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### **Improving the Effectiveness of Aid and Relief in Niger**

The people of Niger have endured unbelievable hardships, and yet they continue to be bombarded with severe ecological, economical, and political devastation. Niger is considered to be one of the poorest nations in the world, and yet the global community seems reluctant to react to the slow, yet constant, erosion of their country. Humanitarian relief and food aid is offered within many of the regions of Niger with inadequate resources to sustain their own people, but the aid organizations are faced with many difficult challenges to overcome. They are handicapped by limits imposed by a developing government, a high birth rate, and a lack of financial, educational, and nutritional resources. As relief and aid agencies attempt to overcome these barriers in order to improve the availability and quality of the services they provide, the people of Niger remain impoverished, malnourished, and undereducated. The global community must react and assist the people of Niger through the funding and implementation of the changes required for Niger to become a nation capable of caring for their own people.

Because of the extensive poverty most of the public of Niger live in, the amount of aid required is vast, and it is unfeasible for current aid organizations to reach the majority of the country in order to provide for the civilians who live far from large cities. Although the populations of Niger are becoming increasingly urban because of widespread malnourishment and food shortage, the vast majority continue to reside in rural communities. More than fifty percent of the Nigerien population live and work as Hausa, the major ethnic group in the country, farmers (St. John web). The Djerma-Songhai, the second largest ethnic group in Niger, also farm and include twenty-five percent of the population (St. John web). Twenty percent of the people live in nomadic groups and raise livestock (St. John web). With nearly the entire population living as farmers, rural communities are the most susceptible to the yearly “hunger season” where thousands of native people subsist merely on food from aid organizations (St. John web).

The large family size of most Nigerien families leads to hurried consumption of the undersized quantity of nutritional aid given to families. As the majority of the Niger population practices Islam, it is common for a man to take several wives. With little to no knowledge or use of birth control, most Nigerien women give birth to eight children during their life, the highest average in the world (2008 web). This causes Niger to have an extremely young population, fifty percent under the age of fifteen, consequently the relief agencies must provide for more children for whom adequate nutrition now is vital for a healthy future (Niger web). For most children and adults, the average diet consists mainly of millet, a locally grown grain, served with a sauce made with vegetables, milk, or meat. Rice is also grown in Niger, but typically served only for special occasions. With grains such as millet, rice, and corn the major food crops, there is little protein in the average Nigerien diet (2008 web). In order to supplement the diet of Nigerien children, organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières often provide Plumpy’nut, fortified peanut butter stuffed with milk and vitamins. Plumpy’nut can help critically underweight children gain up to one pound a week. This food supplement helps to save the lives of thousands of starving children who pass through MSF clinics every day.

Although the most prevalent crisis in Niger is dealing with the malnourished population, the lack of education is also an imperative concern. While public education in Niger is free, there are few government schools. The most common schools are Qur’anic schools, which instruct children in the religion of Islam, and “tent schools” that move with nomadic groups. Although French, the official language of Niger, is spoken in most schools, most people speak the language of their ethnic group (St.

John web). With over seventy percent of adults unable to read or write, the cycle of poverty and illiteracy continues to hinder children the education of Nigerien children (Key web).

The conditions most Nigeriens live in places excessive pressure on the weakened health care system. The health care in Niger is split into two basic sectors: government-sponsored hospitals, clinics, and mobile units and traditional healers. Most Western medicine facilities are unable to provide for the people who come to them for assistance because they lack funding to purchase medical supplies and nutritional supplements. As the people of Niger cope with the severe flooding and drought of the past years, malnourishment is the most common ailment treated by medical centers. The situation will only decline as farms struggle with this year's harvest, destroyed by severe flooding and drought.

As a majority of Nigeriens work as farmers, the only food source for most families is the harvest of their crops. The main crops of Nigerien farmers are millet, beans, peanuts, and cotton. Millet and beans are produced for food, and peanuts and cotton are generally sold for cash. With food insecurity affecting over half of the population, the people rely heavily on the harvest of their farm to support their family. As many farms were completely wiped out by recent flooding and drought, the United Nations and Nigerien government are preparing to distribute 14,000 tons of animal feed, 3,000 tons of cereal seeds, and 1,500 tons of fertilizer for Nigeriens to use this season (UN Supports web). This effort to "take it to the farmer" will help benefit thousands, but more actions must be made in order to improve lasting agricultural conditions.

A major barrier to improving agricultural productivity is the common inadequate education about farming practices and environmental devastation. The farmers of Niger live from one harvest to the next and do not have the resources to revive their crops after droughts and flooding. These factors also prevent farmers from producing a large enough yield to support their families throughout the entire year which causes many families to undergo a "hunger season" each year. Niger is one of the few countries in the world with a season where the provisions are entirely depleted leaving entire populations in a state of deteriorating health. It is expected that "7.8 million, or nearly sixty percent, of Niger's population are running out of food...and another three million people are expected to face "extreme" food shortfalls this year" (Leichman web).

