

Mr Issoufou and the fight against hunger

Extended dry periods and drought are regular occurrences in Niger. Whenever rain falls short, people fear for their survival. But they do not give up. They laboriously wrest a harvest from the barren ground, determined to be prepared for the next crisis.

It's purely coincidental of course, that both men have exactly the same name. Issoufou Mahamadou is the chief of the small village of Soumaguela somewhere in the south of the vast desert country of Niger. The head of state, the President of the Republic of Niger, is also called Issoufou Mahamadou. This is not at all unusual, because Issoufou in the Hausa language means Yussuf or Joseph, and Mahamadou is a version of Mohammed – a common name in a predominantly Muslim nation. But despite their unremarkable-sounding names, their mission is far from unremarkable. Both men are fighting the hunger which afflicts their homeland and its people so regularly and relentlessly.

According to the Global Hunger Index, the situation in Niger is still "alarming". Every poor rainy season can trigger a major new crisis – such as the widespread famine which raged throughout the Sahel zone in 1973, and then again in 1984, 2000 and 2005. Even today in Niger, according to the United Nations, four out of every ten children under five years of age are still chronically undernourished. But there are people who want to change this state of affairs – including both men named Issoufou. Many observers see President Issoufou as a beacon of hope. This is because, as the latest hunger crisis loomed in September 2011, he did something unheard-of. He stepped up before the General Assembly of the United Na-

tions in New York and said: "Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, we need your help." A humble act which his predecessors would have considered a sign of weakness. Prior presidents preferred to block foreign aid and play down the problems of their country – until it was almost too late: until drought and need had firmly taken hold of the nation and huge numbers of people were starving to death. This early warning in 2011 meant that the worst effects could be avoided.

■ The 3N Initiative

But President Issoufou has other objectives, too. He plans to ensure that famines become a thing of the past here, and to make Niger capable of feeding itself as far as possible. Upon taking up office he said: "It is a disgrace that we have to keep on begging other people to give us our daily

bread." For this reason he has drawn up an ambitious programme: the 3N Initiative, which aims to reform agriculture and stock farming on a grand scale within the next five years. "3N" stands for "Les Nigériens nourrissent le Niger" which means "Nigerians nourishing Nigerians". The fifteen A4-page document outlines the President's programme which includes greater mechanisation of agriculture and increases the number of areas under irrigation. Under the plan the population will also learn new methods of cultivation.

The planned volume of investment of 900 billion CFA Francs (1.37 billion euros) is expected to derive mainly from the income from mineral resources.

Niger is rich in natural resources – it is one of the world's largest uranium producers, for instance. In addition, a Chinese consortium has been extracting oil for a little over a year now.

The inhabitants of Soumaguela have built a granary in the village to stock the reserves local people need to live on during dry season.

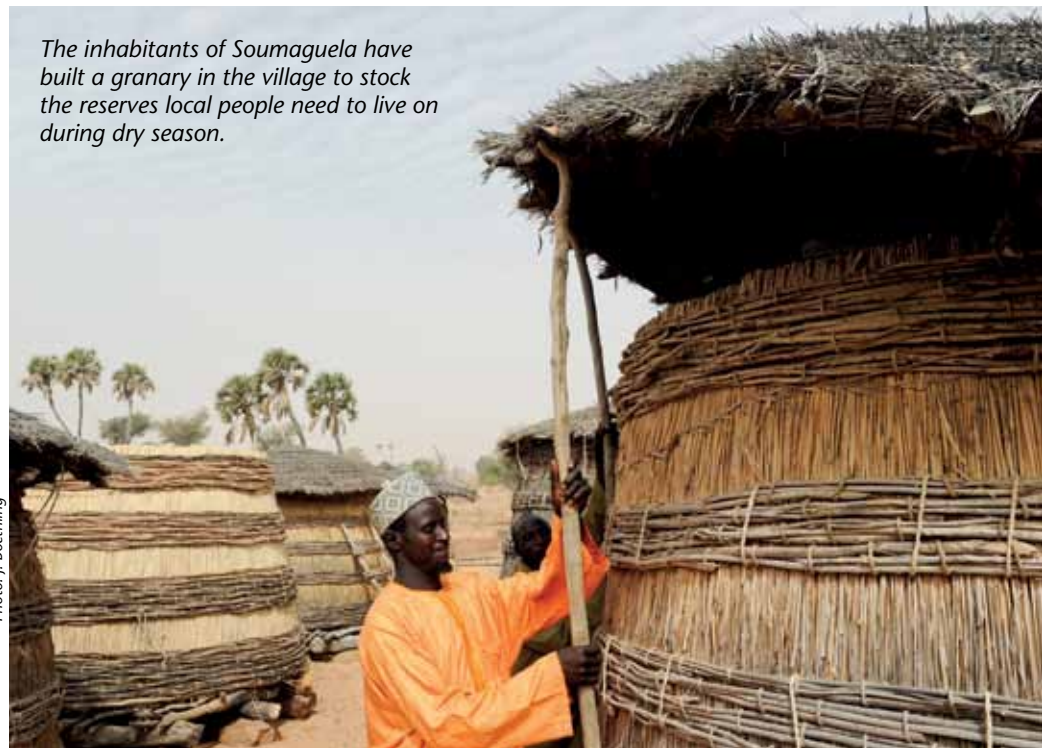


Photo: J. Boethling

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Issoufou Mahamadou is head of about 180 households in the small village of Soumaguela.

