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West Africa - Sahel

Food insecurity at unprecedented levels in most coastal and Sahelian countries

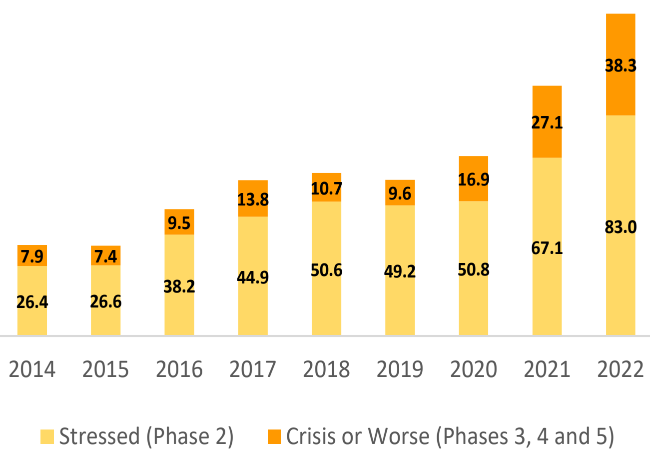
Highlights

- An estimated 27.3 million people are facing acute food insecurity between March and May 2022. This number is projected to increase to an unprecedented 38.3 million between June and August 2022 if humanitarian interventions are not scaled up.
- The alarming high level of food insecurity is due to localized shortfalls in cereal production in 2021, worsening conflicts, high food prices and macroeconomic challenges compounded by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The number of food insecure people could increase above initial projections in the second half of 2022 as spikes in food and fuel prices, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, are likely to worsen access to food.
- Further aggravating risk factors to food insecurity are the high prices of agricultural inputs, notably fertilizers, persisting insecurity and forecast localized unfavourable weather conditions that could have additional negative impacts on agricultural production.

Overview

A major food crisis is ongoing in West Africa and the Sahel[1] in 2022. Food insecurity has reached an unprecedented level in the subregion, with the estimated number of food insecure people on an upward trend since 2014 and almost quadrupling between 2019 and 2022 (Figure 1), driven by severe shocks: localized shortfalls in cereal production, worsening conflicts and insecurity, reduced cross-border trade, high food prices and macroeconomic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the number of food insecure people could increase above the initial projections as the effects of the war in Ukraine, mostly related to soaring international prices of food, fuel and fertilizers, were not factored in the latest food security analyses. Food insecurity conditions can worsen further if constrained access to fertilizers, persisting local insecurity and forecast localized unfavourable weather conditions result in lower cereal production in 2022.

Figure 1: West Africa - Trend of food insecure population between June and August
(2014–2022, millions)



Source: Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), 2022.

[1] The following 17 countries constitute the regional space of West Africa and the Sahel contained in this report: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Food insecurity at unprecedented levels in 2022

According to the March 2022 "Cadre Harmonisé (CH)" analysis, in West Africa and the Sahel between March and May 2022 about 27.3 million people[2] are estimated to face acute food insecurity (CH Phase 3 [Crisis] and above), including 1.29 million facing CH Phase 4 (Emergency). In the upcoming lean season, between June and August 2022, if humanitarian measures and responses are not scaled up, about 38.3 million people are projected to face acute food insecurity, the highest level on record since the start of the CH analysis in 2014 and about 40 percent higher compared to the same period in 2021 (Figure 1). The projected figure includes about 2.7 million people facing CH Phase 4 (Emergency). The highest incidence of food insecurity is projected in the major hotspots of the subregion: **Nigeria** (19.45 million), **the Niger** (4.4 million), **Burkina Faso** (3.45 million), **Chad** (2.1 million) and **Mali** (1.84 million). A significant deterioration of food insecurity in 2022 is projected also in **Sierra Leone** (1.6 million), **Guinea** (1.2 million) and **Benin** (830 150).

