

Food Crisis in Niger...

June 2005

The developing food crisis in Niger has gotten increasing attention in European and American media in recent days, and many Niger RPCVs, current PCVs, and their families and friends have been asking for more information and looking for ways in which they might help. Therefore, I thought it would be useful to provide this summary of the situation and address the question of Peace Corps involvement.

Last year's harvest was very poor in the agro-pastoral zone, i.e. more or less along the 14th parallel: Tillaberi-Ouallam-Filingue-Tahoua-Dakoro-Tanout. Forage for the animals is also scarce. This zone includes about a fourth of the population, some 3 million people. In the rest of the country, the harvest was normal or better.

Thus, while the food crisis is not country-wide in scope, it is very serious for those in the affected zone. The usual coping mechanisms (temporary emigration, animal sales, "famine food," etc.) have been employed sooner and more extensively than in normal years, and various relief operations by the government (sale of reserve food stocks at subsidized prices) and donors (food for work, grain banks, etc.) have already begun. However, there are reports that some people (estimates of the number vary widely) are not just hungry but starving.

A major problem in addressing this crisis is that food grains are in short supply throughout West Africa, and prices are very high; so simply providing money, while needed, is not a sufficient response to meet the overall requirements for more food. The government and donors are seeking to import additional supplies.

The rains began in late May, and crops are planted in most areas. However, the harvest won't come in the agro-pastoral zone until about September. Moreover, as always, there is no assurance that the rains will continue in a sufficient amount or timely manner.

This situation poses challenges for PC/Niger and our PCVs, about a fourth of whom are located in the agro-pastoral zone where the problem is centered.

For many good reasons, it is not appropriate for PCVs to simply pass out free food to their villagers:

- * PC focuses on development, not relief; and therefore we are not trained and equipped for such operations, which require special expertise and professionalism. Well-meaning amateurs can do more harm than good, while getting themselves into trouble.

- * Since PC as an organization has no resources for food aid, there is no way that an individual PCV could be able to feed everyone in the village. Thus

the question inevitably arises of who gets food and who doesn't, with the PCV caught in the middle. This could endanger the PCV's security as well as undermine his/her effectiveness as a development agent.

* If one PCV hands out food in his/her village, this creates expectations for successor PCVs and PCVs in other villages, expectations that cannot be met (and should not be met if our primary objective remains long term, sustainable development).

On the other hand, PC is also a people-to-people organization, and we are acutely aware of the humanitarian imperative to do something when friends and neighbors are starving. This is not only a moral issue but also a practical problem: Development work is not possible when people can't eat, and the PCVs' own safety and health (physical and mental) may become problematic in such conditions.

Thus, while we can't and shouldn't get involved in direct food relief by PCVs, neither can we turn our backs and do nothing, particularly in those places where PCVs may be living among starving people.

Here are some things we are doing:

* CRS has received a grant from USAID for an emergency food relief project. They would like to have a few PCVs to help administer it. PC staff is currently assessing the situation of PCVs in seriously affected villages to see if it would be appropriate for some of them to work temporarily in this project.

* We are looking at the possibility of collaboration with other NGOs, including Africare and World Vision, that have access to food aid and the expertise and means to deliver it effectively.

* PCVs have organized 13 village food banks, and the government has agreed to our request to provide an initial stock of 10 tons of grain for each (although they have not been able to give us a date when this will be done).

As the food crisis develops, we will continue to monitor the situation and look for ways in which PC could effectively respond.

RPCVs and family members who would like to make a personal contribution to food relief in Niger might wish to consider donations to the UN's World Food Program, the lead agency in addressing the crisis. You can go to:

www.wfp.org, click on the "donate" box at the left of the page, click on "WFP operations in" and scroll down to Niger.

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