



Saving Lives Through Smart Investments in Flexible Food Aid

Findings from the CARE Learning Tour to Niger

October 30 - November 4, 2016

From October 30 to November 4, a bipartisan group of House and Senate Congressional staffers and influential leaders from the public and private sectors traveled with CARE on a Learning Tour to Niger. The purpose of the tour was to see how U.S. investments in food and nutrition security are providing short-term food assistance to those in need and enhancing the resiliency and self-sufficiency of smallholder farmers and families. This trip to Niger, a country with alarmingly high poverty and malnutrition rates, provided the delegation a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the ability of food assistance programs to save lives and promote long-term food and nutrition security. Targeted U.S. investments in emergency food and nutrition security, as well as the long-term, sustainable development of local agricultural capacity, particularly empowering smallholder female farmers, not only help to meet immediate need but also harness the power of Nigeriens to provide for themselves, their families and their communities.



The delegation (from left to right): Alisha English, Mary Dee Beal, Ashley Osterkamp, Anne Cafer, Nicole McAllister, Emily Janoch, Alvaro Zarco, Rachael Leman, Mary Olive, Devin Mogler, Kristin Wells, Katherine Miller, Nicholas Rodman and Catherine Swoboda.

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► Day One: Why Niger? Setting the Context

Scene-Setter Briefing with Local Technical Experts

The Learning Tour began in the capital city of Niamey with a briefing by local technical experts, including Rotimyo Djssoja, CARE Niger country director; Viviane Van Steirteghem, Niger country representative for United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); and Charles Djrekpo, country director for the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The panelists provided an overview of the current food programming in Niger, where they emphasized several challenges that were evident throughout the trip. The major challenges included an estimated 80 percent rate of illiteracy among Nigeriens, a growing instability from regional security threats, climatic changes and shocks and an astonishingly high fertility rate of 7.6 children per Nigerien woman.

The group discussed the intersection of these issues and the impact they have on food and nutrition security, particularly the need to address population growth. As Viviane from UNICEF pointed out, economic growth driven by the agricultural sector is often eclipsed by population growth. For example, the economy grew at 4.4 percent in 2015, but the positive impact of this growth was largely counteracted by a comparable population growth of 3.9 percent that same year. The result is that many Nigeriens are left hungry and malnourished. A lack of proper nutrition particularly impacts women in Niger, who are often the first to go without food and frequently suffer from malnutrition while pregnant, resulting in underweight infants and the perpetuation of a cycle of malnutrition. The panelists also discussed the need for stronger agricultural infrastructure, much of which has recently been the target of attacks during regional conflicts, and how U.S. assistance is providing therapeutic nutritional interventions to the almost 450,000 children in Niger suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Tour of World Food Program (WFP) Warehouse

The delegation's first site visit was to a WFP warehouse where U.S. food assistance is stored and then shipped and distributed to vulnerable families throughout Niger. Belkacem Machane, WFP Niger deputy country director, greeted the group and explained their work to reach the more than 2 million Nigeriens facing chronic food insecurity and the 4.5 million Nigeriens at high risk for chronic food insecurity. WFP examines climate forecasts to assess the regions most vulnerable to shocks, visits vulnerable regions to assess local harvests and markets and determines whether commodities can be locally purchased.



Belkacem Machane, WFP Niger deputy country director, explains their process for local procurement at a WFP warehouse that stores millet.

If in-kind food assistance is necessary, U.S. food is transported from ports in Lome, Togo, to WFP regional substations in Niger for distribution. The delegation toured the WFP storage facilities while learning about the cooling, storage and mobilization techniques and discussing the criteria WFP uses to determine whether to buy locally or regionally; this is determined by factors such as the impact on the market, availability, quality and quantity of food grown by local farmers. The tour concluded with a discussion on nutrition and the role plumpynut, a USAID signature ready-to-use therapeutic food containing nutrients vital to healthy child development, plays in combatting malnutrition. As Belkacem stated, "the solution is to build the capacity of the population," and U.S. food assistance provides a life-saving stopgap.