Main drivers of the 2022 food crisis

Weather- and conflict-induced production shortfalls

A key factor underpinning the current food insecurity levels is the shortfall in 2021 cereal production, mostly concentrated in the Sahel, which reduced food supplies in 2022. While the 2021 cereal production was favourable in most coastal countries, with outputs in **Benin**, **Ghana**, **Guinea**, **Liberia**, **Sierra Leone** and **Togo**, officially estimated at average to above-average levels, cereal harvests in northern parts of **Nigeria**, the main producer of the subregion, and in a number of Sahelian countries were officially estimated at below-average levels. Several weather shocks in 2021, including frequent dry spells and floods, hampered cereal production in **Burkina Faso**, **Chad** and **Mali**, where outputs were up to 10 percent below the average. The unfavourable weather conditions significantly affected rainfed coarse grain crops in **Mauritania** and **the Niger** resulting in outputs 30 and 40 percent below the average, respectively. In **Cabo Verde**, severe drought conditions for the fifth consecutive year resulted in marginal levels of cereal production in 2021.

In addition, the intensification of conflicts and insecurity has widely disrupted agricultural livelihoods and markets at the national and regional level. The number of violent incidents increased throughout 2021 and continued to rise in the first quarter of 2022, particularly in the central Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin (**Burkina Faso**, **Chad**, **Mali**, **the Niger** and **Nigeria**), but also in northern parts of coastal countries, particularly **Benin**, **Togo** and **Côte d'Ivoire**. The widespread upsurge of violence has caused large-scale displacements, forcing many rural households to abandon their crops in the fields. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of March 2022, about 6 million people were internally displaced in **Burkina Faso**, **Chad**, **Mali**, **the Niger** and **Nigeria**, compared to 5.15 million estimated in early 2021, while 1.17 million people sought shelter as refugees across the subregion.

Access to pastoral resources and availability of fodder across the Sahel have also been affected by insecurity and the poor weather conditions, resulting in reduced livestock production and an early start of the pastoral lean season in 2022. This has caused abnormal transhumance movements, with consequent overexploitation of accessible grazing areas and increasing tensions between farmers and herders.

Overall, the reduced agricultural production resulted in an early depletion of cereal stocks of rural households and below-average market supplies in 2022, while lowering income-earning opportunities, adding pressure on food prices and pushing a large number of households to resort to crisis or emergency coping strategies.

Macroeconomic challenges and high food prices

Macroeconomic challenges, including currency depreciation in countries outside of the *Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA)* zone and high inflation rates, have aggravated the food insecurity situation, particularly in coastal countries. A significant depreciation of the national currencies in **Ghana**, **Sierra Leone** and **Nigeria** in 2021 and early 2022, partly driven by large trade deficits and foreign exchange shortages, has added support to inflation.

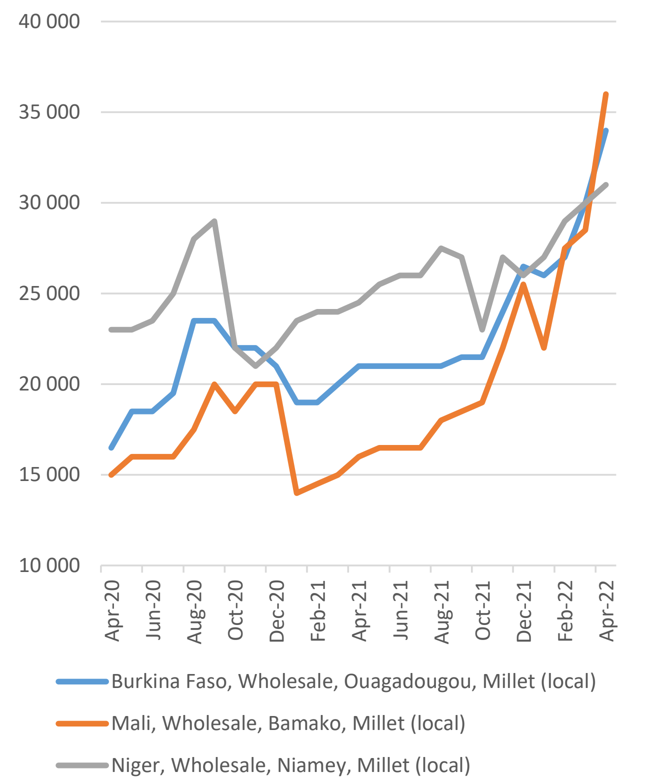
[2] These figures do not include food security estimations for Cameroon, which also implements the CH analysis.

