PRECARIOUS SITUATION IN THE SAHEL, URGENT ACTION NEEDED TO FACE THE LEAN SEASON.

This note was prepared and published by Action against Hunger, a humanitarian organization working in all countries of the Sahel. It aims to draw attention to the urgency of a coordinated response to the lean season, which is looming fast, and which could further weaken the communities that are already struggling to cope with the overlapping security, health, food, nutritional, climate crises. It is mainly focused on the situation of the 5 Sahel countries: Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mali, Mauritania.
The humanitarian context continues to deteriorate further each year in the Sahel, with insecurity already underpinned by numerous deadly incidents toward populations likely to spread to other areas of West Africa, seriously affecting the lives of communities. Violence and attacks are causing chronic insecurity in several regions and sharply increasing the need for humanitarian assistance. A total of 29 million Sahelians need assistance and protection, representing 7 million more than in March 2020. Food and nutrition insecurity has reached an unprecedented peak, endangering the lives of the most vulnerable (especially affecting women, children under 5, the poor, the elderly).

*This first reference to Sahel includes Burkina Faso, northern Cameroon (Far North region), Chad, Mali, Niger, north-east Nigeria (Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states), Senegal and Mauritania.

**VERY CRITICAL FOOD AND NUTRITION SITUATION COMBINED WITH CONFLICTS**

Violence in the Sahel significantly affects food and nutrition security. As illustrated by the map above, the cumulative effects of conflict and violence concentrate in four major food insecurity hotspots, the most acute situation being reported in Central Sahel and in Lake Chad basin area. In the conflict-affected areas, the food and nutrition situation has drastically deteriorated according to the latest publications of the

©World food program. Projected food insecurity situation (June-August 2021) and violence events SOURCE: CH and ACLED data

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1 OCHA, Humanitarian needs and requirements overview, sahel crisis, April 2021
cadre Harmonisé (CH) of March 2021. For the G5 Sahel countries - Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania Niger, Chad - more than 6,057,000 people are currently in a food crisis (phase 3)².

These figures will increase further during the lean season (also called hunger gap, period preceding harvest from June to August)³ with more than 8,700,000 million, meaning over 1,600,000 than in 2020.

Populations in emergency situations (phase 4⁴) requiring immediate action have increased in the G5 Sahel countries (from 2019 to 2021). In 2019, there were over 143,000 people and in 2021, they are estimated at over 811,000 individuals. The graphic below compares the number of populations in emergency in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.

In the central Sahel zone, at the 3 borders (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) the trends observed since 2017, based on the Cadre Harmonisé data, show an increase of the number of people in the crisis situation (from phase 3 or worst, graphic below).

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² The Cadre harmonisé (CH) is a tool used to analyze the vulnerability of populations to food and nutrition insecurity. Based on various information sources and a common methodology, the analysis identifies the number and areas of food insecure people. Action Against Hunger contribute always to the CH. Phase 3 represents CRISIS: households have food deficits that are reflected in high or above average of acute malnutrition or are marginally able to cover their minimum food needs by exhausting livelihood assets or using crisis coping strategies. Urgent actions are required to protect livelihoods and reduce food consumption gaps.

³ The lean season (also called hunger gap) is the period preceding harvest. Its length varies from one year to another but is generally accepted to be, in the Sahel, 3 months long between June and August.

⁴ The phase 4 of the cadre harmonise (CH) represents EMERGENCY meaning that urgent actions are required to save lives and livelihoods. It is used when households have large food deficits resulting in very high acute malnutrition or excess mortality or are able to mitigate large food deficits by using emergency coping strategies and liquidating their assets. Phase 5 of CH represents: DISASTER/FAMINE meaning that urgent actions are required to recover/prevent widespread deaths and avoid collapse of livelihoods. It is used when households have extreme food shortages and are unable to cover other needs even by using strategies. Death and extremely critical malnutrition rates are evident (for famine classification, very high rates of malnutrition and mortality are necessary).
So urce: Cadre harmonise data analyzed by Food Security and Nutrition Regional Working Group (FSNWG) co led by Action Against Hunger

The situation in Mauritania also shows an increase of the number of people in the crisis situation during the lean season (281,156 in 2017 to 409,940 in 2021).

Due to the compounding effects of conflict, poor access to basic services, climate variabilities and chronic food deficit during the lean season, Sahel is prone to the most acute levels of food insecurity. As such, the region is considered a top priority of the United Nations High-level Task Force on Preventing Famine and the newly launched G7 famine prevention and humanitarian crises compact.