Briefing with U.S. Mission in Niger

After touring the WFP warehouse, the delegation joined four experts from the U.S. Mission in Niger for lunch. Alfreda Brewer, USAID Niger representative, began the conversation by reiterating the challenges of high illiteracy rates and population growth in Niger. These factors are compounded by climatic shocks like droughts and flooding, a poverty rate where 80 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day, poor roads and infrastructure and weak institutional and policy support from the Nigerien government. USAID experts discussed their response to these issues, particularly programming to build the resilience and capacity at the local level.

Jennifer Karsner, agricultural development officer for USAID in Niger, explained that Niger usually receives rain for only four months in the year, leaving families dependent on food assistance for the other eight months. “USAID...implements programming to reduce those months of dependence and help move [Nigeriens] out of poverty,” she further explained. These programs focus on education and literacy, family planning, democracy and governance and food resilience.

“In Niger, when the success [and livelihood] of your children is based on luck...it makes sense to have so many children.”

Jennifer Karsner, agricultural development officer for USAID in Niger, discussing high population growth in Niger

Meeting with 3N—Nigeriens Nourish Nigeriens

To gain insight from local Nigerien government officials, the delegation met with 3N or Nigeriens Nourish Nigeriens, an interagency taskforce reporting to President Issoufou created by the Nigerien government to address food and nutrition insecurity in the country. Mahamane Sani Abdou, permanent secretary of the 3N Initiative, detailed the five priorities the initiative has been working on with each governmental sector that addresses the following: access to water, strengthening value chains, environmental protection, decreasing vulnerability to shocks and scaling up nutrition efforts. The delegation discussed with 3N partners their methods for defining and tracking shock and resilience, as well as how regional security threats impede their progress.



Devin Mogler (right) thanks deputy chief of mission Phillip Nelson (left) for welcoming the delegation to Niger and sharing more about the U.S. Mission's work to address hunger and malnutrition in the country.



Abdourahamane Hassane, democracy and governance development assistant specialist for USAID Niger, answers questions about the current security situation in Niger and how it impacts delivery of important aid and services.

Reception with the U.S. Ambassador to Niger

The delegation ended its first full day in Niger with a reception at the residence of U.S. Ambassador to Niger Eunice Reddick, along with government officials, development colleagues and private sector partners working on food security. Deputy chief of mission Phillip Nelson delivered brief remarks, welcoming the delegation and emphasizing the strong diplomatic relationship between the United States and Niger. Devin Mogler, legislative assistant for Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA), thanked the deputy chief for his hospitality and shared how excited the delegation was to see these issues up close and speak with program participants in the field.

“It’s one thing to read statistics and facts from your office in Washington, DC, but a very different thing to go out and see it firsthand.”

Devin Mogler, legislative assistant, Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA)

► Day Two: Understanding Flexibility in Food Aid Programming

Visit to Food Aid Distribution and Integrated Food Security Program

On Wednesday, the delegation flew two hours east to the Maradi region, where they were greeted by the governor of Maradi and then traveled to the N’Walla village to visit LAHIA, a five-year USAID-funded integrated development food aid program (DFAP). The LAHIA program not only supplies vulnerable families with emergency food assistance but has also integrated nutrition education as well as agricultural training. Implementing partner Nivo Ranaivoarivelo, with Save the Children, explained that the program aims to increase access to food, reduce stunting in children under five years old and promote nutritious diets for pregnant and lactating women.

After receiving this overview, the delegation split into two groups to have more in-depth conversations with two women who have benefited from the program, Aicha and Hawa. Aicha and Hawa explained that once they have a certificate from the health clinic proving they're pregnant, they become eligible for the LAHIA program, which ensures they are eating enough nutritious food, teaches them what a healthy diet looks like for an expectant mother and helps them monitor their weight and nutrition throughout their pregnancy. Once the baby is born, the program participants explained that the program encourages them to weigh their babies weekly to screen for malnutrition and trains women on how to cultivate and cook foods that will bolster their ability to breastfeed until the infant is six months old and then provide nutritious meals for a growing child beyond the first six months.

