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SPECIAL REPORT

Summary

FAO/WFP CROP AND FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT MISSION TO CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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Highlights

- The unprecedented political and military crisis in the Central African Republic (CAR), which started in December 2012, has devastated the country's overall economy with the Gross Domestic Product falling by 37 percent in 2013 compared to 2012.
- The agricultural sector, the backbone of the economy, has also contracted by 46 percent in 2013. In 2014, agricultural activities continued to be seriously disrupted with planted area reduced to well below pre-crisis levels due to persistent insecurity and scarcity in essential inputs like seeds and tools.
- Crop production in 2014, estimated at 762 690 tonnes, is 58 percent lower than the pre-crisis average but 11 percent up on 2013, due to increased cassava production; by contrast, cereal production fell by 54 percent in 2014 compared to 2013.
- FAO's support to crop production mitigated the negative impact of the crisis on food production with about 111 750 households being assisted with input seeds (maize, rice, groundnut, sesame, millet, sorghum, cowpeas and beans) and tools, while 100 seed multiplication groups received maize, rice and groundnut seeds. WFP supported the operation by providing seed protection rations.
- Based on the Mission's estimates, a cereal import requirement of 134 356 tonnes for the 2014/15 marketing year (November/October) is forecast. Assuming commercial imports at 29 000 tonnes and food aid in stock and pipeline at 48 000 tonnes, the Mission expects an uncovered cereal deficit of 57 000 tonnes.
- Livestock numbers are currently estimated to have declined by up to 77 percent compared to pre-crisis levels, due to looting and slaughtering.
- Fish supply declined by about 40 percent from pre-crisis levels, due to insecurity in fishing areas and loss of fishing equipment.
- The breakdown in market and trade activities has resulted in severe scarcity of commodities, including essential food items, leading to price surges in Bangui, where inflation increased from 3.5 percent in January 2014 to 12 percent in August 2014 thus constraining access to food to many.
- In Bangui, prices of maize, millet and groundnuts increased by 30-70 percent between March-April and August 2014. By contrast, prices of locally-produced cassava declined by 13 percent between February and August.
- The crisis has caused a sharp deterioration of the food security situation. Food reserves in rural areas are estimated at 40-50 percent lower than average following recurring lootings and widespread insecurity, and a decrease in the quantity and quality of meals has been observed.
- The Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and the isolated populations are facing an emergency food security situation, with about 50 percent of these households having critically low levels of food consumption and high malnutrition risk.
- For non-displaced groups, continued provision of food assistance is required during the 2015 lean season (April-July). An introduction of safety net facilities is recommended to prevent and treat moderate acute malnutrition.
- Support to boost food production (through distribution of seeds and tools, promotion of vegetable production, fish farming and small livestock rearing) is urgently required.
- Strong support to the agricultural sector in conformity to the Programme National d'Investissement Agricole, de Sécurité Alimentaire et Nutritionnelle (PNIASAN) would enable an inclusive economic growth and generate employment and income opportunities.
- The setting up of an agriculture and food security and early warning information system is highly recommended to provide updates and progressively allow for a timely, accurate and systematic monitoring.

OVERVIEW

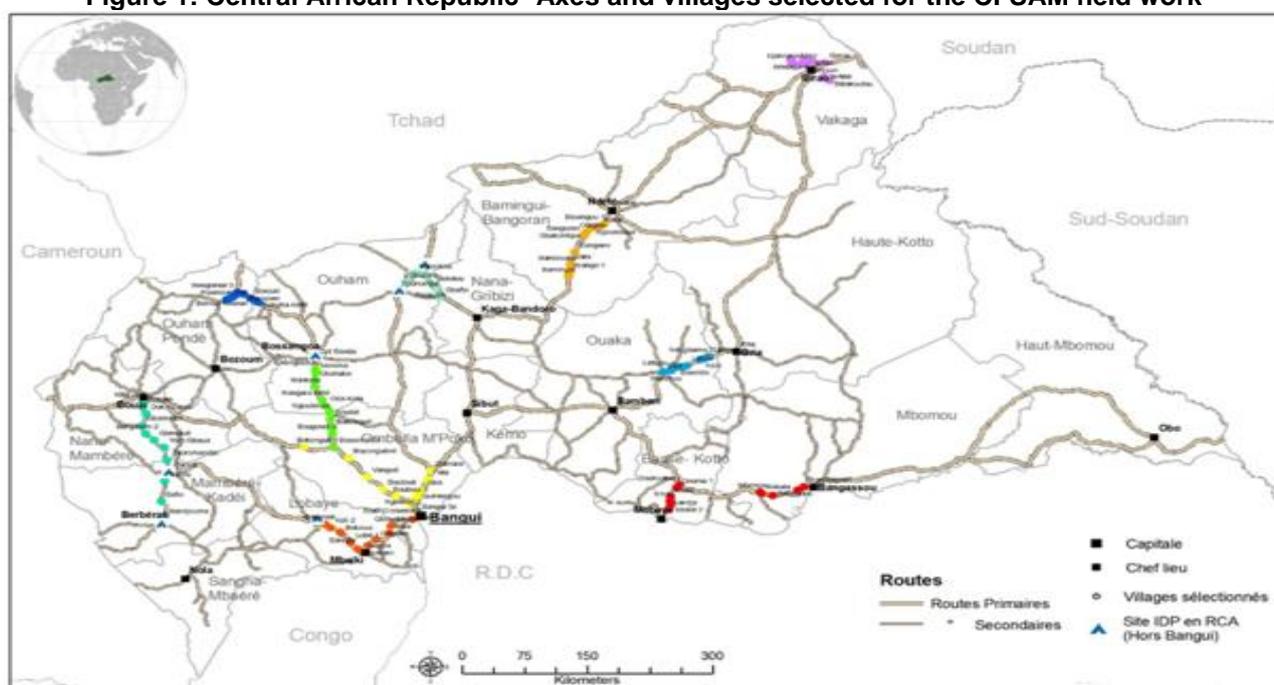
Following a request from the Government of the Central African Republic, an FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) visited the country from 10 August to 13 September 2014 to estimate crop production and assess the overall food security situation. In addition to FAO and WFP, the Mission field

teams included representatives from the Ministry of Rural Development, the Bureau of Statistics and seven national and international NGOs (World Vision, JUPEDEC, AIEC, COOPI, NDA, COHEB, Solidarités).

