

SEPTEMBER 2022










# CRS Sahel Humanitarian Response Strategy

WEST AFRICA REGIONAL OFFICE | 2023-2025





## The Sahel in Crisis: Key Numbers

-  14 million people in need of humanitarian assistance
-  5.4 million people in food crisis or emergency
-  2.8 million children acutely malnourished
-  2.5 million people displaced internally, 1.9 million of whom are in Burkina Faso
-  6,500 schools closed
-  5,728 fatalities from political violence\*
-  14% of humanitarian response funded

Source: [Mali](#), [Niger](#), and [Burkina Faso](#) (accessed June 2022).  
\*ACLED (2021 data, accessed July 2022)



Cover: Hama Dicko is living in a camp after violence forced him from his home in Bankass, Mali in 2019. CRS provided him with cash assistance to purchase food and supplies. Photo by Annika Hammerschlag/CRS.

## THE CENTRAL SAHEL CRISIS: OVERVIEW

The violent conflict in the Central Sahel is rooted in historic grievances, inequitable management of resources, disaffection of populations, and more recent interjections of violent extremism. The sharply worsening conflict in the Central Sahel, the mass displacement it's caused, and a new global hunger crisis have created a humanitarian catastrophe in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2022. The conflict is defined by deadly attacks on civilians and community leaders, human rights violations, targeting of lifegiving infrastructure like water sources, vigilante and intercommunal violence, and unpredictable volatility. Gender-based violence, including forced and child marriage, physical and sexual violence, and sexual exploitation, threaten the safety and agency of those trapped by the conflict or fleeing it. According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, [an estimated 2,050 civilians have died in the first 8 months of 2022, more than in all of 2021.](#)

Almost 3 million people have fled violence, some multiple times and with little warning. Often unable to carry assets with them, they are not able to meet basic survival needs. Most of those fleeing remain within their country's borders as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or have sought refuge in a neighboring country. Hence, the burden of caring for the displaced remains largely within the region. The global hunger crisis, linked to market pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 war in Ukraine, is exacerbated by displacement and conflict which interrupts local agricultural production and pastoralists' access to pasture and waterpoints. In some isolated locations like Djibo and Dori in



Burkina Faso, acute food insecurity spiked when markets and humanitarian aid were totally cut off by conflict.

Although communities across the Sahel largely welcome the displaced and share limited resources, overcrowding and prolonged hosting increases pressure on host communities' livelihoods and well-being. Temporary displacements have become long-term, ad-hoc settlements on host communities' seasonally farmed land, in public buildings like schools, or in overcrowded neighborhoods with limited water, sanitation, and other services. The displaced, hosts, and all conflict-affected communities face extended loss of livelihoods, education, and resilience.

## THE CENTRAL SAHEL CRISIS: OVERVIEW, CONT'D

Conflict dynamics in the Central Sahel aggravate existing inter-community tensions across ethnic and livelihood groups such as ecological disputes between settled farmers and pastoralists, or feed ethnic reprisal violence by identity-based militias and community self-defense groups. Persistent violence and destruction of already limited infrastructure and services particularly affects the most vulnerable including women, children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other groups. Schools across the Central Sahel are shut down, reducing children and parents' social support and causing loss of formal education for a generation of children, with cascading effects on their future livelihoods. Acute trauma and accumulative stress weigh heavily on the population.

Although numerous root causes of the Central Sahel crisis have simmered for decades, including pervasive inequality, persistent poverty, and ecological degradation, the conflict erupted in 2012 when nationalist and jihadist movements in northern Mali began a war for control of the country's northern territory, activating an international military response. Over the next decade, the conflict increased in scale and complexity, as attacks by Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliated non-state armed groups (NSAGs) surged. The conflict spilled into the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger known as Liptako-Gourma. While national security forces mostly retain control of urban areas, rural zones—with their gold mines and other illicit sources of financing—have been attacked or are under NSAGs' control.

