

The Famine in Regions of Niger: 2005

By the British Geographer

Situation

Niger is a landlocked country situated in West African. It is bordered by Algeria and Libya to the north, Nigeria and Benin to the south, Mali and Burkina Faso to the west, and Chad to the east. Its north is dominated by the Sahara Desert and its south forms part of the Sahel dry arid zone.

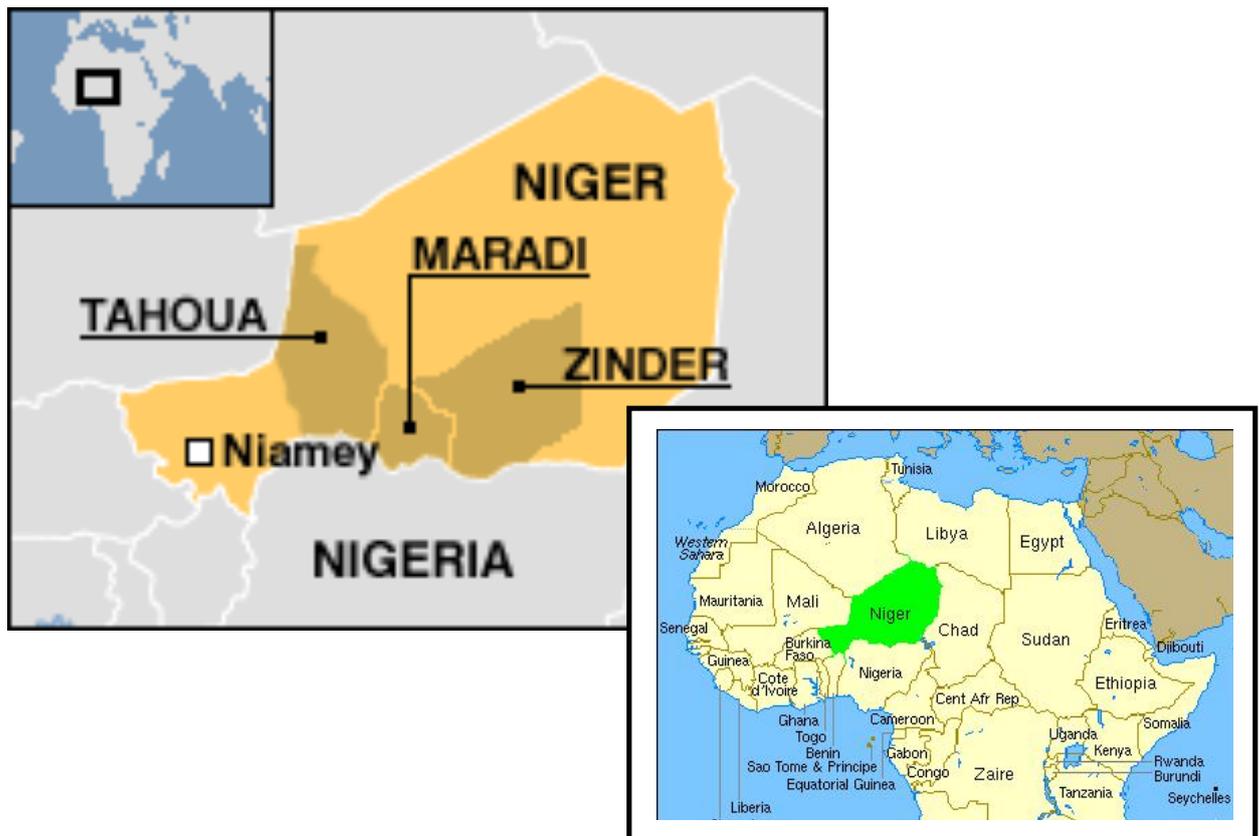


Figure 1

Climate

Niger's subtropical climate is mainly very hot and dry. In the extreme south there is a tropical steppe climate on the edges of the Niger River basin. The terrain is predominantly desert plains and sand dunes, with flat to rolling savanna in the south and hills in the north.

There are three main climatic zones in Niger. The Sahara Desert climatic region lying to the northern part of the country, in the centre we find savannah and in more strips there steppe.