In these three countries, the annual inflation rate was between 16 and 18 percent in March 2022, while it reached 8 percent in **Cabo Verde** and 12 percent in **Liberia**. Furthermore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures adopted for its containment adversely affected income-generating activities and the overall economy, notably in **Cabo Verde**, **Liberia**, **Guinea-Bissau**, **Sierra Leone**, **Mali** and **Nigeria**, where negative economic growth rates were recorded in 2020. These factors have contributed to increase the fiscal deficits and debt levels, with a negative effect on the delivery of agricultural support and essential social services to the most vulnerable rural households.

Access to food has been severely constrained by abnormally high food prices. Prices of staple cereals, particularly locally produced coarse grains, have increased across the subregion since early 2021 and were well above their year-earlier values during the first quarter of 2022, reaching record or near-record levels in several countries. In **Mali** and **Burkina Faso**, prices of millet and sorghum (Figure 2) were more than 60 percent higher on a yearly basis, while in **Chad**, **the Niger** and **Senegal** they were over 20 percent higher year on year between March and April 2022. In **Cabo Verde**, prices of local maize and imported cereals in March 2022 were between 20 and 70 percent above their year-earlier levels. In **Nigeria**, **Ghana** and **Togo**, prices of millet, sorghum and maize increased since early 2021 (Figure 3) and, in March 2022, they were between 20 to 60 percent higher year on year. In **Sierra Leone**, prices of locally produced and imported rice varieties were up to 40 percent higher year on year in March 2022. The high level of prices reflects reduced cereal outputs and conflict-related market disruptions as well as weak currencies in non-franc countries and strong domestic and export demand in coastal countries. High international prices of food and fuel, driven by the COVID-19-related supply chain disruptions, added upward pressure on domestic food prices through 2021 and early 2022.

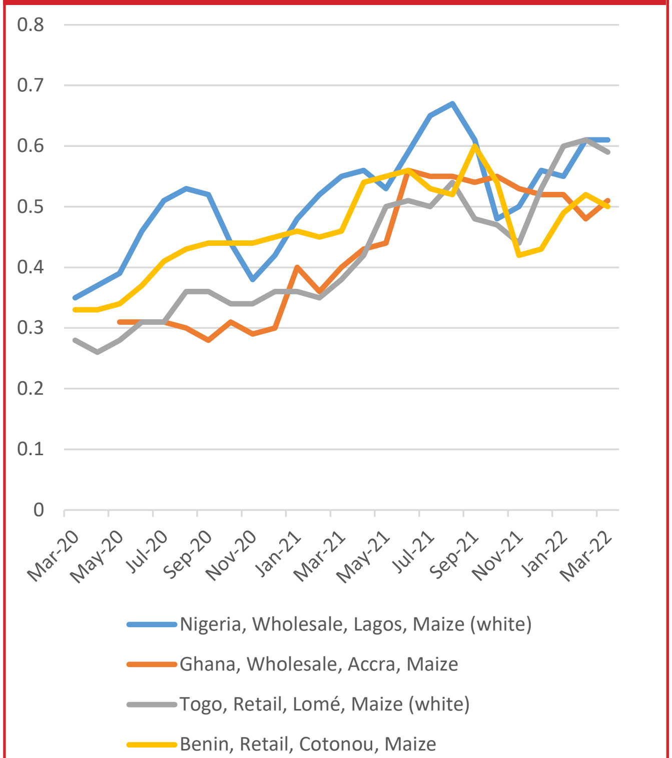
Reduced trade flows of food commodities across the borders in the subregion have been an additional factor weighing on domestic prices. To safeguard

Figure 2: West Africa - Wholesale prices of local millet in central Sahelian countries
(CFA Franc BCEAO/100 kg)



Source: Afrique Verte, 2022.

