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The Rise of a Market Mentality Means Many Go Hungry in Niger

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MARADI, Niger, Aug. 10 -- With her family's stocks of millet long gone, Rachida Abdou tied her shrunken baby girl to her back and grabbed the emaciated hand of her 7-year-old son. Together, they set out in search of food, or for somebody who might help.

On the fifth day of their journey, they stumbled into Maradi, a trading center. There, Abdou recounted, they saw something that they hadn't encountered in a very long time: food. There were sacks of rice, bags of peanuts and baskets of millet in the bustling markets. There was enough food -- here in the epicenter of a major hunger crisis -- to feed her family and thousands like it, if only they had the cash.

"What can you do?" said Abdou, a tall woman of about 30 with dark, piercing eyes. She sounded frustrated, and a bit desperate. "The price of millet is very high."

As streams of women like Abdou arrive here, with breasts shriveled from malnourishment and skeletal babies strapped to their backs, they are discovering some unexpected reasons for the hunger crisis in Niger:

It is the result not only of food shortages but a host of other problems, including vendor profiteering, a government policy shift toward a free market, and a decline in the traditional culture of generosity that once helped communities in Niger survive cyclical periods of scarcity.

In a country adopting free market policies, the suffering caused by a poor harvest has been dramatically compounded by a surge in food prices and, many people here suspect, profiteering by a burgeoning community of traders, who in recent years have been freed from government price controls and other mechanisms that once balanced market forces.

At the same time, Nigeriens said, the tradition of sharing in their society is giving way to sharper, more selfish attitudes as Niger, one of the world's poorest countries, reaches for a more materialistic, Westernized future. That is especially true here, along the southern border with Nigeria, where an aggressive entrepreneurial culture has created the economic powerhouse of West Africa.

"There are people who are making profit out of this whole situation," said Abdoukader Mamane Idi, a local radio journalist. "The link of brotherhood and solidarity has been broken."

A U.N. report found that prices in markets in Niger have shot up sharply because of profiteering, said James Morris, executive director of the U.N. World Food Program, speaking from San Francisco. Some traders, he said, have raised prices in anticipation of the arrival of aid groups, which often buy food locally to save on transport costs.

In the mostly Muslim nation, where the wealthy have a religious duty to set aside a portion of their income for the poor, some Islamic leaders said fewer and fewer are bothering to do so.

"There is nothing like generosity now," said Malan Hassane, the imam of a neighborhood mosque. "Selfishness is gaining ground." He maintained that humanitarian groups would not need to intervene if people here were more willing to feed one another.

The United Nations is attempting to provide food to 2.7 million people in Niger. Most serious cases already have come to Maradi, a city of 70,000 where Doctors Without Borders, an international aid group, has been treating hundreds of children a day. Admissions for serious malnutrition at the clinic, officials there said, are double the normal rate.



A merchant sells food at a market in the city of Maradi, where many people suspect profiteering by a burgeoning community of traders. (Photos By Craig Timberg -- The Washington Post)

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