The unique LAHIA program, funded by both the Feed the Future and Food for Peace USAID accounts, has also integrated programming to support sustainable, local agricultural and nutritional progress. Delegates met Radi Maman, a local mother who demonstrated how she cooks the millet and moringa she grows with support from the LAHIA program into more nutrient-rich foods, like pasta and biscuits, that are healthy for her as a pregnant mother and that she can also sell to support her family. Radi shared some biscuits with the group before they proceeded to the community's moringa garden. The LAHIA project provided seeds and farmer training to women in a CARE Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) in the community who are now cultivating moringa, a locally grown tree whose leaves are rich with vitamin C, vitamin A, calcium, potassium and protein. The women shared with the delegation an iron-rich porridge and salad they make with the moringa leaves. As one beneficiary described, "With the project, now I know how to grow food and cook for my children. I have many recipes and I don't fear the health problems I used to." The LAHIA program shows what is possible when emergency food aid is coupled with community-driven, sustainable food security programming that empowers local communities and provides them with several different interventions.

"Whenever the project ends, whatever we have been taught about food, that knowledge remains with us."

Hawa Oumarou, beneficiary of USAID-funded LAHIA program



Community members prepare a nutrient-rich salad made from moringa leaves grown in their community garden.

Visit to Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Program

After leaving N'Walla Village, the delegation visited Sawki Safe Space program for empowering adolescent girls. The delegates heard from Aichatou Djmarou, gender specialist for Mercy Corps, about the nutrition education the girls receive and the challenges they face in Niger, including low rates of secondary education and the highest child marriage rate in the world. The girls, ages 12 to 18, meet weekly in a safe space with older female mentors to discuss overcoming these challenges and receive education on nutrition and reproductive health. Nafisa Assonwahe told her story of joining the group when she was 14 years old to learn about the connection between child marriage and poor maternal health outcomes. She is now learning how to cook with cowpea, millet, eggs and legumes to combat malnutrition. Delegates learned that the Sawki program's approach to integrating girls' empowerment and nutritional health is paying off; 94.7 percent of households who participated in the program produce two or more varieties of nutritious food in their gardens, and the average age of marriage in the community has increased from 16 to 19 years for girls.



Habsoula Aboubaer, a mentor to girls participating in the Sawki Safe Space program, explains her role working with parents, families and the community to advocate for the needs of adolescent girls.

Visit to Integrated Rural Agriculture Farmer Field School

The delegation ended their visit to Maradi by meeting women participating in a farmer field school (FFS) in the Danjadou village. Illa Almajir, a team leader with Mercy Corps, welcomed the delegation and explained that farmer field schools attempt to increase smallholder yields and productivity by fostering community-led solutions. The women in the FFS of Danjadou identified three major challenges to farming in their area: shortage of seeds, infertile soil and crop pests. The delegation followed Illa and a community facilitator into the women's millet field to see how they are being trained to overcome these challenges. Women in the FFS were taught to create test plots to experiment using different amounts of fertilizer and various biological controls and then observe which test plot produces the highest yield. Farmer field schools have succeeded with growing gardens and fields in communities who simply need support and training on how to increase productivity. Those coordinating the program emphasized that the flexibility to invest in locally sustainable solutions to food insecurity, such as farmer field schools, where appropriate, is critical to creating a self-sufficient, secure Niger.

“This was all made possible because of the flexibility we had after we ended monetization.”

Diallo Thierno Samba, Niger Country Director for Mercy Corps



The delegation ventures into a millet field at the farmer field school to learn how women are using new techniques to improve their food security, including using test plots to experiment with the timing and spacing of planting, fertilizer use and cultivation.

Taking Action Back Home

The delegation returned to Niamey Wednesday evening and ended their day with a closing dinner to reflect on the trip. Kristin Wells, senior director of government relations at CARE, led the conversation. She emphasized the need for different modalities and complementary programming to challenge food insecurity and make sure programs are locally sustainable and have lasting impact. She also discussed the intersections between food and nutrition insecurity and regional conflicts, insurgencies and global security. The group ended the dinner by discussing the need to amplify successes from the field and share the stories of the women they had met in Niger with their colleagues and friends back home.

“Women’s empowerment is just a complete game changer...you harness a whole new sector of the economy.”

