

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

FOOD PRICES IN MALI AND SUDAN

Changes, causes, consequences and responses – May 2025 update

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Motivation

From early 2020 prices of cereals, fuels and fertiliser on world prices began to rise, beginning a cycle that would peak in mid-2022, by which time many prices had doubled or more. At the time, much concern was expressed that increases in prices on world markets would transmit to domestic markets in the Global South, driving up local food prices, and causing distress to people on low incomes.

A 2023 study from Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme was undertaken to see what had happened in Mali and Sudan to staple food prices, with what consequences, and with what public responses (Wiggins et al., 2023). That study reported cereal prices in both countries had doubled or more since early 2020. Price rises were (very) largely a result of domestic drivers, above all poor harvests and, in Sudan, hyperinflation. Most people living on low incomes tried to economise by cutting out costly foods and trying to earn more by taking on more work. Public responses were inadequate to mitigate hardship.

Purpose

This paper extends the analysis in the two countries from 2023 to mid-2025, examining subsequent price changes and their drivers, effects on vulnerable people, and public responses.

Approach and methods

We analysed monthly price data collected by World Food Programme (WFP) Vulnerability Analysis Mapping (VAM) teams. We reviewed cereal harvests and likely causes of changes: droughts, floods, conflict, etc.; imports of cereals whether as whole grain or flour; overall inflation in the domestic economy; and any other factor identified in the literature that might affect food prices.

For effects of price changes, we drew on secondary literature, above all the reports from Famine Early Warning Systems Network, or FEWS NET (USAID), Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture or GIEWS (FAO), and WFP. We interviewed selected respondents in Mali for their direct experience of living with rising food prices. To record public responses, we reviewed documents on government policy, and those from non-governmental organisation (NGO) and donor sources. In Mali, we also asked the selected informants what they had observed of public responses.

Data, literature and interviews were collected in late 2024 and the first half of 2025.

Findings

- Prices of cereals had increased greatly since early 2020 in both Mali and Sudan, with Sudanese prices rising by many multiples in an economy experiencing hyperinflation. World prices had only a small influence on domestic prices in Mali and Sudan; most clearly seen since mid-2022 after which world cereals prices fell, while those in Mali and Sudan remained high. In both countries, domestic cereal production per person has fallen markedly over the last five or more years. Harvests faltered: in the face of conflict affecting large parts of both countries, farmers struggled to plant, tend and harvest crops – indeed, hundreds of thousands of farmers had been displaced and no longer worked their original farms – while disruptions to trading reduced the incentive to produce a surplus.
- People on low incomes had to economise on food, eating the cheapest foods and often eating less. They had further cut spending on health care and schooling for their children, with many children removed from school entirely. Assets had been sold, loans taken out. Searching for extra income, people had to take on arduous jobs or very low-paid employment, and sometimes both. Only a few options offered good wages, but these also entailed risks: informal gold mining, migration from rural areas to towns and sometimes leaving the country altogether.
- In areas of (active) conflict in Sudan, the situation had become desperate: in parts of Darfur from 2024 onwards famine was declared, while large areas of the rest of Sudan faced a food emergency.
- Public responses – from government, donors and local and international NGOs – were insufficient to alleviate hardship. Most hard-hit households had to cope with whatever resources they and their close families, friends and neighbours could muster.

Policy implications

Options to prevent food prices rising inordinately in Mali and Sudan include:

- importing more cereals – surprisingly, given harvest failures, there were few increased imports in either country in years of poor harvests. This is puzzling: domestic prices had risen to levels at which imported grains, even after costly transport to the inland markets of Mali and Sudan, would have been cheaper
- holding public stocks to cover harvest losses – but neither country held stocks of sufficient size, but a costly option in any case
- controlling prices or subsidising prices of staple foods – the former unfeasible, the latter too costly
- reducing the incidence and severity of harvest failures – for which there are agricultural development options, but these are difficult to fund and implement when large parts of both countries are conflict zones.

The hardship and distress to people on low incomes caused by higher prices is all too clear. This raises the question of whether hardship is temporary or does it threaten long-term welfare? Is hardship something that people can survive: are they able to resume fuller lives when prices drop or fall back, or when their incomes rise; or does hardship threaten long-term welfare, above all the welfare of children, who may suffer malnutrition as infants (which impedes their mental and physical development) and who, after age five, may be unable to go to school (potentially another lifetime disadvantage)? Whatever national and international resources exist to provide some relief should prioritise children, albeit not necessarily exclusively so.

Even during conflict, most people do whatever they can to maintain some livelihood activity: agencies providing relief need to support people to either try to maintain economic activities or to undertake new ones viable in conflict.

Local and regional trading often persists to a remarkable extent during conflict, vital in allowing people to earn income and to buy additional food. Food prices may escalate during conflict, but without local trading, there might be no food at all in local markets leading to famine.

Actions to sustain trading can be valuable, whether to maintain and repair roads and bridges, or to find ways to recapitalise traders who have lost vehicles, stores, and cash to conflict.

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