

## Beyond Sporadic Solutions: Poverty in the West African Sahel

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**ABSTRACT:** The Sahel region experiences a recurrent cycle of famine and many people in the region face the stinking problem of poverty. This paper reviews the available literature to explore the reasons why the problem persists and what solutions or attempts have been made so far by governments, the international and local organizations, and the people themselves to address the issue. The literature shows that the region suffers mainly from the consequences of climate change and food shortage for an ever-growing population. Based on the theoretical and analytical approach, it is the contention of this study to support the claim that water shortage, inadequate food production which causes a historically high food import dependency, lack of access to the ports and low cost trade remains the stumbling blocks for any effort to foster economic growth in the Sahel. This paper argues that while historical factors of education are often overlooked when discussing the intricate causes of poverty in the developing countries of the Sahel region, geographical position remains the ill-fate of people living in the zone. With the current food crisis in the region, one would safely contend that the region appears far from attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Finally, this study suggests that a huge investment in creating artificial rivers, a dramatic change in people's mode of production in agriculture and livestock based on new techniques and methods, and at the same time holding accountable the people and their government would alleviate the dismal living conditions in which vegetate many people in the Sahel zone.

**Keywords:** the Sahel, Sub-Saharan Africa, hunger, poverty, development.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Sahel refers to the world largest semi-arid zone that stretches from Senegal to Sudan and Ethiopia right below the Sahara desert.



Source: Google map

The region is characterized by scarce and highly variable rainfall in time and space (Hein et al., 2011). This zone covers part of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in West Africa. While Senegal has access to the Atlantic Ocean, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are landlocked, very poor, and share the same colonial past, that of the French imperial misrule. All of these countries have 'hunger hotspots,' because a large proportion of their population suffer from chronic or persistent malnutrition and hunger with very low income (The Status of Food Security in Africa, 2011). Despite the fact that the region houses important quantities of natural resources and UN (2018, p.7) proclaims that it is one of the richest region in the world in terms of oil, gold and uranium, the Sahel remains the place where the poorest people of the globe live. Poverty and economic difficulties, in these nations, can be discussed at the socio-political and geographical levels. While "hunger is both damaging and

avoidable” (DeRose, 1998, p. 1), the current strategies appear inefficient to stop the persistence of hunger in the Sahel. People in the region witness all three levels of food problems discussed by DeRose (1998). Those levels of hunger range from food shortage (insufficiency in food needed by the population of a given region), food poverty (lack of enough food with a given household), and food deprivation (an individual consumes less nutrients than he/she needs). Today, with the current armed conflict in the region occasioning thousands of displaced people, the situation appears more worrisome than ever before.

### **A. Problem Statement**

Among the four poorest countries on the planet, three are located in the Sahel and they are landlocked (Trench, 2007, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2011). These countries face the interlocking problems of hunger and undernourishment together with an outspoken poverty. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) (2011) estimates that there is an increase of 24 million people who suffer from undernourishment due to an increase in prices of staple cereals in Sub-Saharan Africa from 2005 to 2007. The reporters lament that 25% of the world hungry people live in Sub-Saharan Africa which harbors 11% of world total population (The Status of Food Security in Africa, 2011). This paper explores the historical and remote causes of hunger and poverty in West African Sahel countries before it discusses the current challenges regarding the economic growth of the nations in the region. This study also aims at critically and analytically digging in the literature that displays the complexities of the challenges of hunger and poverty faced by people living in the Sahel region.

Although diseases like malaria are still an issue in the Sahel, hunger remains the most serious threat to people in the region. Despite the fact that hunger is difficult to measure, it raises “the question of whether people are getting enough to eat” (Millman, 1998, p. 20). The scope of hunger and poverty in the Sahel has reached an alarming level and the number of the poor keeps soaring. It is sad that “300,000 children under the age of five risk death from malnutrition every year in Sahel” (Strategies to Stop Sahel Starvation, p.3). Indeed, food shortage and lack of financial sources prevent people from getting the necessary diet for their daily lives. This situation is aggravated by natural hazards due to the climatic conditions which are not conducive to agricultural production. As a result, millions of people are reported to face hunger as natural hazards, namely drought and pest infestation, have occasioned poor harvest and emergency food stocks have been exhausted (Food Crisis Escalates in Africa’s Sahel Region, 2010). Wilson (2011), on the other hand, observes that while the persistence and gravity of malaria in the Sahel is seasonal, poverty and hunger affects millions of Sahelians every single day of the year. Hence, it appears urgent to enumerate and analyze the intricate causes of this natural disaster before proposing some solutions to remediate the issue.