Photo: J. Boethling

The President describes his approach as: “village by village, community by community.”

How long will it take for the 3N Plan to reach Issoufou Mahamadou’s village? As the local chief, he is the head of about 180 households, consisting of just under 1,000 people. His grandfather also held this office, which is passed down from father to son. Until now the main sentiment Issoufou has felt towards his government has been disappointment. “I have never been to Niamey”, he says. The capital is more than ten hours’ drive away. Issoufou Mahamadou rides a small “Royal” brand motor cycle, which takes him along dusty sand tracks to a water hole.

■ **The dry season lasts more than eight months a year**

It is late January, and the rainy season has just ended. The people have dammed up the water here, but it won’t take long before it’s all gone again. “We have about ten hectares of land available” says Issoufou, “but we can only cultivate ten per cent of it. We don’t have enough water for the rest.”

The past weeks and months have been spent digging out a retention pond so that the water lasts just a little longer. Teams with donkeys and oxen come here from far and wide, laden with plastic containers.

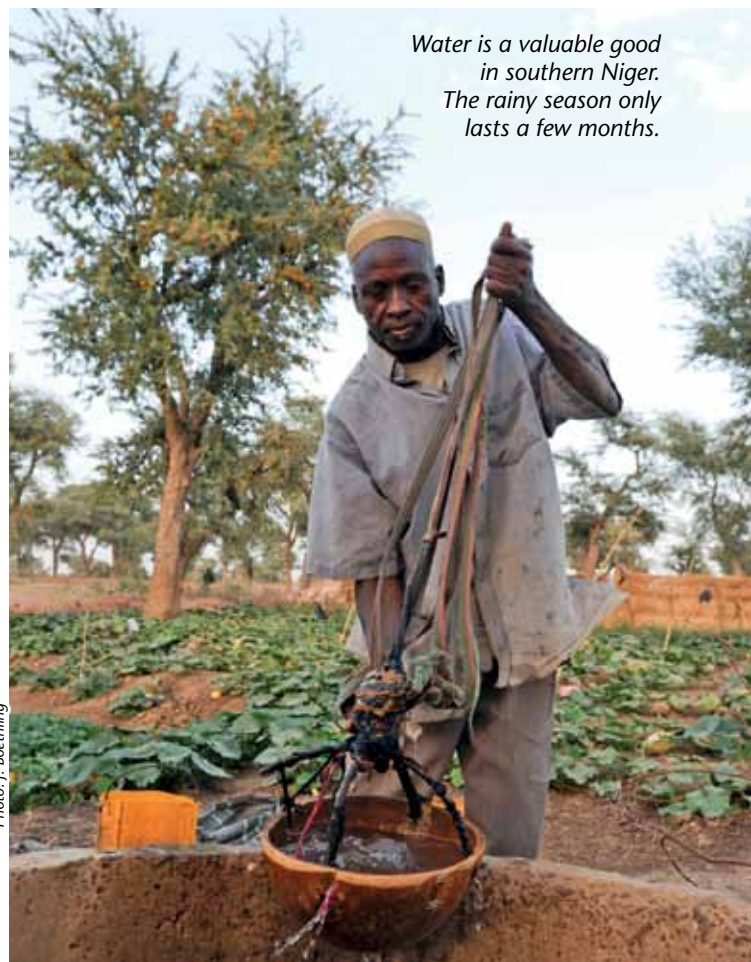
The water hole provides drinking water for both people and animals, and it is essential for agriculture. “We only have four months”, explains Issoufou. “During that time we have to plant and harvest our crops, to see us through the other eight months of the year.” Green lettuces are growing next to the pool. “We sell them at the market,” he says. The women do that, don’t they? “No, salad is men’s work. Our women sell tomatoes and onions.” The main crop here – even more important than vegetables – is millet. They have built a granary in the village to store the reserves the local people need to live on during the dry season. “We have also dug several wells,” says Issoufou. These have been fitted with motorised water pumps.

It is not the President who has organised all these programmes, but CADEV, the local development aid agency of the Catholic Church in Niger. Although Christians make up a small minority of the population, the social work they do is highly valued, which makes them influential. “The important thing is to include the local people in all the projects” says Raymond Younoussi Yoro, General Secretary of CADEV. Otherwise wells would be dug at locations where the land is not traditionally cultivated. “When this happens the people give the water to their animals, leaving nothing for them-

selves again,” says Yoro. He can think of other challenges which continually slow them down in their race against famine.