FIELD EVIDENCE CONFIRMING A WORRYING TENDENCY

Spiraling food prices

Sahelian communities for the most part have their own production as a source of consumption (around 80% of population). But with the growing population, the production does not meet the needs. In addition, with climatic shocks in all the G5 Sahel countries, inter-community conflicts and armed attacks, farmers have reduced access to land and water for agriculture. Household incomes are severely degraded due to conflicts and are disrupting food access knowing that communities increasingly depend on markets to get basic foodstuffs (cereals, tubers, vegetables). In addition, during the lean season, most of the price of food steadily increase. In 2021, the increase is estimated at more than 10% compared to the average of the past five years. Analyzes show that more than half of households in the Sahel are experiencing difficulties accessing or cannot access an affordable nutritious diet.

On another hand, with the COVID 19, and the different national restrictions for travel, limitation of imports there has been an increase in maritime transport costs, particularly for containerized goods. Land borders between the different G5 Sahel are still closed.

In Chad, for example, the latest analyzes carried out in March 2021, show increases in cereal prices ranging from 4 to 27%. An assessment made by Action Against Hunger in the Logone Occidental area (border area with Cameroon in southern Chad, covering more than one million inhabitants) confirms a

5 Cadre harmonisé, Mars 2021
6 Chad, Cadre harmonisé of March 2021 shows an increase for millet (4% to 22%), 7% to 27% for sorghum and 14% to 26% for maize.
surge in the prices of all food products in the markets visited. Thus, the price of millet in February 2021 increased by 10% compared to January 2021, in at least 2 departments (Lac Wey and Ngourgosso), i.e., + 14% compared to February 2020 (period before COVID19).

In Burkina Faso, the situation is similar with a general increase in the price of cereals in the markets compared to last year at the same period and to the five-year average. For example, the price of sorghum - a basic staple food - in the Kaya market (a crisis area, located about 100 km from the capital) increased by 93% in February 2021 compared to last year at the same period and increased by 55% compared to the five-year average. The same trend is observed for other crops.

### INCREASE IN MALNUTRITION CASES

Malnutrition has worsened in almost all G5 Sahel countries compared to the last 2 years, due to several conflicts that have led to the closing of health facilities in some areas, thus reducing communities’ access to healthcare. WFP and UNICEF data on the Central Sahel estimate that nearly 2,900,000 children aged 6 to 59 months could be affected by global acute malnutrition. Severe acute malnutrition cases are estimated at around 770,000 children (6-59 months). The three-border area (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) is in a very difficult situation and represents around 70% of the areas affected by nutrition insecurity.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>CURRENT INCREASE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agadez (Arlit)</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffa (CSME)</td>
<td>176%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maradi (Madarounfa)</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHR Maradi</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tessaoua</td>
<td>26%</td>
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In Niger, for example, extensive analyzes at the national level, in February 2021 revealed a 12% increase in admissions to CRENis (intensive nutrition education and recovery centers) where care is usually provided to patients hospitalized for complicated cases – the most affected regions are mentioned on the table.

In CRENAS (outpatient recovery and nutritional education center for severe acute malnutrition) in Dosso (Falmey 220%, Gaya 51%, Loga 4% and Tibiri 31%) and Niamey (Ny II 42%, Ny IV 17% and Ny V 221%)

### FACTORS AGGRAVATING THE STRUCTURAL SAHELIAN CRISIS

The situation in the Sahel has deteriorated significantly over the last years, especially in Central Sahel where complex and fast-growing crises are causing unprecedented needs.

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7 Action Against Hunger Chad, Evaluation des besoins socio-économiques et moyens d’existence des populations des sous-préfectures de Moundou, Bah, Déli, Dodinda, Mbalkabre, Mballa-Banyo, Ngondong, Bénoué, Bébalem, province du Logone Occidental, Chad; Février 2021.
The region is characterized by chronic poverty (40% of the population lives below the poverty line) and lack of access to basic social services, in particular health and water and sanitation.

The worsening food and nutritional security situation in the Sahel is linked to the fact that the area is facing a multitude of simultaneous, interconnected shocks: political, socio-economic, security and health shocks. Action Against Hunger believes that 3 major factors can be highlighted:

1. **Growing insecurity in all Sahel countries**, with the increase in armed robberies, inter-community conflicts, kidnappings, abduction of women... leading to massive displacement of populations to other so-called “stable” areas. These communities thus find themselves deprived of access to certain basic social services (health center and schools closed, no water or sanitation infrastructure) and see their savings dwindling, their livelihoods drastically reduced, and are forced to abandon their basic activities in search of other means of survival. Additionally, the security crisis has largely complicated the humanitarian response. Access to people in need has become increasingly difficult, and militarized and politicized response constitutes a major risk to humanitarian action. Humanitarian actors are increasingly exposed to risks and targeted in attacks.

