



Enhanced
Responses to
Nutrition
Emergencies

CONCERN
worldwide



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PILOT PROGRAMMATIC PARTNERSHIP

The effects of anticipated interventions/early actions and seasonal interventions to respond to food insecurity linked to the lean season in Niger

Introduction

ERNE (Enhanced Responses to Nutrition Emergencies) is a three-year (2020–2023) ECHO-funded programme aimed at reducing malnutrition-related morbidity and mortality among children under five in countries affected by multiple shocks (conflict/climate/epidemics). The ERNE programme includes an Early Warning Early Action (EWEA) component, which focuses on risk analysis, monitoring, early warning and capacity building of vulnerable communities to better anticipate and respond to shocks affecting their food and nutrition security. EWEA also includes provision for early actions and/or emergency response to emerging or existing crisis, using a cash or in-kind assistance modality.

Food insecurity is endemic in Niger with marked seasonal trends (with the agricultural lean season going from June to September). Following poor harvest due to irregular rains, localised droughts, and attacks of crop pests, 2022 saw the highest number of food-insecure people in the last eight years, with 4.4 million people in need of food assistance (phase 3 to 5) according to the Harmonised Framework (March 2022)¹.

PHOTO 1: Balki M. with her child, beneficiary of the early action. Balki received six cash transfers to support her family access food in Takanamatt, Tahoua; July 2022.



PHOTO 2: Awareness raising session on Concern Complaint Response Mechanism (CRM) with cash transfer beneficiaries in the village of Dabnou, Illela; May 2022.

¹ The Cadre Harmonisé (Integrated Phase Classification for the Sahel) is a unifying tool that helps to produce relevant, consensual, rigorous, and transparent analyses of current and projected food and nutrition situations. It classifies the severity of food and nutrition insecurity based on the international classification scale. The IPC Acute Food Insecurity classification provides a differentiation between different levels of severity of food insecurity, classifying units of analysis in five distinct phases: (1) Minimal/None, (2) Stressed, (3) Crisis, (4) Emergency, (5) Catastrophe/Famine (<https://www.ipcinfo.org/>).

As part of the EWEA component, ERNE intervened to respond to the food crisis that affected the most vulnerable households in three departments of Niger (Tahoua, Bouza, Illéla) with two types of intervention.

1. A three month **Early Action (EA)**, triggered in April 2022, was launched **before the lean season and progressively scaled up vertically** (the duration of the support was extended from three to six months for the same households), to prevent a sharp deterioration of food security amongst the most vulnerable households (based on socio-economic vulnerability). The triggers for the EA were crop pest invasions and drought identified through the programme's early warning system, confirmed by Harmonised Framework/IPC food insecurity data. 1,100 households were provided with six monthly transfers of unrestricted cash assistance intended to cover their immediate food needs (one village received one month's support as in-kind food due to localised insecurity). The initial value of the transfer was 32,500 F CFA (49.5 EUR), corresponding with 75% of the monetary value of the food basket on the local market². This percentage represents the household average gap (food deficit) identified through household survey analysis and market price monitoring data. The scale up continued into the lean season due to progressive deterioration in the food security context in Tahoua region. The transfer amount remained the same.

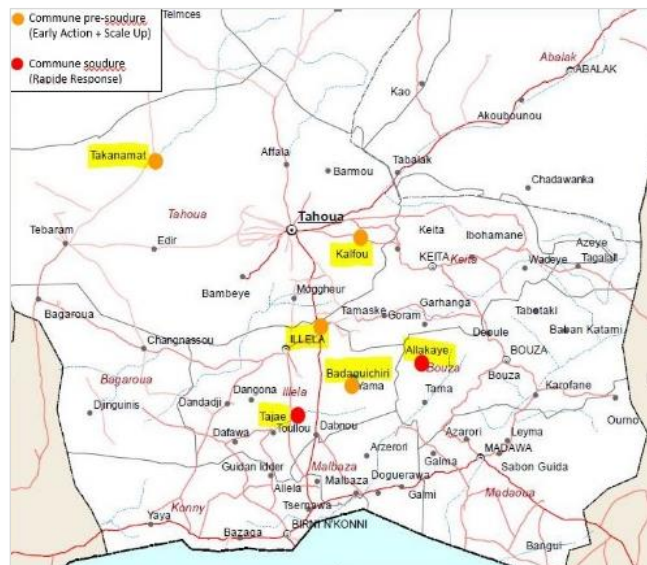


FIGURE 1: Map showing the municipalities of intervention. Orange for the early action and scale up assistance, red for the rapid response.

2. An **Emergency Response (RR)**, triggered in July 2022, was implemented **during the agricultural lean season** to assist 1,418 most vulnerable households affected by food insecurity with monthly cash transfers to cover food needs over a period of three months. The value of the transfer was 36,500 F CFA (55.6 EUR), corresponding with 85% of the food basket, based on the gap analysis (food deficit) and market price monitoring data.