### **B. Questions to Be Addressed**

With the ongoing suffering of people living in the Sahel, one would ask the following questions: can we talk about economic growth in a place in need of basic food supplies? What is the impact of the colonial economic system and education legacy on the dismal living conditions of people in the Sahel? Are the current efforts (in terms of food security and self-sufficiency) to stop hunger and poverty in the region efficient enough to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)? What are the significant strategies, if there is any, adopted by the Sahel governments to face the recurrent drought and food shortage? Is it possible to measure development and poverty based on the same standards between places that have universities and continual support in research since the beginning of the nineteenth century and those whose ‘formal education’ has started in the mid twentieth century under colonialism?

### **C. Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study is a review of the available literature on the overwhelming yet worrisome situation of the Sahel region. There is no field work or any questionnaire or interview. The secondary resources dealing with the issue of poverty and hunger in the Sahel are explored through analytical approach which is the leading theoretical underpinning of the research.

## **II. UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF HUNGER AND POVERTY IN THE SAHEL**

Despite the so called historical support and help from IMF, World Bank, and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), poverty and hunger in the Sahel, have historical, geographical, and structural causes, and many attempts have been made to fight the problem. Food crisis and poverty in the Sahel stem from colonial indelicacy to the geographical position of the area together with the structural failures of the government and aid relief agencies to implement sound solutions to the problem. Historically speaking, the Sahel region was stuck into a notorious educational system which was set up to satisfy the colonizer in the detriment of the region (Sabatier, 1978). Then, the Sahel, like other African regions has inherited a colonial cash crop agriculture which

not only impoverishes the soil but also creates a recurrent import dependency on food products (Pitcher, 1991; Davidson, 1984). Analysts like Rodney (1974) cogently demonstrate the negative impact of colonialism on the African socio-economic and political system and the extent to which colonial exploitation of the continent will be felt in its entire economic structure for generations. Indeed, the European industries demand for raw material like cotton, peanut, cocoa, and other non food products urges the African farmers to replace their maize, cassava, yam, beans, and other food stuff by the mentioned industrial products. Lamentably enough, Davidson (1984) stresses, the price of those products is not determined by the African farmers. As a result, the money they get from their products remain ridiculously derisory to buy the manufactured goods imported from Europe.

This change in agricultural products, Sheihk Anta Diop argues in Davidson (1984), has created a long-held problem of dependency on European imported products. Pitcher (1991) contends that the continually wide (in terms of space and quantity) production of the cash crop mercilessly deteriorates the soil and even if the farmers change those products by the ones to supply their needs in nutrition, they need help to fertilize the over-exploited soil. This situation clearly shows colonial legacy not only creates poverty but it maintains many Africans hungry or undernourished working manually in their farms. This living condition generates a cycle of generations living in dismal conditions because “an undernourished manual worker is likely to be less productive than a well-nourished one, to need longer breaks between periods of effort, to be able to work fewer hours per day, and to need to spend more of his non-working time resting” (DeRose, 1998, p. 8).

However, beyond colonial legacy, the stubborn hunger and poverty problem in the Sahel originates from the unfavorable weather, the geographical position of the region, and structural failures. The harsh weather in the Sahel, to begin with, could partly explain the low agricultural production in the region. Though DeRose (1998) has strived to explain the cause of low productivity in the Sahel, he fails to explain that the condition of the weather remains a major factor in assessing the work performance of people living in one of the most hostile weathers of the world. In the Sahel, the temperature can easily culminate to 40 degree Celsius during the day, and with the absence of air condition technology, the heat causes general body fatigue resulting in a mediocre work performance. Also, the high variation, temporal and spatial, of rainfall makes it difficult to better predict which type of strategy to adopt. Hein (2011) Explains the rain use efficiency (RUE) process in the Sahel by showing that the fewer the vegetation, the more arid the soil becomes because the rainfall water evaporates quickly leaving the soil dry and unprotected. He argues that further study needs to be done because it is not clear whether widespread ecological dilapidation occurs in the Sahel and causing the unpredictable natural hazards like drought.

