claims and stores: stores and stocks; reciprocal arrangements one has been able to build to call upon in time of need.

3) geographical location and market access

4) cultural morés including ethnic and gender discrimination.

5) length of residence

5. Income generation possibilities in Niger are largely small-scale and limited. Yet, it is income and the ability to smooth interannual production variability which assures food security. Continued attention must be placed on private sector development and income generation opportunities.

6. An equitable, functioning food crop market is fundamental to food security in Niger. Further work is required to understand cereal market dynamics, crossborder trade and regional cereals marketing.

7. Livestock is a critical part of Nigerien production systems and is a primary resource for mitigating food stress among all ethnic groups. The majority of agricultural research and extension and natural resource management (NRM) activities in Niger, however, are focused on crop production and agronomic issues. Livestock must be brought into the picture.

8. Understanding people's own perceptions of their food needs is required since these are likely to be different than outsiders perceptions. Further use of rapid rural appraisal is envisioned.

9. It is unclear to what extent households have shifted responsibility for coping with drought to the national government and foreign relief assistance. Since the 1970s, food aid has had an impact on rural Nigerien lives. Constant attention must be paid to ensuring that this impact is positive and that local coping strategies are not eroded or displaced with dependence on uncertain external assistance.

10. Food aid is a stopgap measure. The underlying cause of famine or food insecurity is poverty. Disaster assistance in Niger needs to be linked to longterm development and sustainable economic growth which is the foundation of the Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Project. It seems useful to move from looking at the situation as a disaster that inherently implies relief, or from seeing the situation as an issue of food security where food is seen as the priority need, to viewing the situation in terms of livelihood security, where livelihood is defined as the "adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs" (Chambers, 1988). The focus on food security is being reevaluated and is being seen as but one piece of the puzzle. As we see in Niger, people are not just concerned about food but about longer-term security and survival.

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Table 1. Local Chronologies of Famine in Central and Western Niger

Time Period	Name	Meaning	Location
1913-14 drought	Kakalaba El Kwatau Gande Beri or Yolamoru	hunger that makes a hole in the stomach; torture name of the kernel of the dum-dum nut that was eaten; the famine that hit people hard refers to how the famine affected a huge area; also means "bloating stomach" (an early sign of starvation); also referred to as the time when women were in such a hurry to eat their little bit of food that they started chewing on their pigtales	Throughout Niger
1920's drought	Mai Bouhou Pamparam Gounga Hanna Tama Banyaize	refers to a new sack of the time (50 or 100 kg sack used to transport grain) that was used to collect food a great famine refers to living and gardening on small islets which appeared in the river one kept the coin for oneself and didn't give it to one's kin	Throughout Niger
1930's crickets	Wande Wasu Soudan Dezey or Haray Bero Nda Sey	"avoid your wife", the time when men sent their wives away because there was not enough food the time of too much rain; crickets could fill up a house, when the "hyenas ate the bodies" "the scattering", when people abandoned the village and scattered looking for food	Western Niger
1941-43 crickets	Mai Tia or El Tia Gorowa (Garwa) Mai Gani Kangale Kouri Ataram Yedda Koni Mangaize Koni	the measure used to buy/sell millet; merchants used 1/3 of normal measure; time when people used the tia to scoop up and sell crickets name of the kerosene container in which food aid arrived a change in customs and hospitality to the point that people were not sharing with each other "short stalks" the time when people looked everywhere for food and found nothing "Yedda had some food", the village near Baleyara where villagers went to get food "the people towards Tahoua had some", people went to Tahoua for food	Localized
1950-54 drought	Kwajaja Garouna Kwatchi Chut de Lana Gari Toukoulfa	skinny, emaciated, general famine the manioc flour that was distributed (also called Mai Kwaki) "end of life" "the year of the manioc flour" when manioc flour was distributed refers to mats used as packaging when grain was brought from Tahoua in mats and sold (also called Tchoukourfou, Takoro)	Throughout Niger
1967	Banda Bare	"turn your back on others" and eat in secret	Western Niger

Time Period	Name	Meaning	Location
1973-74 drought	Amaro	time when people ate kulikuli from Nigeria	Throughout Niger
	Jeki nika	"Go away, I will pound the millet" which men said to women so they could have the millet to themselves	
	El Hili	"clear space"	
	Zololo	to get skinny and be drawn out like a rubber band	
	Kakuduba	"the famine that made people thin"	
	Tchinfara Prendre ta couverture	refers to destruction by crickets; crickets became the principal food "take your blanket and leave" indicating that there was nothing available to eat so one needed to leave or starve	
1984	Jandawa	refers to the red sorghum people received	Throughout Niger
	El Buhari	named after the new Nigerian President since people went to Nigeria looking for food; named after the new Nigerian President who tried to prevent people from taking food out of Nigeria; refers to the food that came from Nigeria when Buhari was Head of State	
	Banga Banga	large, general famine; the famine that paralyzed people	
	Karjama	the famine when people looked like skeletons/people became too thin	
	Jebba Zoli	clothing fell off thin bodies (also called Jebba Zouroukou, Jebba Kuru)	
	Faww	"absolutely nothing"	
	Kogay	"a great dryness"	
	Kan Ta Kala Je Kossou-Kossou	"nothing but the providence of God" "emptiness"	
Source: USAID Field Data, 1992. Central Niger: Matameye, Magaria, Tanout, Gouré Western Niger: Tera, Ouallam, Filingue			