Niger Resists In The Crosshairs Of Sanctions And Climate Catastrophe

12-05-2024 ~ *Aboubakar Alassane of the West Africa Peoples Organization (WAPO) explains how Nigeriens are enduring the consequences of unprecedented floods that have devastated their economy already crippled by sanctions.*

In the aftermath of the devastation left behind in the wake of unprecedented floods, Nigeriens are rebuilding their livelihoods and economy with the help of several relief measures instituted by the government to drastically cut prices of essential commodities and services.

The Sahel-wide flooding between June and October of 2024 has exacted a particularly high toll on the people of Niger, destroying crops, cattle, houses, and infrastructure in one of the world's poorest countries. The country's economy had already been strangled by seven-month-long sanctions.

By late September, at least 339 were killed, many more injured, and 1.1 million people displaced by the floods caused by unprecedented rain. The storms affected almost 190,000 hectares of cultivated agricultural land in a country with one of the highest child malnutrition rates.

Maradi region, the agricultural hub of south-central Niger, was the worst affected, with "the equivalent of an entire month's worth of rain falling in a day," said Aboubakar Alassane, a member of the coordination council of West Africa Peoples Organization (WAPO).

Masses of livestock, one of the most important sources of foreign exchange in Niger, were washed away in the Agadez region in the Sahara desert in the central north of the country. This destroyed the sole livelihood of nomadic communities.

The floods have further eroded the food supply that had already been dwindling, with agricultural land and pastures shrinking due to deficit rainfall over the five

years before this deluge.

This climate catastrophe took place as Niger was already suffering under the harsh sanctions imposed by the regional bloc Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). France egged on ECOWAS following the ouster of the regime of Mohamed Bazoum in Niger, perceived domestically as a puppet of the Western European country.

Mass protests against the military deployment and economic domination of Niger by its former colonizer culminated in a coup. This was led by the head of Bazoum's presidential guard, General Abdourahamane Tchiani, removing Bazoum on July 26, 2023. A military government called the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) was formed.

Sanctions followed on July 30, without any notice period. State assets were frozen. A no-fly zone was imposed. The borders of this landlocked country were closed immediately. Even those trucks that had already cleared paperwork were halted at the borders. Between July 30 and October 31 of 2023, 42,037 tons of various goods, worth over $23 million, were prevented from crossing into Niger.

Alassane recounted that immediately after the sanctions were imposed, the price of a 25 kg bag of rice nearly doubled from 12,000 to 21,000 CFA Franc, a colonial currency through which France continues to exert monetary control over its former colonies in West Africa.

A 75 kg bag of corn, "which had never exceeded 23,000 CFA, was selling at 40,000. Millet prices rose similarly, with niébé beans reaching 47,000 CFA, up from 20,000-25,000 before sanctions. Within a week, people were forced to line up in long queues" to buy the limited supplies of food items that had to be rationed, he said.

The foreign market for onions was cut off. Onions are one of Niger's main irrigated crops, over 90 percent of which used to be exported. Hundreds of thousands of farmers were unable to sell their produce. Many more who were involved in the agricultural supply chain and export industry lost their livelihoods. The government is still struggling to resolve the disputes that arose between farmers, transporters, and exporters due to the sudden inability to make payments.

Neighboring Nigeria, on which Niger depended for 70 percent of its electricity, cut off power in violation of the bilateral agreements. “Electricity was rationed to four hours per neighborhood in Niamey. Dosso and Tillabéri only had electricity for six to eight hours when the old thermal generators, purchased in the 1980s, did not break down,” he added. Students were not able to study after dark. Meanwhile, Nigerien uranium powered France’s nuclear plants.

Desperation and misery increased amongst the poorest as a consequence of the economic devastation caused by the sanctions, ostensibly imposed to “restore democracy.”

Sanctions Have Only Served to Consolidate Popular Support of the Military Government

Be it “Cuba, Russia, DPR Korea, Iraq, Iran, Venezuela, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, and now Niger,” sanctions have always been imposed to make the people suffer “to turn them against their governments.” However, like in all these countries, it has “had the opposite effect,” maintains Alassane.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup removing Bazoum, Niger was divided between those who supported the coup and those who opposed it, he explained. It was amid this confrontation tearing Niger’s political fabric two ways, that the ECOWAS imposed sanctions and threatened war with the backing of France.