Figure 3: West Africa - Wholesale and retail prices of maize in coastal countries
(USD/ kg)



Sources: Nigeria: FEW SNET, Ghana: Marketing Services Unit, SRID (MOFA), Togo: Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Élevage et de la Pêche and Benin: Institut National de la Statistique et de l'Analyse, 2022.

domestic food supplies and contain inflationary pressure, exports of cereal grains and flours have been banned in **Mali**, **Burkina Faso**, **Chad** and **Côte d'Ivoire**. Particularly affecting **the Niger**, exports of non-locally produced wheat products and other foodstuffs were banned in Algeria. The economic sanctions imposed on **Mali** by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which include the closure of borders and a trade embargo of non-essential items, coupled with persisting banditry and the lingering COVID-19 containment measures, have contributed to disrupt cross-border commodity movements across the subregion. This has resulted in increased transportation costs and tight availability of foods and agricultural inputs.

Aggravating risk factors for food insecurity

The prevalence of food insecurity in the second half of 2022 could increase above current projections, which were produced prior to the start of the war in Ukraine. Access to food is likely to worsen due to the unfolding effects of the war on international trade and commodity prices, particularly in countries with a high reliance on food imports. In **Cabo Verde** and **Mauritania**, for instance, imports of staple cereal grains and products account for more than 70 percent of the national consumption requirements. Increased international prices of wheat, significantly exacerbated in recent months by the war, are likely to deteriorate food security conditions of urban populations in **Benin**, **Burkina Faso**, **Cabo Verde**, **Ghana**, **Mauritania**, **Nigeria** and **Senegal**, where significant quantities of wheat grain and flour are imported. In these countries, between 25 to 60 percent of the total imports of wheat in the last five years originated from Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Shortages and higher international prices of vegetable oils, underpinned by trade disruptions in the Black Sea Region and a recent ban of palm oil exports in Indonesia, are also likely to support domestic prices of these products and processed foods across the subregion. Increasing global prices of fuel are expected to drive up transportation and production costs of agricultural products and to increase the fiscal burden in countries that subsidize fuel. In particular, the budget deficit is expected to widen in **Nigeria**, due to a sharp increase in the cost of local gasoline subsidies.

Food availability could be further compounded in the second half of 2022. Cereal production prospects in 2022 remain uncertain at the subregional level and localized shortfalls are likely to persist, due to worsening security conditions in conflict-affected areas and limited access to fertilizers. Most countries in the subregion are reliant on imports of fertilizers, particularly potassium, and the high international prices of these products could mean a reduction of supplies to farmers in countries that implement fertilizer subsidy schemes, such as **Ghana**, **Mali**, **Mauritania**, **the Niger**, **Nigeria** and **Togo**, reflecting increased fiscal constraints. These factors are likely to curtail yields and hamper planting activities of the 2022 main cereal crops, currently underway in southern parts of coastal countries and expected to start shortly in the Sahel. In addition, weather forecasts for the 2022 rainy season, between May and September, indicate a high likelihood of below-average rainfall amounts in southern parts of several coastal countries, which could adversely affect crop production. In Sahelian countries, the weather outlook indicates above-average rainfall amounts, which would benefit crop development but also increase the risk of floods, particularly between August and September.

Given the critical deterioration of food security across the subregion and the compounding effects of the risk factors that could further aggravate conditions in 2022, an immediate scaling up of ongoing food and livelihood humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable households is urgently required. In addition, agricultural support for the ongoing main agropastoral season should be provided to farming and pastoral households to enhance productive capacities and bolster their access to and availability of food.

This **Special Alert** has been prepared under the responsibility of FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture, with information from official and unofficial sources. None of the information in this Alert should be regarded as statements of governmental views. These Alerts are short reports which describe an alarming food security situation that is developing in countries or subregions. They also alert the international community on measures to be taken. The alerts are available in English, French or Spanish depending on the country/region. Since conditions may change rapidly, please contact the undersigned for further information if required.

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