Additionally, in both cohorts households with children aged 6 to 23 months (740 children in total) received **fortified flour (micronutrient enriched)** with the aim of preventing malnutrition and reducing the risk of micronutrient deficiencies. These children were also **screened for acute malnutrition on a monthly basis during the intervention (from April for the early action and from July for the emergency response, until September)**, and children referred to the health facilities if acute malnutrition was detected.

Households from both cohorts were selected according to socio-economic vulnerability criteria (Household Economy Approach methodology), such as little to no livestock, little to no arable land, less than two months of food stock, a very low monthly revenue, the presence of vulnerable people in the household (children under 5 years old, elderly, pregnant or breastfeeding women, disabled).

Results monitoring

Concern adopted a comparative approach to analyse and compare food security indicators of the two cohorts of households assisted with the early action and with the emergency response within the ERNE programme.

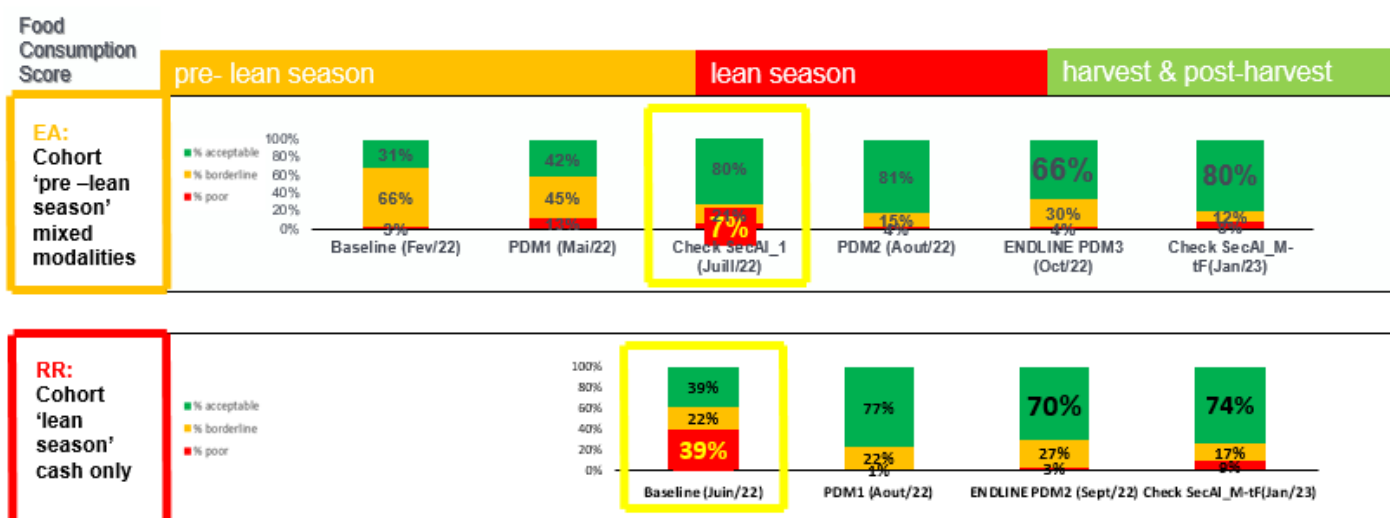
Data was collected using Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) surveys. The PDMs were carried out between two to three weeks after the distributions, to gather feedback from beneficiaries as well collect information on key food security indicators: Food Consumption Score (FCS) and the Reduced Coping Strategy Index (r-CSI). Concern also carried out additional, timely data collection on food security indicators to better inform the programmatic decision-making: at the start of the lean season, towards the end of the planned responses as well as four months after the last distribution round.

The quantitative data was collected using Concern's DDG (Digital Data Gathering) platform. Sample sizes for the two cohorts were calculated with 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.

² With the exception of one village where the transfer was adjusted to 21,000 F CFA to cover 50% of the food basket (following the identification of a lower gap (food deficit) in this village than others in the intervention zone).