“We had never given anyone the mandate to kill us because a president was deposed by a coup,” Alassane said. He described what followed as a “patriotic surge” that united the country behind the CNSP. The government consolidated its popular support by ordering the French troops out of the country and demonstrating its commitment to implement the popular will.

France refused to withdraw its troops, provoking mass demonstrations outside its military base and embassy in Niamey. “The march amid the pouring rain on September 2, 2023, was an unprecedented display of popular strength in the history of Niger,” Alassane said. “Some even say that the proclamation of the country’s independence did not draw as large a crowd proportionally to the population.”

Later that month, neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso vowed to defend Niger if attacked. They had also suffered sanctions after similar popularly supported coups in recent years removed French-backed regimes and forced French troops

out of the two countries. The trio came together to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

ECOWAS, on the other hand, was a divided bloc, with its member states facing domestic opposition to the war from popular movements and opposition parties. France announced its retreat in late September of 2023 and completed the withdrawal of its troops by the end of the year.

In January 2024, the AES states announced their decision to withdraw from ECOWAS, threatening to halve its geographical expanse and disrupt the 15-member bloc's trade and service flows worth almost $150 million annually. Amid this existential crisis looming over ECOWAS, its leaders met in late February and lifted the economic sanctions "on purely humanitarian grounds."

However, "we still feel the effects," Alassane said. With no confidence in the economy, which suffered missed deadlines for payments due to a freeze on transactions due to sanctions, "businesses are closing one after another."

"Spare parts for vehicles and other mechanical equipment are slow to arrive. We are forced to repair using second-hand parts, which are often defective. The automobile fleet, which is essential for a landlocked country, is shrinking more and more. Every day, we see people struggling with old broken vehicles."

Niger relies on the port of Cotonou in Benin for most of its imports of machines, spare parts, equipment, and food essentials, while exporting cash crops, uranium, and other minerals. Although the sanctions imposing border closure were lifted, Alassane said that the CNSP has been forced to keep the border closed from Niger's side due to threats of terror attacks.

The official reasons stated by France for stationing its troops in its former colonies in this region was to fight these terror groups it had helped spawn across the Sahel with its participation in the war destroying Libya. During its nearly decade-long troop deployment, terror attacks only increased.

After being compelled to withdraw, France is accused of aiding these terror groups to destabilize AES states. "France has set up new military bases on the Beninese side of the border to train terrorists to carry out attacks on Niger and Burkina Faso," Alassane said, explaining Niger's compulsion to close the Beninese border despite consequent shortages.

Already reeling under the pressure of this economic crisis, the Nigerien people were additionally hit by the country-wide floods this monsoon. Although floods in this season are common in the region, the scale of devastation left in its wake this year is "unprecedented."

Relief Measures
The CNSP has taken several measures to provide relief, including "a 50 percent reduction in the cost of medical procedures, examinations, and other services in public hospitals and health centers," Alassane said. To increase domestic food availability, the CNSP has banned exports of cereals and pulses outside the AES countries.

Despite being heavily reliant on imports for its own food needs, "more than 50 percent of the harvest were exported to Nigeria" over the last few years because farmers could not find remunerative prices in the local market, he explained.

To mitigate this problem, the CNSP has launched a campaign to provide remuneration to the farmers by purchasing their produce above the market price, while making it available for the domestic consumers at a subsidized rate.

Eighty percent of the farming is done on high lands that escaped the devastating impact of the floods, Alassane added. In fact, the yield has been "excellent" due to above-average rain. The government is prioritizing securing this harvest. All these measures have "drastically" dropped the prices of cereals, he said. As of November 2024, the price of a 75 kg sack of millet was down by about 45 percent since July.

With the price of cement slashed by 50 percent through a waiver on certain taxes on the commodity and exemption of its inputs from taxation, "new construction projects are visible in capital Niamey and other main cities," Alassane said.

Despite all these travails, the Nigeriens have endured in the crosshairs of climate catastrophe and sanctions. At no point did these issues undermine popular support for the CNSP, Alassane insists. "As proof" he points out that "each time the CNSP announces the holding of the National Consultative Council" under the pressure of the ECOWAS, France, and their Western allies, it has been forced to backtrack due to popular opposition.