Nicholas Rodman, professional policy staffer, Republican Study Committee

► Day Three: Building Resiliency and Local Agricultural Potential

Visit CARE Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) and Integrated Food Security Program

On the last day in Niger, the delegation drove an hour outside of Niamey to visit a CARE VSLA that includes integrated food security programming in the village of Benni Kanni. Hadiza Mamane, field manager with CARE, provided an overview of CARE's VSLAs, which are small community savings groups aimed at increasing economic opportunity and promoting female entrepreneurship. VSLAs, which first started in Niger in 1991, not only provide capital and savings to the unbanked but also provide women a safe and consistent space to discuss important issues in their lives. The delegation learned that this VSLA group often discusses the challenge of malnutrition in their community during their weekly meetings, an issue that CARE has offered support in. CARE assisted in bringing women from Maradi and Niamey regions to visit the Benni Kanni village and teach the group about nutrition for pregnant mothers and children, how to cook nutritious meals, intervention methods for severely malnourished children and farming and cultivation techniques.

After a short simulation of a VSLA group meeting, the delegation got to see these techniques in action by meeting Fati Sediku, a mother of two who joined the VSLA to learn how to address her children's malnutrition. Fati explained that before training, she thought her child's protruding stomach, a typical sign of malnutrition, meant he was full and healthy. Fati's children would get sick with diarrhea and were suffering from acute malnourishment because, although she gave them all the baobab leaves they could eat, she in fact was not feeding them a diverse diet that provided them with all the nutrients their bodies need to grow. The nutrition training provided through the CARE VSLA changed all of that. She learned about her children's nutritional needs and how to make nutritious porridge by combining baobab leaves with onions, tomatoes, cowpea, millet, salt and sugar.

The delegation then toured the women's baobab garden and learned that CARE provided seeds and cultivation training to increase yields to be sold for individual profit and enhance contributions to the women's cereal bank where they store cereal for local families. From seed, to cultivation, to profit, to building savings, to meeting family nutritional needs, the delegation observed how integrated food and economic security programs can empower Nigeriens to end cycles of poverty and malnutrition.



The delegation gets an opportunity to try porridge made by women in the VSLA program that aims to prevent and combat child malnutrition.

Roundtable Discussion on Cash Transfer Programs

After leaving the Benni Kanni village, the delegation returned to Niamey to have lunch with food and nutrition security experts Benoit Thiry, Niger country



Benoit Thiry, Niger country director for WFP, highlights the need to consider the state of local markets, the availability and quality of locally grown food and the financial resources of families when determining whether a cash transfer program will be effective in a community.

director for WFP, and David Kerespars, head of office for ECHO Niger. The two experts stressed the necessity of all the varied programming the delegates had seen, particularly the need for these programs to complement one another. If there are strong local markets but people can't afford to buy food, cash transfer programs may help feed the vulnerable without degrading local markets; if the agricultural potential is present but crop productivity is low, farmer training may create sustainable food security; if a community is suffering from a severe climatic shock wiping out crops, in-kind assistance may be necessary to save lives. The delegation discussed what works when and how community needs are fluid, often changing based on season, weather and population shifts.

"We have...different tools to address the same issue and we choose the tool that will work best."

Benoit Thiry, Niger country director, World Food Program

Tour of Flour Fortification Factory

The delegation ended the Learning Tour with an eye toward the future by visiting a regionally owned, locally run flour fortification factory that uses innovative techniques to combat malnutrition. Andre Pare, executive director for the Grand Moulin company, and Dr. Josette, Niger country director for Helen Keller International, briefed the delegation and escorted them on a tour of the factory. Delegates started on the top floor of the factory and followed the grains through sifters and roller mills grinding it into flour.

The flour is eventually taken to the factory lab where it is fortified with vitamin B, folic acid, iron, ascorbic acid and gluten. As Dr. Josette explained, these nutrients are critical yet often low in pregnant women and young children in Niger; by fortifying a food as basic as flour, the factory is helping to ensure that every meal in Niger is as nutritious as possible.

Conclusion

As the delegation saw, integrated and complementary short- and long-term solutions to food and nutrition security are critical for addressing the various underlying problems affecting undernourished and food insecure populations. Programs require the flexibility to respond to the needs of local communities, to feed the most people in the shortest amount of time and to build the capacity and sustainability of local farmers and markets.