With the expansion and intensification of violence in the regions and the multitude of military actors therein, be it national, regional, European or UN levels, in the region humanitarian access and to basic social services continues to be a challenge. In this regard, it is crucial to continue working on the improvement of civil-military coordination challenges. It is important also to work on the lifting imposition of armed escorts seeking exemptions as well as avoiding the confusion of humanitarian and military mandates by refraining from engaging in life saving assistance by military actors (such as food or medical kits distributions). On the other hand, it is important to monitor the counter-terrorism measures put in place by the G5 countries, such as the ban on the use of motorbikes. It should be noted that this means of transport is the one most used by the population and such measures limit their ability to reach to health facilities. In addition, some of the health centers are already severely impacted, with limited capacity to continue service delivery in conflict affected areas like Tahoua and Tilabery in Niger or central Mali.
2. **Recurrent health crises in the region with several outbreaks** of cholera, measles, meningitis, compounded by the COVID 19 pandemic. All this combination has contributed to further weaken health systems that were unprepared for such shocks, increasing the lack of confidence of communities vis-à-vis health services, reducing attendance at health centers, creating a slowdown in mass activities such as vaccinations, screening, thereby increasing the number of children and women victims of malnutrition and other diseases. In several countries, **Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates exceed 10% (alert threshold set by WHO)** and **the prevalence of GAM is above 15%** with regional contrasts in several regions, especially in Sahel central countries.

3. **Increasing Climatic variabilities** with alternating and recurring peaks between droughts, floods, and threat of locust attacks, armyworms, grain-eating birds... affecting the agricultural production of the countries. The reduction in stocks observed in recent years in all countries further exacerbates the crisis.

**OUR FEARS IF NOTHING IS DONE...**

So far, weak, and inadequate responses

Since 2015, Action Against Hunger has been one of the first NGOs to launch annual alerts before the lean season in order to prevent the crisis and provide concerted and coordinated responses. In all the countries where we operate, in complementary with early warnings, we are developing programs to support the communities most affected by the lean season. Several humanitarian organizations and national NGOs also support governments in responding to crises. The communities themselves develop response and adaptation strategies to crises and emergencies. **But the needs are enormous, weariness sets in the face of the worsening situation and the responses are carried out timely.** For 2021, the financial needs for Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad are $1,045,739,672 for food and nutrition assistance. Only about 7 to 15% of this amount has been mobilized so far.

Action Against Hunger believes that urgent action must be taken in the next few weeks and months to limit the effects of the upcoming lean season, and minimize the resulting human suffering, including the risk of loss of human life, especially for children under 5 and pregnant or breastfeeding women living in areas of high insecurity. This can also prevent the further deterioration of food and nutrition security of millions in the region. To enable such response, humanitarian access must improve to create a more favorable operational environment enabling communities to reach aid. **At the same time, we must continue to address structural and conjunctural barriers affecting communities’ access to basic social services.**
TO THIS END, WE URGE COUNTRIES IN THE REGION AS WELL AS DONOR STATES TO

- Increase significantly their funding to cover these urgent needs including for life-saving interventions by supporting the humanitarian response appeals that continue to be severely underfinanced. We stress the urgency of swiftly and adequately deploying the necessary resources to ensure a rapid and impactful response to save lives and protect the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, encompassing food, livelihoods, and nutrition and health responses. Addressing these needs by acting in a coordinated manner with all humanitarian actors will enable to save more lives, including that of displaced populations and those in hard-to-reach areas.

- In addition to the emergency response, double their efforts to strengthen access to basic services, by increasing their funding to essential services such as health and nutrition- ensuring these reach the most vulnerable communities throughout the region. Donor countries must further invest in the prevention and sustainable treatment of undernutrition; also enabling long-term and flexible funding to strengthen resilience through a multi-sectorial approach, thus enabling to the application of the humanitarian-development nexus in such contexts.

- Secure a conducive operational environment for humanitarian actors, ensuring unhindered, sustained, and effective access, is imperative to assist and save lives in conflict-affected areas. To this end, upholding international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, including by enabling principled humanitarian action is central to guarantee the security and acceptance of humanitarian workers in such contexts.