This council, he added, "is set up every time there is a coup d'état to declare" that

the military is only ruling as a “transitional government” whose decisions will be reviewed by the council until a new constitution is drafted and power ceded to a civilian government after an election. Mali and Burkina Faso have constituted such councils.

However, Nigeriens do not want this council. Every time there has been a coup in the past, the council has served as “a door for Western imperialism” to intervene, be it through NGOs or other blocs of civil society. This ensures that another French puppet takes power when the transitional period comes to a close, Alassane explained.

By Pavan Kulkarni

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The Carbon Soil Opportunity: Organic Farming Helps Counter Climate Change

12-03-2024 ~ *Switching to organic products is an easy way to eat healthier and support the environment.*

Climate change is no longer an abstraction. I can literally see it at my front door. My figs ripened in October 2024, which has never happened before as it was never warm enough during that month. In my home state of Oregon, wildfires set

new records this year, with almost 2 million acres burned.

Meanwhile, in my hometown, Eugene, we had the longest stretch of consecutive days when temperatures reached at least 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. It's hard for me to think about the world that I will leave to my grandchildren. So I look for what I can do, and believe it or not, there's hope right at the grocery store; buying organic can contribute to combating climate change. Organic farmers actually store carbon in the soil, meaning there's less in the air to change our climate.

A series of long-term studies mentioned below demonstrate that organic farming increases soil carbon. In other words, organic farming is carbon farming. Federal law defines organic farming as a farming method, so we know what we're buying. Organic farmers use cover crops, mulches, and crop rotations to build healthy soil. They utilize various techniques to prevent pest problems, using only certain pesticides, which have been thoroughly reviewed as a last resort. You can support carbon farming by buying organic.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2023 Synthesis Report states that carbon sequestration in agriculture has one of the highest potentials for reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Carbon sequestration, or carbon farming, uses farming techniques to increase soil carbon, keeping it out of the atmosphere (For more details about carbon farming and farmers who are using the method, see "How Land Use Is a Tool for Solving Climate Change" and "Carbon Farming: A Sustainable Agriculture Technique That Keeps Soil Healthy and Combats Climate Change.")

Referring to the IPCC recommendations, the World Economic Forum's November 2024 article states, "[E]nhancing soil carbon sequestration through regenerative agriculture could sequester up to 23 gigatons of carbon dioxide by 2050, a substantial portion of the mitigation required to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius."

Studies on Organic Farming and Soil Carbon—the Big Picture

Organic carbon farming has been documented by scientists for decades. In 2012, researchers from Switzerland, Scotland, and Italy published a meta-analysis of 74 studies that were pairwise comparisons of organic and conventional farms growing various crops around the world—from all continents except for Africa

and Antarctica. The researchers measured soil carbon in three ways (if the underlying study provided the necessary data): the soil carbon concentration, the amount of soil carbon per unit area, and the rate at which the soil carbon measurements changed. They found that for all three measurements, soil carbon was greater at the organic farms than conventional farms. They concluded that "organic farming has the potential to accumulate soil carbon."

Meanwhile, a 2017 study by Northeastern University and the Organic Center—which studied more than 1,000 soil samples from both organic and conventional farms across 48 states in the U.S.—"found that organic soils had 13 percent higher soil organic matter and 44 percent higher long-term carbon storage than conventionally managed soils."

Crops That May Be on Your Grocery List

Eating organic fruits and vegetables is better for the environment and has overall health benefits. "Not only does organic production help reduce public health risks, mounting evidence shows that food grown organically are rich in nutrients, such as Vitamin C, iron, magnesium, and phosphorus, with less exposure to nitrates and pesticide residues in organically grown fruits, vegetables, and grains when compared to conventionally grown products," states the Organic Trade Association.

Below is a list of popular items we regularly purchase from grocery stores. I chose these products because they are foods that most of us buy often. For each food, There is at least one study showing that choosing organic can help support carbon sequestration and, therefore, allows us to play our part in combating climate change:

Corn

A 2015 review article examined six long-term organic and conventional corn farming comparisons. Each study involved one site, with some plots managed organically and others managed conventionally. Four studies were done in the Midwest, one in California, and one in Maryland. All the studies grew corn in rotation with other crops. The studies were initiated between 1981 and 1998, and these plots had been continuously used for farming between 10 and 24 years when soil carbon was measured.