In a similar vein, the Sahel region like other African countries’ slower growth, when compared to other developing countries, is due to scarcely deficient infrastructure and unfavorable geography (Sachs, 2005). Indeed, the Sahel presents small opportunity for food production and most of the countries in the region are landlocked with little opportunity to participate in low cost trade. Also, the soil, in the region, which is impoverished since during the colonial period when Africans were coerced to intensively and continually grow cash crops (Pitcher, 1991), has become less and less fertile especially with its excessive use by a ever-growing population. Despite the fact that soil fertility decline over time is difficult to evaluate and to estimate, population pressure (mostly rural living on agricultural products with rudimentary techniques) makes the soil quality deplete (Ridder, et al, 2004; The Great Green Wall Initiative of the Sahara and the Sahel, 2008). Trench (2007) has found that in the Sahel, people tend to equate vulnerability to poverty and that vulnerability has two main types of causes: temporary and structural. Hence, the weather and ecology partly explain the ongoing plight of people in the Sahel.

Another complex cause of the economic difficulties in the Sahel remains structural failures mostly stemming from corruption and poor policies. The Sahel region leadership appears incapable of implementing sound policies to address the issue of hunger and poverty in the region. This leadership is not very different from that of other African countries as a whole whereby politicians engage in squandering and embezzling the meager resources they have and in some cases the borrowed money. For instance, Mills (2010) courageously opines that “African leaders—not a lack of capital, access to world markets, or technical expertise—are to blame for the continent’s underdevelopment” (p. 2). He continues to support that the political elite become rigid to reforms because they benefit from the status quo. Similarly, Mbembe (2001), in his theory of ‘zombification,’ demonstrates that blatant corruption and lack of frugality in Africa appears more outspoken when African leaders and their supporters engage themselves in festivities through which the little asset the country has is squandered. For him, corruption in Africa resides not only within the leadership but within the society as well. The same claim has been made by Bayart (2010) when he observes that the general public in Africa is not

innocent when it comes to bribery and corruption because politicians share some of their money with commoners. In addition, poor policies and governance further complicate the situation in the region. Trench (2007), for instance, finds that dependence on natural resources, “lack of economic opportunity” together with “population increase, drought frequency, poor access to services, poor governance, and inequitable markets” remain the roots of vulnerability in the Sahel (Trench, 2007, p.6).

In a related development, the free market system remains one aspect of structural arrangements that does not favor settling the problem of hunger and poverty in the Sahel. Indeed, the free market, as supported in “Strategies to Stop Sahel Starvation,” makes the poorest hungrier and increases poverty while food traders gain more and more profit. Citing the report: “Sahel: A Prisoner of Starvation”, the article mentioned above reveals that “in July 2005, a Nigerian farmer paid more for a kilogram of millet at the local market than a European or an American consumer paid for a kilogram of rice in the supermarket” (Strategies to Stop Sahel Starvation, 2005, p.3). This claim challenges Mills (2010) who advocates for more liberalization of the economy in Africa. Another structural failure resides in the poor policies implemented by the government of the region who behaves like beggars. Those governments without critical questioning welcome the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and globalization. Yet, SAPs and globalization have proven more harmful to Africa (Obademi, 2010; Godwyll & Malcalm, 2008; Wafula, 2008; Dadzie, 2008; Brobbey, 2008). Today, the region is trapped in a cycle of debts and the dicta of international financial institutions which further plunge the countries in poverty.

Beyond these structural frameworks, psychological propaganda and hegemonic paradigm prevent rich countries and investors to fully address the issue and these paradigms further obscure the problem. Viewed from the outside, African poverty stems from the African lack of modern values and morals. However, Sachs (2005) clearly shows the fallacy of this statement by arguing that Africa has suffered so much from a hegemonic paradigm, which has been created to foster the exploitation of the continent. This attitude towards the African people has created a feeling of dependency in them as they become the importers of manufactured European goods. Similarly, the case study of the Old Peanut Basin of Senegal clearly demonstrates the ability and willingness of specific groups of farmers to benefit from and participate in environmental services in enhancing the soil fertility and production in their effort to reduce poverty in the region (Tschakert, 2007). This study reveals that the Sahelian people mostly living in the rural areas are ready to work and improve their living conditions, but they lack access to opportunity due to the failed policies of their governments. Hence, the stereotypical claim of laziness does not hold when it comes to demonstrate the origin of the societal uneasiness of the Sahel region. The alarming conditions of the masses in the region urge the implementation of adequate solutions to the problem.

