

WEST AFRICA Food Security Alert

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Above-average prices threaten food security in West Africa

The 2008/09 growing season in West Africa resulted in above-average harvests sufficient to meet regional demand. Cereal prices, however, did not decrease as much, or for as long, as would be expected following such a harvest. As prices in the region were already above the five-year average for the period prior to the harvest, early post-harvest price increases could lead to moderate, high, or extreme food insecurity for net consumers by the start of the June-September hunger season.

In most of the region's key markets, nominal retail cereal prices in January 2009 tended to be higher than both the five-year average and even those of 2004/05, a year characterized by poor production and abnormally high cereal prices that led to a regional food crisis. For example, in key markets in December 2008, the nominal retail price of millet, the main food staple for a majority of the Sahelian poor and food insecure populations, was 24-48 percent above the five-year average and 15-19 percent above the 2004/05 season. Similar trends were observed in maize and rice markets. Finally, several markets in cereal production zones of Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso already recorded post-harvest price increases between November 2008 and January 2009, whereas these increases were expected between January and March.

Due to high prices, many governments are having trouble fully restocking their national grain reserves, which had been depleted in 2007/08 in order to mitigate the effects of high global food prices, particularly in urban areas. Without replenishing reserves, governments' ability to mitigate food insecurity in deficit areas will be limited this year.

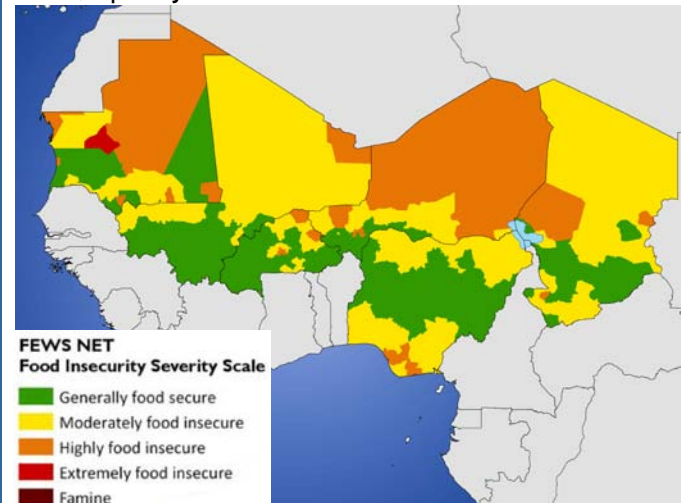
To insulate themselves from price changes and protect national supplies, some surplus countries such as Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, and Niger could turn to erecting trade barriers to limit the transfer of cereals to net food importers. Such measures contradict regional agreements providing for the free movement of goods in ECOWAS and the UEMOA, and their impact on food insecurity could be especially severe in the northern Sahel and northern Nigeria.

High prices combined with good harvests are likely to benefit food producers. High food prices increasing early in the season, however, constitute a barrier to food access for net consumers of the region. In spite of currently strong livestock prices, pastoralists may face weakening terms of trade as the dry season approaches and prices for food and livestock feed rise, particularly in the insecure areas of the northern Sahel.

FEWS NET and its partners will undertake an assessment mission in February 2009 to analyze markets, stocks, cross-border trade, and food security in the region. In March 2009, results of the mission are expected to explain causes for current prices and to offer recommendations for action.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues alerts to prompt decision-maker action to prevent or mitigate potential or actual food insecurity. FEWS NET is a USAID-funded activity. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the view of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

Figure 1. Most Likely Food Security Scenario for West Africa, April – June 2009.



Source: FEWS NET