Anarcho
How capitalism has caused famine in Niger
IMF structural adjustment programme pressed Niger too hard
August 16, 2005

Retrieved on 28th October 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

**usa.anarchistlibraries.net**

# How capitalism has caused famine in Niger

**IMF structural adjustment programme pressed Niger too hard**

Anarcho

August 16, 2005

Niger is the second poorest country in the world. Markets in some parts of the country are still full of produce. Yet a few minutes drive from these is the face of Niger which the world has seen — starving people under canvas tents with aid workers trying their best to help them. The reason is simple — poverty. People cannot afford to buy the goods in the market and so they go hungry. This, the bleak reality of Niger's famine, is noticeably absent from almost all of the media reports

In capitalism it is a little know feature of famines that the affected countries generally do produce enough food. During the Irish famine of the 1840s, Ireland exported food to Britain. During the Ethiopian famines which inspired Live Aid in 1985, cash crops were exported to the west. The same applies to the current famine in Niger.

Capitalism has always been marked by extremes in rich and poor. Niger,the second poorest country in the world, is no exception, with markets in some parts of the country still full of produce. Yet a few minutes drive from these is the face of Niger which the world has seen — starving people under canvas tents with aid workers trying their best to help them.

The reason is simple — poverty. People cannot afford to buy the goodsin the market and so they go hungry. This, the bleak reality of Niger's famine, is noticeably absent from almost all of the media reports. There the hunger is seen as a natural disaster, not a man-made one. This is unsurprising, given the role of capitalism has played in this (and other) famines. It cuts to the heart of claims that the capitalist market can solve the problems of the world's poor.

As in most famines, the situation has been worsened by market forces. The last harvest was only 11% below the five-yearly average and drought and pests had a modest impact on it. Yet the price of grain went through the roof, with a 100g bad of millet, the staple grain, nearly doubling in price since last year (from around STR13 to STR25). While problems started when locusts ate crops and cattle fodder, it reached crisis proportionswhen the market worked its magic and the prices of food shot out of reach. While there is a need for food, there is no demand for it. Unsurprisingly, traders in Niger have been exporting grain to wealthier neighbouring= countries.

Niger relies on donors such as the EU, which favours "free-market" solutions to African poverty. The Niger government, eager to curry favour with the G8, initially refused to hand out free food to the starving as it wanted prove its "free market" credentials and so instead offered millet at subsidised prices. Prices the poorest could not afford. The G8 had written off some of Niger's debt, but only on the condition that it implemented approved economic reforms — its 'debt relief' programme for Highly Indebted Poor Countries stipulates that recipients must remove subsidies for food, reduce subsidies for food production and increase the intake of tax, all as part of a programme for "free market reform". The UN agreed with the Niger government, and refused to distribute free food on the basis that this would interfere with the free market and could harm the country's development out of poverty.

The results of this policy can be seen. Finally, the Niger government,along with its foreign donor countries and the UN, resided and agreed toallow the distribution of free food. This delay in retreating from neo-liberal dogma has resulted in a total of 3.6 million people being affectedby the food crisis, with around 874,000 people needing free food to survive.

Thus Niger is yet another example of the underlying, but ignored, reality of famines in the world. It is not a lack of food (there is more thanenough to feed the world). The problem is an economic system which ignores need in favour of money. Food, like any commodity, will go where the money is while the weakest go to the wall. This aspect of the market has been around for as long as capitalism has been. E.P. Thompson usefully discusses the popular perspectives on food shortages in 18$^{th}$ century Britainversus Adam Smith's position in **Customs in Common.** More recently, economist Amartya Sen has shown that millions can starve to death not because of over-all decline in food availability but because their effective demand disappeared due to market forces. If people's only resource thatthey legitimately possess, i.e. their labour-power, becomes unsaleable in the market then they have no command over food. Once this happens, the market will make things worse, not better, as supply seeks demand elsewhere.

This is the case in Niger. The mission head of **Medicin Sans Frontieres** makes it clear that this famine was avoidable. *"This is not a famine, in the Somalian way,"* she said. *"The harvest was bad in 2004 and the millet granaries are empty. Yet there is food on the markets. The trouble is that the price of the food is beyond anyone's reach."* She stressed that the IMF and the EU had pressed Niger too hard to implement a structural adjustment programme. Being capitalism, of course, someone has to pay for all this and so the tax burden was shifted away from capital onto labour (as per Britain and the US). *"No sooner had the government been re-elected,"* this year she continued, *"than it was obliged to introduce 19 per cent VAT on basic foodstuffs. At the same time, as part of the policy, emergency grain reserves were abolished."* This obviously exacerbated the market induced problems, but such state intervention as necessary to create capitalism as it is to maintain it. IMF imposed policies are just the latest in a long history of state actions required to separate workers from the land and force them to become wage slaves.

Thus, the main causes of the Niger famine are not natural but man-made The reason for the tax rise, said the Niger government, was that it helped meet the conditions of IMF-imposed "reforms" (i.e. a structural adjustment programme). Given that the majority of media have focused on the "natural" roots of the famine and suggest that the Niger government is blameless, you could be forgiven in thinking that this is because they think that it did not do anything wrong in fulfilling IMF and G8 stipulations

The grim reality is, of course, different.