According to Yoro, the past year was actually not so bad in terms of climate and rainfall. “But the crisis in our neighbouring country, Mali, has driven many refugees across the border to Niger, and now we have to provide for them as well.” As a result food has once again become scarce. According to CADEV Secretary Yoro: “Hunger means that more than 3.6 million people in Niger now face a daily struggle to survive.”

He goes on to say that food speculation is very difficult to control. Large numbers of businesspeople buy the harvests of cash-strapped farmers, and then store the crops on the border between Niger and Nigeria. “They wait until prices rise before selling, and thus profit from the food shortages,” he says. He is quite restrained when asked his opinion on the commitment of the state. “A lot of money comes from the World Bank, too. But we’ll have to wait and see how much of it actually reaches the people.”



Water is a valuable good in southern Niger. The rainy season only lasts a few months.

Photo: J. Boethling



Photo: J. Boethling

Infants are measured and weighed at the hospital in Zinder. The food allowance can be quickly adjusted when there are signs of malnutrition.

gramme (WFP) provides food to Niger on a regular basis, not only in times of crisis. Partner organisations distribute it, as does the Catholic Church.

Visit to a clinic in Zinder. This city of more than 300,000 inhabitants is the second largest in the country. Mr Issoufou's village is only eight kilometres from here. The clinic offers free treatment to patients suffering from tuberculosis, and the church runs a primary school next door. Once a day a warm meal is available, especially for young mothers and their children. The demand is great. The women queue up patiently to fill their bowls with millet porridge or rice.

■ The tense security situation adds to the difficulties

Small children are weighed and measured here. If the workers see any sign of undernourishment they can take immediate action and adjust the food allowance. At the centre of the throng is Sister Dolores Astorga, a Spanish nun. It is quite exceptional to come across a person with white skin here. For some time now the risk of being kidnapped by Islamist groups intent on destabilising Niger has been too great. Europeans are being strongly advised against travelling to the country, and even long-term diplomats rarely leave the confines of the capital, Niamey. Dolores Astorga has been living in Niger

since 1968. "So far all has been well", she says. The precarious security situation adds yet another layer of difficulty to the fight against hunger. Where foreign aid workers have to fear for their lives, help often reaches the people too late. In such cases a crisis can quickly become a disaster.

Dolores Astorga picks up her notepad and records how much food they have distributed today on behalf of the United Nations. The WFP requires them to be absolutely exact with their bookkeeping. They allow 200 grams of millet, 30 grams of oil and 10 grams of sugar per person, per day – a total of 1,130 calories. Just enough to survive. "That's how it is here," says Dolores Astorga. "We take it step by step – one step forward and then sometimes another step back."

Soon the dry months will be upon the country. Then President Issoufou must show that he really is serious about his plan. Village head Issoufou must hope that his people will get through it somehow. Perhaps the men will find work on a construction site in the city. Perhaps relatives will send money from Nigeria or Côte d'Ivoire. Perhaps the stores will last this time. The people have stored grain and sold vegetables. They have dug wells and collected rainwater. They have cultivated the ground and produced the best harvest they could. They really couldn't have done more.

■ Hunger lurks around every corner

Raymond Younoussi Yoro is a devout Muslim. He doesn't consider working on behalf of the Catholic Church as a contradiction. In his village the people say: "Before the Christians arrived we used to have four sacks of millet in our store: now we have 250 sacks." Nonetheless hunger lurks around every corner, even in Mr Issoufou's village. Another kind of disaster – this time a flood of all things – has left even deeper scars. The population was desperate for the rain to come – but when it finally did, it lashed down so violently that the dry earth could no longer absorb it. It washed away mud walls and destroyed painstakingly-established livelihoods. "Now I am forced to choose" says a woman in the village. "Shall I repair my house, or shall I feed my children?" She is a widow who takes care of a large number of children, not all of them her own. "We eat once a day," she says, pointing to a pot in which she is stirring a thin porridge of millet. She could not survive without outside help. The United Nations World Food Pro-

Niger in profile

The Republic of Niger in West Africa ranks last among 186 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations. Its difficult climatic conditions are a particular challenge for the country and its 17 million inhabitants; extended periods of drought and famine are a regular occurrence. The security situation is also extremely tense. In 2010 President Tandja Mamadou who ruled the nation from 1999 was ousted in a military coup. The army promised to return the country rapidly to civilian rule, and this occurred following the elections of 2011, which were won by Issoufou Mahamadou. During the 1980s and 1990s Issoufou worked for the French nuclear group, AREVA, which mines uranium in Niger. China has also become an important partner. State-controlled Chinese oil company CNPC holds 60 per cent of shares in the new oil refinery at N'guigmi, close to the Chad border. The population is 95 per cent Muslim. Most of the three to five per cent Christians arrived as immigrants from neighbouring countries. The Catholic Church of Niger comprises the two dioceses of Niamey and Maradi. It advocates dialogue with Muslims, stands up for disadvantaged women in particular, and operates a number of schools and clinics. Through its development organisation CADEV (Caritas-Développement), the church is actively involved in the fight against hunger.