In five of the six studies, soil carbon capture increased in instances of organic

treatments compared to conventional treatments. (The one exception was a plot that used to be a dairy farm and had high soil carbon levels at the beginning of the study.) The review article concludes, "These results suggest that organic farming practices have the potential to reduce nitrate leaching, foster carbon sequestration, and allow farmers to remain competitive in the marketplace."

Wheat

An 11-year comparison of organic and conventional wheat farming (with other crops grown in rotation) in Nebraska found that soil organic matter (one way to measure carbon) was higher in the organic plots than in conventional plots.

Tomato (in rotation with corn)

California's Century Experiment has compared organic and conventional tomato (and corn) farming since 1993. Measurements of soil organic carbon showed that the concentrations in organic plots were two to three times higher than in the conventional plots. The study authors noted that the increases occurred throughout the soil profile, down to a depth of 6 feet.

Potato (in rotation with wheat and corn)

A long-term field study in Switzerland that compared organic and conventional farming systems showed that soil organic carbon was higher in the organic plots. The researchers collected soil samples over two decades after the experiment started. A study in Germany found that while carbon was sequestered in the organic plots for more than 15 years, in the conventional plots, the soil lost carbon.

Almonds

In 2018 and 2019, researchers in California compared eight conventional almond orchards with eight organic orchards. (The researchers identified the organic orchards as "regenerative," but all were certified organic.) The trees in the orchards had been growing for between three and 38 years. Total soil carbon was about 30 percent greater in organic orchards than in conventional orchards. The researchers concluded: "Our results support the notion that converting agriculture to regenerative systems could contribute to remediating several imminent global problems, including climate change diminishing water resources,

biodiversity loss, agricultural pollution, human health problems, and diminishing rural economies."

Strawberries (in rotation with broccoli and lettuce)

In 2004 and 2005, researchers, mainly from Washington State University, compared 13 pairs of organic and conventional strawberry farms in Watsonville, California. The farms had been either organic or conventional for at least five years. They found that the amount of carbon in the soil from organic farms was higher than 21 percent compared to conventional farms.

Apples

Scientists from Washington State University and the United States Agency for International Development compared conventional and organic apple production in a commercial orchard in the Yakima Valley. Trees were planted in 1994, and soil measurements were taken in 1998. At that time, soil organic carbon in the organic plots was about 15 percent higher than in the conventional plots.

Citrus

Two studies, one from Brazil and the other from Italy, showed that total organic soil carbon was higher in organic citrus orchards than in conventional orchards. The increase in soil carbon was 30 percent in the Italian study and 300 percent in some Brazilian measurements.

Extra Benefits
Organic farming benefits people who grow and harvest food because they are exposed to fewer pesticides. According to a 2024 study from California, researchers looked for seven common herbicides and two fungicides in carpet dust from homes in the Central Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area. The frequency at which each pesticide was detected and its amount increased in homes where larger amounts of pesticides were used nearby. None of these pesticides are used on organic farms.

"Our findings suggest that most of these herbicides and fungicides travel from the field via primary and secondary drift to homes in the surrounding area, potentially impacting the health of children and other vulnerable groups," the study published in Environmental International states.

Organic farming also benefits those of us who eat the food. In 2024, Consumer Reports (CR) analyzed pesticide contamination of 59 common fruits and vegetables. The data came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, spanning seven years, and included both conventional and organic produce. The analysis by CR found that pesticide contamination posed significant risks in 20 percent of conventional foods but in almost none of the organic foods. Eating more organic produce ensures a healthier diet.

Tackling a Global Problem With Personal Choices

Climate change is an enormous and complex problem, and the solutions are also complex. There's no single silver bullet that can fix the crisis, including carbon farming. Even its proponents state that converting power generation to solar or wind energy and reducing the destruction of natural ecosystems are more significant measures for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

However, while organic food is sometimes hard to find and more expensive, it is a relatively simple step that many of us can incorporate into our daily lives, providing a crucial opportunity to help mitigate climate change.

By Caroline Cox

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