

7th July 2010, Gombe - State authorities and aid agencies in northern Nigeria are scaling up their food security and nutrition responses in the light of coming food shortages.

Seven Nigerian states along the edge of the Sahel - Yobe, Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, Jigawa and Bauchi - received poor and erratic rains in 2009, as did the neighbouring countries of Chad and Niger, and northern Cameroon.

This year, rains are again expected to arrive late and end soon. "Already pockets of [food] problems exist," said Alhassan Nuhu, deputy planning director of the Nigeria Emergency Management Agency (NEMA).

"We are facing an unsteady situation," he told IRIN. NEMA warned that 12 million people across the north could face a lack of basic commodities.

Severe water shortages, plummeting livestock prices and rising grain costs would affect each of the northern states, according to an assessment in May 2010 by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET). Household members would be reducing costs, selling assets, borrowing money and searching for work in towns and cities to try to get by.

Livestock prices were 50 percent lower in May 2010 than in May 2009, while the cost of millet, the staple food, was 25 percent higher. "Most poor pastoral households will not have enough resources to buy food to meet their daily needs," said FEWSNET.

"On top of the situation"

NEMA has alerted state authorities to help them prepare for shortages and is storing grains in its six offices around the country. The Ministry of Agriculture has also stockpiled 130,000mt of grain to stabilize food prices, said Nuhu.

Abimbola Williams, the newborn and child survival adviser to Save the Children, told IRIN that the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam and the Clinton Foundation were all gearing up to respond to the approaching lean times.

Food security assessments are underway across the country, and in June the National Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF conducted a nutrition and child mortality survey.

"We are on top of the situation," Nuhu told IRIN. "Here [Nigeria] we are talking of [a food insecurity] forecast, while there in Niger we are talking of a real food crisis."

Malnutrition

The extent of the nutrition problem is still unknown, but some early indicators are worrying: one-third of the severely malnourished children being registered by MSF's therapeutic feeding centres in Niger come from its southern neighbour, Nigeria.

Some 41 percent of Nigerian children are chronically malnourished, 14 percent are wasted, and 23 percent underweight, according to 2008 government data.

"By the time you are having two-digit prevalence, malnutrition becomes a serious health problem that should be urgently tackled," Susan Ojomo, UNICEF's child survival and development manager in northern Nigeria, told IRIN.

The organization has pre-positioned stocks to treat 18,000 severely malnourished children across the north, its Nigeria spokesperson, Paula Fedeski, told IRIN.

These initiatives in response to people in need build on existing efforts by UNICEF and the government to treat severely malnourished children in the states of Gombe, where 3,426 children were treated in the past month, and Jigawa. The programme will soon be extended to Kebbi, Katsina and Sokoto by means of US\$1.3 million in state government funding.

Fatima Idi treks 14km every week - from Mubi village in Yobe State to a UNICEF feeding centre in Jigawar Nafada village in Gombe state - with her emaciated two-year-old baby, Hassan, strapped to her back, so he can be treated for severe acute malnutrition.

"It is a long and arduous trek but it is worth the effort, and I'm determined to endure it for the remaining five weeks for the sake of my child, who has shown considerable improvement," she told IRIN.

Hassan weighed 4.4kg when he started receiving treatment; three weeks later he has gained half a kilogram, and his rapid improvement has spurred 70 mothers from neighbouring villages to join the programme.

Source: [IRIN](#)