

The Challenge of Compounding Crises:

HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

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Overview of the Crisis

The West African sub-region known as the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)¹ has experienced sharp spikes in violent extremism, terrorist attacks and multiple coup d'états over the last decade. The number of security incidents across these three countries [has increased eighteen-fold since 2015](#) and the region is home to [one of the fastest growing displacement crises](#) in the world. As of December 2022, those internally displaced by the rising violence has almost doubled since last year to [2.4 million people](#). Sixty-eight percent of those displaced, or [over 1.7 million people](#), are located in Burkina Faso, which has become the region's epicenter of violence and displacement, largely driven by extremist violence.

The violent conflict in the Central Sahel is rooted in historic grievances, inequitable management of resources, disaffection of populations and more recent interjections of violent extremism. Extremist non-state armed groups (NSAGs) operate in these three countries, aggravating and exploiting existing local conflicts spurred by "[unresolved grievances of local communities](#)." The sharply worsening conflict in the Central Sahel, the mass displacement it has caused and a new global hunger crisis have created a humanitarian catastrophe in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger this past year. The conflict is defined by deadly attacks on civilians and community leaders, human rights violations, targeting of lifegiving infrastructure like water sources, vigilante and intercommunal violence and unpredictable volatility. The number of civilian deaths in the Central Sahel in the first eight months of 2022 surpassed reported fatalities for all of 2021, with over [2,000 civilians killed](#). Women and girls are also [vulnerable to protection risks](#), such as child marriage or exploitation, because of displacement and lack of education services in the region.

Key Dynamics of the Crisis

The complex, multidimensional humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel is characterized by instability, fed by deteriorating social inclusion and exacerbated by international neglect and limited humanitarian access. For example:

- **Protracted crises intensified by shocks:** the crisis exists simultaneously on two timeframes, with survival and recovery of people in protracted ecological and economic crises interrupted by new and repeated violent shocks. Attacks in rural areas have led to mass displacement towards more urban centers, which are not equipped to support rapid population growth and the basic needs of displaced and host communities, such as access to livelihoods. Needs in such urban centers are only growing as IDPs are [staying for longer periods of time](#) and are increasingly less likely to return to their homes of origin given sustained displacement and ongoing instability.

¹ CRS defines the Central Sahel Crisis as rooted in the effects of the war in Mali that began in 2012 and embroils Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with increasing spillover into northern Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Benin, and Togo. This is distinct from the large ecological belt called the Sahel, which stretches from Sudan to Senegal. This document focuses on the Central Sahel Crisis only.

- **Breakdown of civil society and social cohesion:** NSAGs infiltrate spaces where the social contract between the state and citizens is weak, and the lack of confidence in the role of the state or strength of the economy can lead socially excluded groups, like youth, to turn to violence.
- **Need for locally led, sustainable solutions:** humanitarian assistance in the Central Sahel is inadequate and poorly adapted to the scale of the crisis, as well as the diverse and continuously evolving needs. Local organizations are sometimes the only ones able to access the most vulnerable communities; however, many of these organizations are under-resourced.

Conflict continues to drive acute food insecurity in the Central Sahel

Current Food Security and Malnutrition Issues

Food insecurity and malnutrition have risen sharply over recent years in the Central Sahel given the combination of violence and instability, climate change-induced extreme weather events and the secondary impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods. Currently, over [5.3 million people](#) are estimated to be facing Crisis or higher levels of food insecurity across the three countries; the number of children under 5 facing acute malnutrition has [increased by over 30 percent](#) since 2021. Conflict and violence remain the primary drivers of acute food insecurity, as they limit access to fields for planting, mobility of pastoralist communities and their herds, access to and functioning of markets as well as access for humanitarian assistance. Displaced populations have the highest food security needs in the region, particularly near the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger known as Liptako–Gourma; [over half the displaced are women and children](#). Due to the impact of conflict and instability on livelihoods and markets, some households may be currently facing [Catastrophe \(IPC 5\) food security outcomes](#) in Burkina Faso.

A significant proportion of the Central Sahel relies on rain-fed agriculture and livestock as primary sources of income and are [chronically vulnerable](#) to changes in rainfall. For example, droughts can drive [rural to urban migration and lead to negative coping strategies](#) that exacerbate poverty, such as selling assets, and flooding can destroy crops and homes, as seen recently in August and September 2022 in Niger. Despite normal to above average rainfall in the Central Sahel and good agricultural production this season, severe flooding in parts of Niger has reduced household food stocks.

Other major drivers of acute food insecurity and malnutrition are [increasing prices of food, fertilizer, and energy](#) combined with [local currency depreciation](#). These drivers are straining household purchasing power and limiting poor households' access to agricultural inputs in the region, particularly fertilizer. Agricultural [production shortfalls, combined with increased market demand, impacts of insecurity and supply shocks related to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and inflation](#) are all driving higher food prices. Staple food prices in the region have soared, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali, where prices are 50% higher compared to the average. In Niger, conflict-affected markets in Tillabéri have seen prices [20 to 40% higher compared to the five-year average](#).

Looking Ahead

Hunger and malnutrition needs were estimated to peak August to September 2022, during all three countries' agropastoral lean seasons. While improved agricultural production in the region could improve food security and nutrition, [a recent assessment](#) notes it is unlikely to be enough to reverse recent trends, especially with increased cases of acute malnutrition during the lean season. A small proportion of households are experiencing Catastrophe (IPC 5) outcomes and severe acute malnutrition in Burkina Faso; this is [projected to worsen from February to May](#) 2023, given the conflict's impact on market functioning, mobility, loss of livelihoods and humanitarian access.