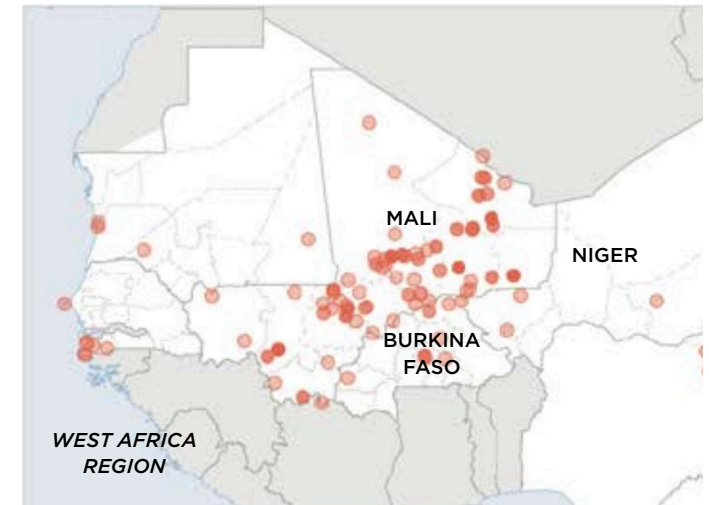
In 2019, the scale and toll of the conflict escalated, especially in Burkina Faso, which became the epicenter of violence and displacement. Military officers, frustrated by ineffective responses, led coups d'état in Mali in 2020 and 2021 and in Burkina Faso in 2022, while an attempted coup failed in Niger in 2021. The international community temporarily imposed sanctions on Mali from January to July 2022. Recently, the crisis has expanded southward, impacting Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin.



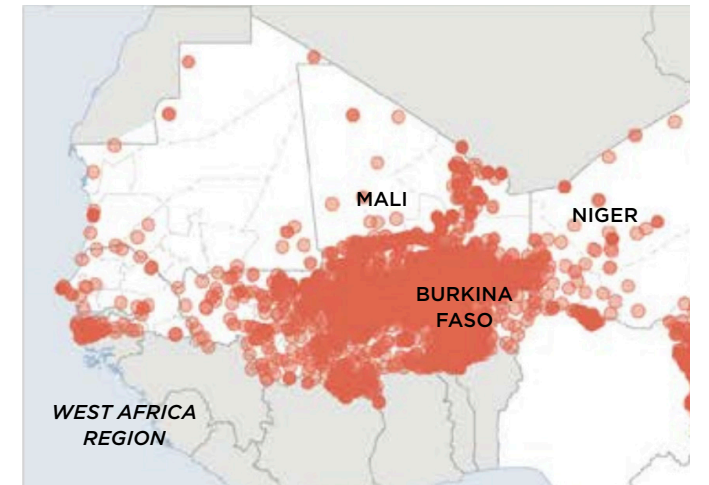
Displaced community members in affected areas of Burkina Faso receive essential living supply and hygiene kits from CRS. Photo by Olympia de Maismont/CRS.

### Security Situation Trend

January - December 2015



January - December 2021



Each red dot represents a security incident, including battles, explosions, violence against civilians, and property destruction in the Sahel region. As the spread of red indicates, almost all of Burkina Faso's borders have become a front line in conflict. Source: OCHA, [Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview](#), 2022.



## KEY DYNAMICS OF THE SAHEL CRISIS

Conflict in the Sahel spans a decade, with instability, displacement, and food insecurity across the region intensifying since 2019. The complex, multidimensional humanitarian crisis in the Sahel is characterized by instability, fed by deteriorating social inclusion, and exacerbated by international neglect and access constraints.

### Protracted Crises Intensified by Shocks

For decades, the Sahel has been marked by inequality, underdevelopment, poverty, and recurrent droughts and famine. Climate-change related weather events, including more intensive droughts, flooding, reduced arable land, and turbulent global markets, further contribute to the food insecurity of millions living in the Sahel. Communities face an uncertain and precarious existence as they face protracted ecological and economic crises punctuated by new shocks such as violent attacks and exactions by NSAGs.

In the immediate aftermath of a shock – a sudden conflict, displacement, or natural disasters – vulnerability dramatically increases. Affected communities require rapid support to survive, recover essential needs, and live in safety and dignity.

In prolonged displacement related to the crisis, families may be unable to return home but also unsure how or even if to put down roots in a host community. Whether displaced or living in host or conflict-affected communities, these populations need ongoing humanitarian support to rebuild their lives and to look to the future. This support includes healthy and ecologically sound shelter and settlements with secure land tenure, basic services, food security, and ecologically sound livelihoods that do not further degrade limited natural resources.

### Breakdown of Civil Society and Social Cohesion

Violent extremist groups infiltrate spaces where the social contract between the state and citizens is weak or non-existent, such as in marginalized, peripheral border regions. They cooperate with other criminal groups such as illegal gold miners, poachers, or traffickers, who also have an interest in maintaining state absence or weakening state presence. Lack of confidence in the role of the state or the strength of the economy can lead socially excluded groups like youth to turn toward violence. At every level, individuals and communities need support to build trauma resilience, repair relationships, and transform conflict to build a peaceful future.