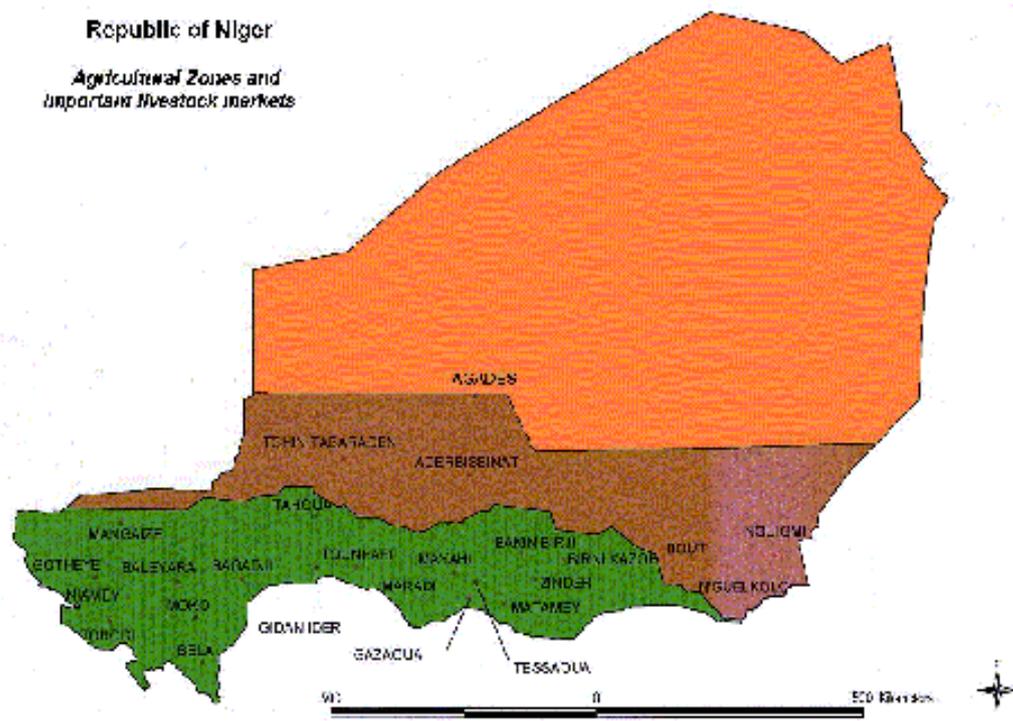
In the eastern part of Niger at Bilma, the annual rainfall is as low as a mere 2 centimeters a year. The average annual rainfall in the northern Air Massif

region is restricted to a maximum of 25 centimeters, most of which falls within a single period of two months. Agadez in northern Sahel receives an annual average rainfall of 16.5 centimeters. Year on year rainfall may vary significantly, with some regions likely to experience no rainfall at all.

The general cause of such a dry climate is due the positioning of Niger at its subtropical latitude between 12 and 23 degrees north. This positioning in addition to its distance from the Atlantic (approximately 700km) creates the conditions for desert like conditions.

Subtropical deserts center on the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer and in Niger are the main cause of desert conditions forming the Sahara Desert. Here, descending air currents are the result of consistently high atmospheric pressure and generate hot, dry winds that prevent cloud formation. At times when rain does fall the heat of the sun is able to evaporate it before it reaches the ground. These high-pressure belts are the direct result of descending air as part of the Hadley atmospheric circulation.

This climate variation creates three distinct agricultural zones.



Conception : SMA B&M S.P. 12091 Alway - Contact Tel : 77 72 26 6. web : sma-b&m@arcelor.com

Zones

- Desert
- Pastoral Zone
- Agro (-pastoral) Zone

Figure 2: Agricultural zones: Source FAO

The Geographical Extent

It is important to describe the geographical extent of the famine accurately and not generalize it to the entire country of Niger. Famine conditions only affected a minority of people in the three political regions of Tahoua, Maradi and Zinder. See figure 1.

In total 3.6 million people, one third of the population was effected by the crisis impacting over 4000 villages. Of these 3.6 million 800 000 were thought to be suffering from acute food insecurity and a further 800 000 from moderate food insecurity. Half of these were thought to be children of which 160 000 were at high risk of death. Actual mortalities figures are not available.

The crisis was not as clear-cut as many aid agencies would make you believe. At the time of the famine the Niger President, Mamadou Tandja dismissed reports that his country was experiencing a famine. President Tandja said opposition parties and United Nations aid agencies were exploiting the idea of a famine for political and economic gain. At the time there was widespread condemnation by NGOs and the western media. However, a documentary in Norway titled "Sultbløffen" The Famine Scam supported Tandja's view, claiming there was no famine in Niger in 2005-06. The documentary claimed that the international media and aid organizations in general were overstating and lying about the food situation in the country. They cited so-called "food-racism": the perception that local, traditional food and food plants are useless and poisonous, despite the fact that the locals have eaten these for millennia. Second, the perception that the people of Niger are incapable of living without support from the west, and that large food packages made it hard for local agriculture to compete

Despite this it is difficult to believe that there wasn't an acute food scarcity and many media reports aired the all-to-common images of emaciated children and drought refugee camps as evidence. The debate over whether there was a famine bites at the heart of the problem concerning the causes of food scarcity and food insecurity.