[Mali](#) and [Burkina Faso](#) continue to impose cereal export bans to secure market availability, which could drive higher prices. Further, many farmers have been unable to access fertilizer given supply chain

issues and high prices, which could lead to lower harvests during the next agropastoral campaign. Further, the combination of higher prices and reduced availability could lead to less consumption of nutrient-rich foods, which could increase undernutrition in some of the most vulnerable populations, including pregnant and lactating women and children under five. Conflict could also reduce access to or availability of health and community nutrition services and deteriorate wellbeing outcomes. Without additional attention to the crisis, however, needs will continue to outpace available humanitarian funding. On average, the Central Sahel received about one third of 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) requirements.²

Especially concerning for the long-term is the impact of climate change in the Central Sahel. The region is especially susceptible to [land degradation, desertification, and extreme temperatures](#), and the rate of temperature increase is expected to exceed 1.5 times greater than the global average. Volatile conditions for crop and livestock yields could [further exacerbate the serious food insecurity crisis](#) in the Central Sahel. Niger ranks as the [most vulnerable country](#) to climate change in the world; Mali ranks seventh. These three countries, along with Chad and Mauritania, have been identified as one of the “world’s tipping points” if the global average surface temperature rises by 3 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. Climate change shocks could also greatly impact poverty levels, given climate shocks’ detrimental impact on livelihoods, animal and human health and infrastructure.

Recommendations

There are sufficient data highlighting the severity of the food and nutrition crisis in the Central Sahel, but insufficient attention and action. In response to increasing levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in the Central Sahel, CRS provides the following recommendations to the U.S. government:

1. **Increase funding and support for humanitarian and development assistance in the Central Sahel.** Humanitarian needs are increasing more rapidly than current programming and funding levels can accommodate. The scale of the crisis requires more robust funding to prevent deterioration of food security and nutrition outcomes.
 - **Funding should be flexible, and whenever possible, come through existing mechanisms.** Funding should allow flexibility in choosing the most appropriate modality for the context, supporting local markets to the extent feasible, and should also utilize crisis modifiers or cost modifications that add to, and do not detract from, humanitarian and development activities.
 - **Additional, multi-year funding is required for urban settings,** where current humanitarian assistance efforts are not sufficiently supporting the protracted needs of IDPs, who have been supported almost entirely by host population generosity. These underserved communities (host and IDP) require settlements, livelihoods and psychosocial support to meet their basic and longer-term needs.
 - **More funding should be directed to local organizations,** who are often the first responders to food security and nutrition crises and provide [more holistic responses](#). As part of its commitment for 25 percent of USAID funding to go to local partners in the next four years, the administration should build on existing funding mechanisms that frontline and local actors already access to move quickly, including topping up existing multi-year grants, adding to existing rapid response mechanisms, and utilizing country/regional pooled funding and other umbrella mechanisms to address acute food insecurity needs. Locally led implementation also [requires adaptive, holistic approaches](#) responsive to the local context. This entails capacity

² To date, only [34%](#), [31%](#), and [44%](#) of Burkina Faso’s, Mali, and Niger’s HRPs are funded, respectively.

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strengthening of organizations beyond simply training, and addressing organizational systems, structures, and buttressing organizational sustainability.

2. **Enhance investments that address root causes of violence, reduce the impact of shocks and stressors and increase the resilience of vulnerable populations.** Increasingly frequent and intense shocks and stressors have become the norm both globally and in the Central Sahel given the impacts of conflict, climate change, economic downturn, and other crises like COVID-19 and the Ukraine-Russia war. Investments should include:
 - **Additional, multi-year programming with livelihoods integrated across humanitarian and development activities**, which can enable people to better recover and meet their own needs over time, build autonomy and dignity and help address economic exclusion of marginalized groups - [a root cause of conflict](#).
 - **Social cohesion and peacebuilding integrated into humanitarian and development activities** to strengthen bonds between communities, help communities address underlying tensions, and decrease chances of further conflict. [CRS' Sahel Peace Initiative](#) is one example of such programming, which seeks to assist local civil society actors with designing and implementing locally led responses to the violence and growing humanitarian and development crisis in the Liptako-Gourma area.
 - **Scaling up and enhancing social protection mechanisms to better enable early action**, reducing the impact of crises on livelihoods and basic consumption needs while also building resilience to future shocks and stressors.
 - **Strengthening local production of diverse, nutrient-dense food sources using climate-smart approaches and supporting agri-food systems to diversify food supply and decrease reliance on food imports, particularly among smallholder farmers.** Investments should focus on land restoration efforts, which can improve soil health and increase water retention for better yields, as well as providing support to smallholder farmers on crop diversification, food storage, processing, transport, etc.
 - **Increasing investments in market systems monitoring and analyses**, which increase availability and access to food and commodity prices, inform emergency responses and guide the transition from humanitarian assistance to recovery and development.
3. **Release its interagency Sahel Strategy to inform these efforts.** An effective strategy must address the root causes of instability in the region, such as violent extremism and [inequitable access to wealth, livelihoods and natural resources](#). We also encourage the USG to center peacebuilding and social cohesion as part of this strategy, strengthening local governance for service delivery and ensuring humanitarian access.