### A Need for Locally Led, Sustainable Solutions

Humanitarian assistance in the Sahel is inadequate and poorly adapted to the scale, diversity, and continuously evolving nature of the needs. Norwegian Refugee Council lists the crises in Mali and Burkina Faso amongst [the world's most neglected crises](#). OCHA reports that, halfway through the year, the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plans for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are only 14% funded. Humanitarian access is limited as aid workers are targets for kidnappings and victims of roadblocks, carjackings, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) laid on highways. Remote communities most at risk are the least accessible by international aid actors. Local organizations are sometimes the only ones able to reach the most vulnerable communities and provide life-saving assistance. However, many local and national organizations in the Sahel are under-resourced, limiting their effectiveness and reach.



Madina Minta, 39, and her daughter Awa Minta, 4, have been living at a camp for displaced people in Mopti, Mali, since fleeing conflict. CRS provided them with cooking supplies and cash transfers, which allowed them to purchase food and clothing. Photo by Annika Hammerschlag/CRS



Talata Dicko, 15, fled from her home near Bankass, Mali in November 2019 after armed men attacked her village and burned it to the ground. She's been living at a camp for displaced people in Mopti, Mali ever since. CRS provided her family with cash upon their arrival, which allowed them to purchase food and clothing. Photo by Annika Hammerschlag/CRS

## CRS RESPONSE

The Sahel Crisis requires a well-coordinated, rapid, and robust humanitarian response to save lives, reduce suffering, build resiliency, and support social cohesion and peacebuilding. CRS and local partners address both shocks and longer-term precarity. Layered, sequenced, holistic programs respond to shocks with life-saving rapid assistance where and when it is most needed, while supporting dignified recovery in face of the unknown so families can construct a foundation on which to build a future. Links with CRS' ongoing development and peacebuilding programs support communities to break the cycle of poverty, instability, violence, and exclusion, so they may live peacefully and resiliently in their new reality, whether that means returning to their place of origin or fully integrating into a new community.

| All people in the Sahel survive and thrive in the face of disasters and conflict |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
|  | Humanitarian Response Strategy   |  | Nexus with Development and Peacebuilding   |
|  | SO 1: Populations affected by a shock receive timely and dignified life-saving assistance where and when it is most needed   | SO 2: Populations in protracted crisis build the foundations of a healthy, safe, and dignified life that allows them to look forward to the future   | SO 3: Populations affected by shocks and protracted crises integrate peacefully into their communities and develop resilience in the new reality |
| <b>Homes and Communities</b>   | IR 1.1: Vulnerable populations have safe and dignified shelter, water, sanitation, and hygienic living conditions after a shock  | IR 2.1: Vulnerable populations in protracted crisis live in healthy and ecologically sound settlements with access to basic services and secure land tenure  | IR 3.1: All social groups live in flourishing settlements and have sustainable access to social and basic services that meet their needs         |
| <b>Basic Needs</b>   | IR 1.2: Vulnerable populations have timely and dignified access to basic needs after a shock   | IR 2.2: Vulnerable populations in protracted crisis restore or create livelihoods that are ecologically sound<br>IR 2.3: Vulnerable populations in protracted crisis improve their food security and nutrition | IR 3.2: All social groups are food secure and practice environmentally sustainable livelihoods   |
| <b>Psychosocial Support, Social Cohesion, Peace</b>                              | IR 1.3: Vulnerable populations receive basic psychosocial support after a shock  | IR 2.4: Vulnerable populations in protracted crisis develop and use strategies to build trauma resilience and peacefully manage community conflicts  | IR 3.3: All social groups develop and use mechanisms for peaceful coexistence  |
| <b>Local Leadership</b>  | IR 1.4: Local humanitarian actors have the operational capacity and systems to respond to the lifesaving needs of vulnerable populations after a shock   | IR 2.5: Local humanitarian actors directly participate in humanitarian response and coordination, and access and manage donor funds  | IR 3.4: Local humanitarian actors have resilient institutional capacity to lead appropriate humanitarian response to the communities they serve  |
| <b>Transversal Approaches</b>  | IR T1: Populations affected by a shock or in protracted crisis and the most vulnerable groups within them, including women, girls, and people living with disabilities, receive assistance that guarantees safety, dignity, and meaningful access to humanitarian assistance |  |  |
|  | IR T2: Humanitarian interventions prioritize market-based solutions including social and sustainable sourcing that help local economies to recover, while respecting environmental limits  |  |  |

## CRS RESPONSE

### Homes and Communities

CRS promotes a people-centered [Settlements Approach](#) that is area-based, multisector, and multi-stakeholder. People's spiritual, social, and physical needs are interconnected, as are the systems and structures that support them. A shelter far from a latrine or water point would not be a home, as it would make the activities of everyday life inconvenient, undignified, and dangerous. Secure land tenure eases precarity and stress. Social services like education and healthcare cement a home within a community.