In Bangui, the Mission held meetings with officials of the Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Economy, Planning and International Cooperation, Ministry of Finance and Budget, relevant staff of international organizations, including the African Development Bank, the World Bank, UNDP and the European Commission to discuss the current situation of the overall economy, agriculture, food security and their prospects. In addition, the Mission acquired the latest information available on the macro-economic situation, agriculture, trade, policy, prices and humanitarian assistance. Field teams were provided with an intensive training in data collection techniques by the staff of the Ministry of Rural Development, FAO and WFP before the start of the field visits.

Field surveys were conducted using structured questionnaires and semi-structured working sessions with focus groups. Data collection was conducted with the support of NGOs from 28 August to 12 September 2014, under the supervision of the Ministry of Rural Development, FAO and WFP. About 170 focus group interviews were held in eight prefectures. Axes and villages surveyed were selected by technicians of partner institutions to ensure the representativeness of the sample of different agro-ecological zones.

Figure 1: Central African Republic- Axes and villages selected for the CFSAM field work



Source: Gaul, FAO CAR, OCHA, UNHCR.

Field work activities were carried out in a context of widespread insecurity, which constrained the access to certain areas. In particular, access was not possible in the whole Vakaga prefecture, while in other areas teams were not always able to visit all villages initially selected.

The current political and military crisis, which started in December 2012, had a severe negative impact on the country's overall economy. In 2013, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 37 percent less compared to 2012, with agriculture, livestock, fishing and hunting sectors declining by 46 percent, 55 percent and 33 percent, respectively. Negligible tax revenues did not allow the State to provide the basic services to face the current dire humanitarian situation, with more than 400 000 IDPs and more than 60 percent of the population living below the poverty line and plagued by widespread violence and insecurity.

The 2013/14 cropping season was characterized by erratic weather conditions in eastern and southern parts of the country, where unseasonal rains in February/March 2014 were followed by below-average rainfall in May and an extended dry spell in July. Subsequently, abundant rainfall in August reduced moisture deficits and, according to satellite imagery analysis, vegetation conditions in September were generally favourable.

Based on the information collected during focus groups, crop production in 2014 is estimated at about 763 000 tonnes, 58 percent lower than the pre-crisis average but 11 percent up on 2013, due to increased

cassava production. By contrast, cereal production declined by 54 percent in 2014 compared to 2013. Based on the Mission's estimates, an uncovered cereal deficit of 56 000 tonnes is forecast.

The reduction in crop production mainly resulted from the intensification of conflict in December 2013, which caused the loss of agricultural tools and inputs and led to a sharp reduction in cereal planted area. However, cassava plantings increased during the same period due to the crop's nature and roots being more difficult to be damaged and looted. In addition, cassava production in 2014 benefitted from important technical support delivered by FAO and partners in 2013.

The overall negative impact of the crisis on food production was to some extent mitigated by FAO's support to crop production with about 111 750 households being assisted with seeds and tools as well as by WFP's provision of seed protection rations.

The livestock and fishing sectors were also severely affected by the crisis. The decline in livestock numbers from last year due to theft, looting and mass slaughter of animals is estimated at 67 percent for cattle and 77 percent for small livestock and poultry. This represents a daunting task for the future recovery of the overall agricultural sector. Fish supplies declined by about 40 percent from pre-crisis levels due to insecurity in fishing areas and loss of fishing equipment.

Prices of agricultural commodities, which remained at comparatively low levels in the capital Bangui throughout most of the crisis period, surged in recent months. Prices of maize, millet and groundnuts in August 2014 were 30-70 percent higher than in March-April 2014. The sharp rise is mainly due to an increase in demand, as payments to civil servants resumed in March 2014, injecting more cash in the economy while large numbers of IDPs also returned to their homes. By contrast, prices of locally-produced cassava declined by 13 percent between February and August due to the combined effect of increased production and limited marketing and movement of goods which retained ample supplies around the surplus producing zone of the capital Bangui.

The crisis has significantly worsened food insecurity in a country where already between one-quarter and one-third of the total population were food insecure. Food reserves and stock levels in rural areas are estimated at 40-50 percent lower than average following recurring lootings and widespread insecurity. This has significantly increased the market dependence of a large number of households whose income sources have already been decimated by the conflict.

Following the decline in main livelihood opportunities, households shifted to secondary activities, such as gathering and selling wood and charcoal. However, these coping mechanisms will not be sufficient to ensure long-term food security and a decrease in the quantity and quality of meals has already been observed.

The IDPs and the isolated populations are facing an emergency food security situation due to the loss of their livelihoods and lack of coping mechanisms. Field surveys indicate that about 50 percent of these households have critically low levels of food consumption and high malnutrition risk, and largely rely on food assistance.

Results from the ongoing Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) and the Standardized Monitoring and Assessment in Relief and Transitions (SMART) surveys are expected to shed more light on the specific humanitarian assistance requirements.