Changes to emergency U.S. food aid programs would allow for better and more flexible responses to food crises, such as El Niño, with the option to buy locally when appropriate and to transport food as efficiently as possible to the communities in need. These program modifications would enhance lifesaving assistance and allow it to reach millions more people each year without additional costs. Smart policies will result in more people helped, communities that are better able to feed themselves and the advancement of America's core interests.

Policy Recommendations

Support Smart Foreign Assistance

U.S. foreign assistance is critical to building a stable and secure world. U.S.-funded programs produce real change in the lives of children and families living in extreme poverty and save lives during crises. By emphasizing self-reliance and sustainability, U.S. foreign assistance helps people help themselves.

One of the most important things the U.S. can do to fight global poverty is devote sufficient resources to these programs and ensure the U.S. is coordinated and effective in its response. The International Affairs budget is just 1 percent of the total federal budget, yet it helps to feed millions, reduces mortality for women and children and enables the U.S. to respond to humanitarian crises, including environmental shocks that cause food insecurity as we saw in Niger. While we recognize the significance of this difficult budget climate, CARE advocates for the U.S. to leverage its resources, coordinate its response and strengthen its support for the International Affairs budget and programming.



The delegation tastes locally produced flour that is fortified with vitamin B, folic acid, iron, ascorbic acid and gluten with the goal of preventing and combating malnutrition.

Modernizing U.S. International Food Aid

Since 1954, U.S. food aid programs have fed over 3 billion people. In a world of growing risk, climatic stress and increasing natural disasters, U.S. food aid programs can be enhanced so communities can better recover and become independent. With adjustments, we could feed 14.4 million more people with the same amount of expenditure.

Traditionally, the U.S. has shipped food from the U.S. to developing countries, and as we saw, sometimes in-kind food is necessary to address crisis needs where food is unavailable. However, the process of sending food from the U.S. can be expensive and slow and can create dependency. Crises are complicated and we need flexibility to respond with the right tools. Sometimes shipping food from the U.S. is the best option, and sometimes it is not. When food is available in regional markets but access is an issue, a response with vouchers allows for markets to function and recover and for assistance to be delivered to those in need.

Currently, a legal requirement called cargo preference requires that at least 50 percent of all food aid be shipped on U.S. flag ships, which cost approximately 2.7 times more than the average global shipping rate. This high-cost requirement diverts valuable resources away from purchasing food: As much as 30 cents of every food aid dollar goes to pay for transportation, not food. Shipping U.S. food takes on average 130 days, while buying local takes 56 days, a difference of over two months.

Local purchase—whether by an organization for distribution or by vulnerable households with cash or vouchers—also supports local economies and small-scale food producers.

CARE calls for enhancements of U.S. food aid programs that allow for a flexible response to emergency food needs, so that more people can be fed and communities can be put on a path toward recovery and independence. Enhancing the U.S. food aid system is a solution for today and tomorrow.

Supporting Long-Term Food and Nutrition Security

Eradicating hunger and malnutrition also requires empowering hungry people to grow or buy adequate nutritious food themselves. A comprehensive strategy is needed to coordinate U.S. programs that address agriculture, nutrition, changing climates and weather patterns, natural resource management and women's empowerment. Tackling the inequality that underpins poverty and hunger, particularly for women, must also be a priority. Many small-scale producers are women, yet they frequently lack equal access to

resources like land, credit and training. Research shows that if women had equal access, global hunger could be reduced by 100 to 150 million people.

Addressing hunger and malnutrition today and for the future also demands that programs integrate environmental considerations and build communities' capacity to adapt. Small-scale food producers, especially women, are vulnerable to changing climate, from rising temperatures to more unpredictable rainfall patterns. By sharing knowledge, access to weather information and sustainable agriculture practices, CARE helps build their capacity to manage uncertainty, protect natural resources and increase yields. Preliminary research results show that sustainable farming practices and improved crop varieties can increase yields up to 400 percent in three years.

CARE advocates for U.S. food and nutrition security programs to adopt a comprehensive approach that empowers the world's poorest women and their families to realize their right to nutritious food and protects the planet's resources for today and years to come.

We are deeply grateful to the many people who generously gave of their time to make this visit to Niger a success. CARE specifically thanks the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its generous financial support of the Learning Tours.

If you are interested in learning more about CARE's Learning Tours program, please contact:

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