### Basic Needs

After a shock, well-coordinated rapid assistance to meet food, assets, and a household's other [basic needs](#) ensures survival and resilience, reducing pressure to adopt negative coping strategies. Recovering lost livelihoods or starting anew enables people to meet their own needs over time, building autonomy and dignity and integrating youth and IDPs into the economy. Holistic approaches to food security support income generation, climate smart agriculture, diversified local diets, WASH, and nutrition for rebounding after crisis on what CRS calls a [Pathway to Prosperity](#).

### Psychosocial Support, Social Cohesion, Peace

CRS' [Ties That Bind](#) social cohesion curriculum repairs social fabric torn by shocks and frayed by protracted crisis through sequenced, community-level trainings. *Binding* activities include psychological first aid and psychosocial support to build trauma resilience. *Bonding* activities strengthen relations within an identity group through dialogue and collaboration. *Bridging* activities bring together identity groups to interact purposefully in a safe space to weave a shared vision of a peaceful future.



CRS provides shelter training to local masons in Burkina Faso for families who have been displaced by the compounding issues of conflict and drought. Photo by CRS/staff.



## CRS RESPONSE, CONT'D

### Local Leadership

Local and national organizations in the Sahel are often the first actors that people turn to for humanitarian assistance. They are likely to have first-hand knowledge of the context, trust of affected people, and personnel and facilities already in place near to the crisis. In the Sahel, while external access to isolated urban populations may be impeded by insecure rural zones and roads targeted for attacks and IEDs, local organizations are embedded within these communities, acting as first responders and sometimes the *only* responders able to reach the most vulnerable communities.

Local leadership of humanitarian response in the Sahel is life-giving. However, many local and national organizations in the Sahel may not have previous humanitarian experience or expertise; may lack stable, long-term funding to maintain response capacity in between grants or may face barriers to accessing and managing funding according to institutional donor requirements; and may not have in place the staffing, operational capacity, policies, and procedures necessary to manage emergency responses at the scale the region now requires.

Rooted in Catholic Social Teaching, CRS is committed to the principle of subsidiarity: the understanding that communities, which are the closest to local challenges, are the artisans of their own development. Strengthening the capacity of local actors in the Sahel is the most effective, socially just, and sustainable response to the Sahel Crisis. In fulfillment of CRS' commitments to localization of humanitarian response through the [Grand Bargain](#) and [Caritas Internationalis](#), CRS applies its [Partnership and Capacity Strengthening approach](#) to support local leadership of humanitarian response.

CRS projects like the BHA-funded **Rapid Response Fund** and multi-donor **Empowering Partner Organizations Working on Emergency Responses (EMPOWER)** support CRS' capacity building approach by providing institutional strengthening, capacity building, and accompaniment of local humanitarian actors. When a new shock arises, participating partners can trigger an Emergency Alert to activate direct funding mechanisms to provide critical disaster relief assistance to the vulnerable, and often remote, communities they serve.

### The Sahel Peace Initiative: Transformational Peace Through Local Leadership

In the spirit of Pope Francis' social encyclical, [Fratelli Tutti](#), CRS supports the West Africa Episcopal Conference to scale up peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions and amplify its compelling, interreligious vision for peace and reconciliation in the Sahel. Led by Bishops in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, and Niger, **the Sahel Peace Initiative**, launched in 2019, has:

- Engaged 4,000 community members in collective community building actions such as dialogues, community service, and peaceful marches
- Delivered life-saving humanitarian assistance to 27,300 individuals
- Trained a network of over 700 youth as peace ambassadors
- Trained 112 regional journalists in conflict sensitive reporting

### The Triple Nexus: Links with Peacebuilding and Development

Committed to promoting Integral Human Development, CRS deploys a range of technical approaches to address the holistic and evolving needs of communities. In the Sahel, CRS adapts development programs like its **McGovern Dole Food for Education** school canteen programs and **Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSa)** programs to reach vulnerable populations in areas impacted by conflict as part of an integrated approach building on humanitarian assistance to respond to evolving needs. CRS development programs address the root causes of persistent poverty by addressing food security and livelihoods, natural resources management, education, governance, and healthcare.