The inadequate effectiveness of humanitarian relief and food aid exacerbates the dire situation faced by millions of Nigeriens. With a largely malnourished population, Niger needs more resources to draw upon to provide satisfactory nutrition for their people. Without a healthy population, the nation of Niger will not be able to pull out of the severe devastation of food security they have been living in. Without immediate action, the amount of malnourished and starving people of Niger will continue to climb until the entire population is living in absolute devastation. In order to improve this situation, aid organizations need to become more successful at providing for the people of Niger. Providing more through relief and food agencies could satisfactory sustain the nutrition and food security of millions. Once people no longer remain malnourished, they can begin to build more successful lives and endeavor to break the cycle of extreme poverty that remains the norm throughout most of Niger.

Improving the availability of aid will increase the amount of food that families receive and allow them to recover from the devastation they have been living in. As more families receive assistance, more may be able to contribute more to society and improve their faltering economy. Currently Niger has few exports that include livestock and uranium. The main trading partners of Niger are France, Nigeria, and the United States. It has been difficult for Niger to improve their economy because of the poor transportation system within the country. The country is hindered by the lack of railroads and paved roads. Most people travel by foot or by bus. This lack of infrastructure also inhibits the availability of communication throughout the country; for that reason Niger has only one daily newspaper (St. John web). Once the daily lives of Nigeriens have been improved, they will be able to contribute to society and help sustain

and improve the economy in Niger. As the economy grows, trade will increase and more small farmers will be able to sell their future surpluses in order to provide for their families. Before the economy can be improved, the amount of relief and aid available must be enhanced.

The largest issue preventing organizations from offering adequate services is the government of Niger. Recently Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been struggling to provide for the civilians living in rural poverty because they are met with resistance from the national government. In 2008 the Minister of Interior of Niger, Albade Abouba, banned MSF from providing treatment for thousands of malnourished children; Albade Abouba has not provided a reason for this ban (MSF Calls web). MSF has made progress against this ban, but has not been allowed to fully resume their treatment within the country (MSF Wishes web). Worsening this situation is the unbalanced condition the Nigerien government that has been exacerbated in the past years by turmoil and unrest within the government. This began when Niger first became a sovereign nation by gaining independence from France, their official name is the Republic of Niger on August 3, 1960; France and Hamani Diori became the first president. After severe drought and shortages in the 1960's and 1970's the government struggled and was overthrown. The new government adopted a multiparty system in 1992 and remained peaceful for four years until the assassination of President Mahamane Ousmane. The subsequent leader, General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara was then assassinated in 1999. Later in that year, a new constitution was approved, and a new president was elected. The president was elected again in 2004, but was overthrown in early 2010 and replaced by military rule called the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (St. John web). For the past forty years these unstable conditions have resulted in an increase in poverty, violence, and dislocation of citizens.

The first step to improving the effectiveness of aid for the citizens of Niger is to develop a stronger government that aid organizations can work alongside rather than struggle against. The government of Niger has little civilian involvement and the majority of the population do not understand how their government is hurting them. The government does not need financial contributions to improve, but they need committed leaders who are willing to take the necessary steps to improve the food insecurity within the country. After a new government is firmly established, the government needs to take action to determine the levels of malnourishment, poverty, and, crop failure. With this information, the amount of aid required can be calculated and requested from relief and food aid organizations such as the United Nations. The government and Médecins Sans Frontières can create guidelines to standardize the distribution of aid. With regulations set in place to determine qualifications for separate levels of care for mild, moderate, and severe malnutrition, the health care centers can provide the proper treatment to those in need. By producing a system for financial and nutritional donations to course through, there can be more affective allocation of the donations from the global community.

Another major issue affecting the effectiveness of aid in Niger is the constantly increasing populations of hungry children. Although the citizens of Niger live in one of the poorest countries in the world, they have one of the highest birth rates. As mothers struggle to feed their children, they themselves are also in severe stages of malnutrition. Humanitarian relief agencies, such as the Peace Corps, need to continue to provide services similar to Camp GLOW, a camp for women and girls meant to address preventative health issues. These activities teach females skills about personal hygiene, prenatal healthcare, food sanitation, and disease prevention (Nguyen web). As more women learn these skills and the importance of birth control, it is possible that fewer children will be born. In a country with an infant mortality of 150 out of 1000 live births, it is critical that women understand the risks placed on themselves and their children if they become pregnant (Key web). This statistic does include the number of still born births due to poor prenatal nutrition. By implementing more programs, the high birth rate should decline and take pressure off under-staffed health care centers providing for thousands of infants with mothers unable to support them. This will also relieve the strain on the few public schools teaching the young population. With less incoming children, the schools can attempt to decrease or eradicate illiteracy in the future.

With increased support from many international humanitarian and food relief organizations, the country of Niger will be able to overcome the seemingly unsurpassable challenges they have faced. By implementing a stronger, recovered government and an enhanced education, the relief and aid will be more widely available and more suitably understood. As challenges to food security are overcome, the quality of life of those who subsist on food from relief and food agencies will be improved. As the smallholder farmer is most affected by the inability of organizations in Niger to provide, his life will be most improved. Once the basics of life are taken care of, the farmer can begin to improve agricultural production and ensure food security for his family.

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