The Causes of the Famine

Physical/ Environmental Factors

The regions affected are arid environments and have a tropical wet and dry climate. Agriculture is volatile and highly responsive to rains that are supposed to come annually. Niger suffered two consecutive drought sin 2004 and 2005. The entire region of the Sahel has seen below average rainfall since 1990. In addition a plague of locust destroyed the cops of over 4000 villages in August 2005.

Social factors

Hunger spread fastest among women and children. Children were affected most due to the youthful population structure of Niger. Children are most vulnerable in the population and deteriorate fastest due to chronic malnutrition, as a result of an over-reliance on monoculture and subsistence

farming. 160 000 children were at risk of death. Journalists who visited Niger reported finding a strange phenomenon: villages in which women and children were going hungry, while there still remained food in their households. In some cases men had left villages in order to find work but due to male dominance women are not even allowed to look in the family grain store – for reasons of taboo. In polygamous families some women and children were observed to be favoured over others. This represents a very clear example of Food Entitlement Deficit.

Economic and Political Factors

Niger is the second poorest country in the world. 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 die every year. In 2005, drought made conditions worse.

Since the 1980s the state has implemented a series of harsh measures dictated by financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. These policies are designed to allow Niger to qualify for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. The World Bank demanded the privatisation and deregulation of institutions that set prices for food. It insisted that agriculture had to be subject to the free market and subsidies to poor farmers be removed.

There used to be a body in Niger that supervised the price of agricultural goods and ensured that producers could get decent prices for their products, without pricing the poor out. The organisation that regulates market prices was privatized. This led to merchants buying up grain at a low price and hoarding it until prices rose. At the peak of the famine merchants were making 200-250 percent profit on maize alone.

The Niger Government was keen to impress the international institutions and refused to hand out free food instead it offered millet at subsidised prices but prices that the poorest could not afford. The UN agreed with the Niger Government and refused to distribute free food. Finally, the Niger government, along with its foreign donor countries and the UN, relented and agreed to allow the distribution of free food. This delay led to needless food scarcity and contributed to the conditions in the worst hit regions.

The last harvest was only 11% below the five-yearly average and it generally thought that drought and pests had a modest impact on harvests. Yet the price of grain skyrocketed with a 100g bag of millet, the staple grain, nearly doubling in price from the year before. While problems started when locusts ate crops and cattle fodder, it reached crisis proportions when the market conditions forced prices of food up. Due to poverty there was little demand for food. Shockingly, traders in Niger were exporting grain to wealthier neighbouring countries at the peak of price.

The warning signs for the famine went back as far as November of 2004. The UN appealed for \$10 million but aid agencies and governments failed to respond. There was no contingency fund for famine emergency in the UN. In 2005 the UN later appealed again for 10 000 tonnes of grain. This was only two thirds of what the WFP had suggested was needed but again this failed to arrive.

Choosing a Essay Framework

The causes of the famine on the ground are varied and highly complex. The spatial distribution of food scarcity and famine conditions relate to the varied spatial characteristics and interconnections. These characteristics, relate to the physical environment and climate, the socio-economic conditions as well as socio-political factors. The causes are both food availability deficit (FAD) and Food Entitlement Deficit (FED). It is important when writing on the causes of this famine that you decide a balanced framework. There are a number of approaches that may include one or more of the following:

- FAD vs. FED
- Short term vs. long term
- Natural vs. human
- Social, economic, environmental, political

In any case, your framework needs to show a balance. The alternative is to discuss the famine vs. chronic malnutrition debate and question entirely whether we should call this a famine.

FAD vs FED

"Famines are complex social phenomena, and a lack of food is seldom the reason why people starve".

Nobel Prize winning Economist Amartya Sen

By developing FAD and FED factors you directly address some key vocabulary within IB specification. In reality, your essay should reflect a balanced account of both types of factors but in doing so you should assess the relative importance of factors and identify trigger causes. In this case study there are some very interesting entitlement issues that relate to trade, politics and gender, concerning the problem of legal polygamy and the patriarchal society.

Short Term vs. Long Term

To what extent can we suggest that famines are caused by one season of poor rainfall? Or is famine a result of a number of years of low rainfall and depleting harvest and grain storage.

In choosing this framework you are able to discuss both the triggers of famine, such as drought and locust swarms as well as the chronic factors that exacerbate food scarcity and determine the acute consequences, such as monoculture diets and poor nutrition. It's also possible to bring in the delayed international aid response.

Natural vs. Human

This is probably the most straightforward approach but you should probably combine it with short and long-term factors so that varying temporal scales can be developed. You could broaden it further depending on your confidence and ability to integrate social, economic, political and environmental factors.

Finally you should assess the relative importance of each factor and directly state the importance of factors. In this way you will identify trigger causes.

Social, economic, environmental, political

This structure provides a simple four-paragraph approach that allows you to develop all the causes of the famine. As with the other frameworks remember to add synthesis through referring to temporal scales and assessing the relative importance of individual factors.