To ensure that the gains people experience recovering from crises are not jeopardized by social fissures, CRS invests in peacebuilding and social cohesion to cultivate healthy social relations characterized by inclusion, equity, and participation. Through the **Sahel Peace Initiative**, CRS supports the Episcopal Conferences (ECs) in five West Africa countries to build lasting solutions to the Sahel conflict. CRS supports ECs to raise awareness of the conflict in national, regional, and international fora, to advocate for durable solutions, and to provide humanitarian assistance in their communities, amplifying the peaceful voice and convening power of the local Church while simultaneously responding to the acute needs of displaced and vulnerable families.



## TRANSVERSAL APPROACHES

### Safe and Dignified Programming

CRS' [Safe and Dignified Programming Framework](#) promotes meaningful access, accountability, safety, and dignity in all humanitarian response activities. CRS applies existing standards to ensure the integration and inclusion of gender, youth, disability, and protection considerations with the development of protection risk analysis and risk mitigation plans; active and inclusive community engagement in all stages of the program cycle; feedback, complaints, and response mechanisms (FCRM); mapping of protection actors for referrals; training first responders in psychological first aid; training and holding staff accountable for conduct including safeguarding and prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation (PSEA); and coordination and advocacy, including active participation in the Protection Cluster.

Needs and capacities of women, men, girls and boys and vulnerable groups such as elderly people and persons with disabilities are identified and assistance is targeted accordingly. Specific practices include approaches to registration that enhance safety and equity, such as registering each wife and her children in a polygamous household separately to reduce the potential for intra-household conflict; budgeting to support accessibility accommodations, as recommended in the [Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and Persons with Disabilities](#); and, adapting activities to promote women's inclusion, for example by respecting women's time burdens, adjusting choice of crops or construction activities, and provision of childcare.

### Market-Based Solutions and Social and Sustainable Sourcing

CRS strategically employs multiple modalities for program and supply chain activities to balance quality and efficiency with opportunities to circulate aid dollars within affected communities for wider economic recovery, while ensuring procurement and modality decisions do not harm fragile ecosystems. Market assessments, response analysis, and price monitoring are systematically conducted as part of project design, including rapid responses, to select the most appropriate assistance delivery modality for the context and program goals and to identify and mitigate price or supply distortions that could negatively impact the wider community.

- Social Sourcing is a purposeful investment in an impacted area by procuring from local, smaller, and medium suppliers or service providers. It may mean accepting a price markup or inefficiencies in exchange for localized benefits, like hiring laborers from both the host and IDP community to promote social cohesion.
- Multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) allows households to prioritize amongst their unique, diverse, and multiple needs while vouchers and in-kind distributions ensure quality standards and program goals are met, or support access to essential items not available locally or that may not be prioritized by household decision-makers, like menstrual hygiene management kits.
- Conditional cash plus livelihoods approaches can control for quality while supporting economic resilience and integration. For example, some CRS shelter programs use conditional cash for construction paired with training for skilled local laborers to enhance skills and create a customer base for local masons.

## DUTY OF CARE FOR STAFF AND PARTNERS

The Sahel Crisis context is particularly insecure, chaotic, and charged with communal and political violence, so care for CRS and partner team members is central. CRS and local partners' principled, contextualized approach to humanitarian access enables durable, long-term programming in hard-to-reach communities, reflective and supportive of rooted, sustainable relationships in the communities we serve. Detailed, active monitoring and in-depth networking informs daily and strategic risk mitigation and adaptive management, while regular capacity strengthening for staff and partner organizations builds preparedness over time. Staff wellbeing trainings and activities support CRS and partner teams to manage stress and help others to do the same. CRS cultivates a workplace culture rooted in CRS agency values of Respect, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) to ensure that internal systems and structures are congruent with CRS' vision and mission.



Hadi Moussa now lives in camp in Ayorou, Niger after fleeing her village with her family amid the threat of violence. "We were only given three days to leave our home; the only place we have known forever." She receives cash assistance from CRS to pay for critical supplies like food and household items. Photo by Hadjara Laouali Balla/CRS.





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