### **III. CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOLVE HUNGER AND POVERTY PROBLEM IN THE SAHEL**

The fight against hunger and poverty in the Sahel should take into consideration how to undo the hegemonic paradigm that keep Africans dependent on import products and redefining new policies and approaches to the problem. Munang and Nkem (2011) cogently shows that sustainability and food security by prioritizing small food producers together with small scale food production which reposes on the direct need of local people should be implemented because it appears “better than an agenda which raises aggregate food production in large units serving the global markets” (p. 1515). They go on to stress that to fully face the food crisis the governments and partner organizations in Africa need to implement “proper planning, transparent resource management, innovative food security policies, and integrative agriculture inputs and outputs” (Munang & Nkem, 2011, p. 1512). It is high time for Africans to sit and define strategies to solve their own problems because nobody will do it at their place as each nation of the rich world has its priorities.

Unless governments step in and secure the prices of staple cereals like in China, the poor will continue to be hungry. The writers of the report “Strategies to Stop Sahel Starvation” contend that departure from liberalization appears one solution to reduce poverty and stop hunger in the region. Sachs (2005) has optimistically demonstrated that there is still a broad possibility to end extreme poverty around the world. He starts his contention by showing the six major kinds of capital that needs investment, but which the poor lack: human capital, business capital, infrastructure, natural capital, public institutional capital, and knowledge capital. He goes on to stress that because the poor countries are trapped in poverty due to the fact that their population grows faster than their capital per person accumulation, they need substantial foreign assistance that lasts long enough to “jump-start the process of capital accumulation” (Sachs, 2005, p. 65) and economic growth. Sachs further opines that with a strong will and determination poverty can be overcome. To back up this contention, he

gives a number of examples of wonderful large scale achievements in eradicating diseases, controlling the population growth, achieving financial success, producing sufficient food, and caring for child survival. This kind of scaling up is still possible in the extremely poor places, but it needs “appropriate and widely applicable technology, organizational leadership, and appropriate financing” (Sachs, 2005, p. 69).

Therefore, what the Sahel region needs is substantial aid, not unfounded judgment and biases, for its economic growth and the eradication of poverty throughout the continent. But, is the greedy capitalist world voluntarily ready to accept some sacrifice on their tax to support the needy? To cope with future shocks, the Sahel region needs a substantial funding for long term projects. The currently short-term emergency responses to the problem have proven inefficient to solve the crisis in the region (Trench, 2007; Strategies to Stop Sahel Starvation, 2005). Planning for drought, which has become a natural reality, not an unpredictable hazard, should be at the core of any effort for development. For Trench (2007), those “plans need to include reducing the impact of drought, and increasing both resilience to drought and the ability to recover from it” (p. 6). Building artificial rivers may buffer the problem of water shortage and help farmers produce more food on the edge of those rivers.

Decentralization constitutes another alternative in the struggle against vulnerability in the Sahel because it helps hold accountability and fosters greater local representation in decision making process (FAO, 2011; Trench, 2007). This administrative approach has shown some success in Niger where it has been implemented since 2001. To reduce corruption in the government, civil society should be encouraged and should be as independent as possible so that it can play its role of watchdog of the state actions (Annin, 2008). Another long term solution is proposed in The Great Green Wall Initiative of the Sahara and the Sahel (2008) which concentrates on sustainable natural resource conservation, it goes beyond the solution proposed by the so-called development projects and programs which focus on infrastructure and income generating action without taking into consideration the degradation of natural resources and soil together with the harmful decline in agricultural production. Ridder et al. (2004) observes, however, that food security has improved in the 1990s thanks to the use of fertilizers and strategies for soil management which remains one of the solutions to reduce hunger and poverty in the region. The report, The Status of Hunger in Africa (2011), further suggests that though the governments have adopted various solutions (macroeconomic - fiscal and trade) to deal with the immediate consequences of the increase in food prices, these solutions should take into consideration the interest of both, the farmers and non-farmers, people living in the city and the villagers, and a sustainable development of agriculture, which can supply the markets with affordable basic food commodities. This objective can be achieved by “diversifying agricultural production and boosting agricultural productivity” (The Status of Hunger in Africa, 2011, p. 28).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A lot has been said on the issue of hunger and poverty in the Sahel, what really matters is the governments’ willingness and seriousness to fully address the problem by implementing adequate reforms that would benefit the entire population. Unless when Africans come together and take care of their problems by themselves and undo the established hegemonic paradigms by showing the opposite of the assumption that they are backward people, then, one can talk about real development in the region. Indeed, the effort of international financial institutions has proven favorable to the capitalist world agenda of exploitation and expropriation, not for the benefit of the developing world. African nations need to stop their begging attitude to solve their problem through their own well-thought strategies together with serious partners who are willing to help.

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