Key Findings

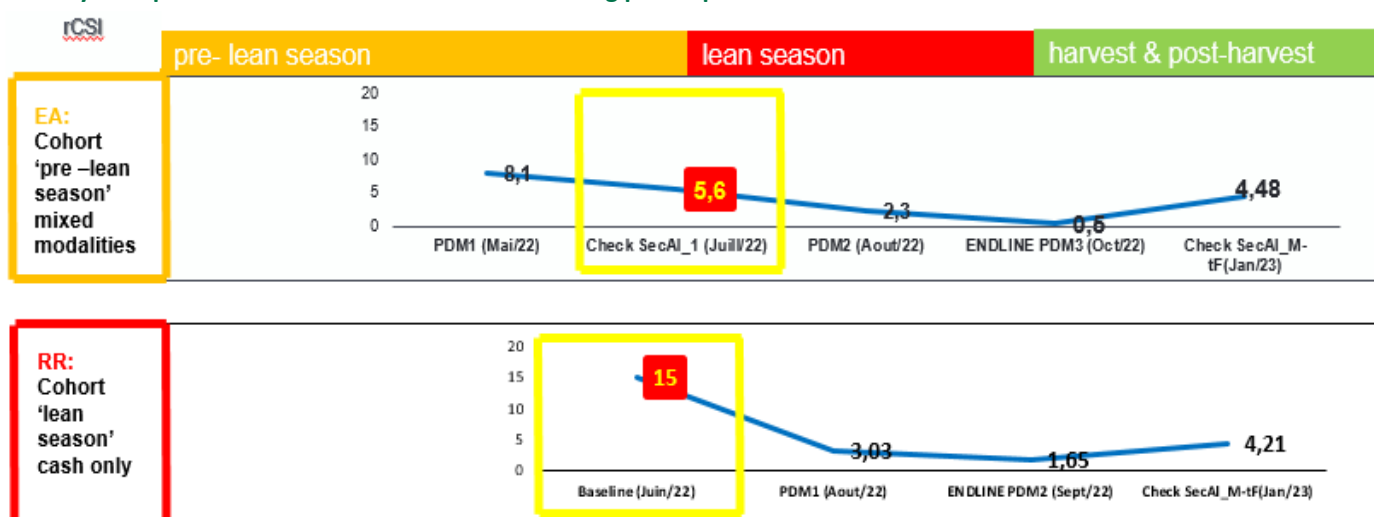
Figure 2: Comparative analysis of Food Consumption Score for the two cohorts during the intervention timeline February to October 2022 and four month monitoring period post intervention



When reading of the results (graphs in Figure 2), it should be noted that the **Early Action cohort** (upper graph) **has entered the lean season with 80% of the households classified as having 'acceptable' FCS**, while the emergency response cohort (lower graph) enters the lean season with 39% of the households with an acceptable FCS. The early action cohort intervention has prevented food insecurity among targeted households, with only 7% of households with a poor FCS at the start of the lean season compared with 39% of the emergency response cohort. With the roll out of the support, until the endline in October 2022, the food security situation for the targeted households as measured with FCS both improved and stabilized for both cohorts. We can also observe that the results were sustained post the harvest period.

FOOD CONSUMPTION SCORE (FCS): The Food Consumption Score (FCS) is an indicator of a household's food security status, as it considers dietary diversity and food frequency, and the relative nutritional importance of different food groups. The FCS provides the percentage of households with poor FCS, borderline FCS and acceptable FCS.

Figure 3: Comparative analysis of reduced Coping Strategy Index for the two cohorts during the implementation timeline February to September 2022 and four month monitoring period post intervention



The rCSI³ results seem to indicate a similar trend. The food security situation at the beginning of the lean season was already much **worse for the Emergency Response cohort**, as can be observed in the graph where at **the average rCSI score was three times higher**.

REDUCED COPING STRATEGY INDEX (r-CSI): The r-CSI is a proxy indicator of household food insecurity. It considers the frequency and severity of five pre-selected coping strategies that the household used in the seven days prior to the survey. The higher the score, the more extensive use of negative coping strategies and hence increased food insecurity.

³ The most used coping strategies were the consumption of less preferred foods, followed by the reduction of the portion size and number of meals.

The data collection tools also included a question regarding the prevalence of acute-malnutrition among children aged 6-59 months in the targeted households. The results obtained at the end of the intervention (in late September or early October 2022), indicate that the number of children sampled under five years self-reported as having moderate or severe acute malnutrition was zero for the Early Action cohort and 15 for the Emergency Response cohort. **This suggests the possible protective role of the nutritional status of children in those households who received a longer support through cash transfers and fortified flour (Cash Plus⁴).**

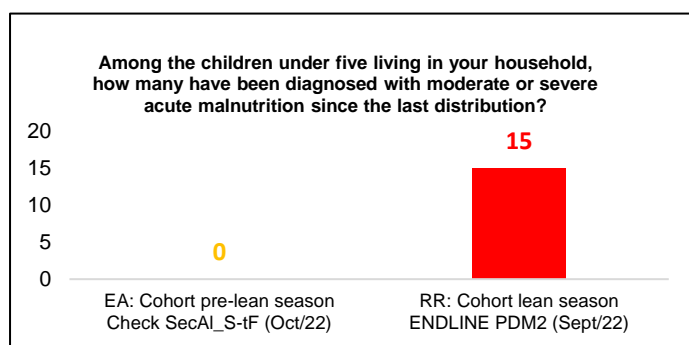


FIGURE 4: Graph showing targeted households survey results about children under five diagnosed with malnutrition during assistance.

Key Insights

1) PROTECTING FOOD SECURITY

- **Anticipate and trigger the support before the lean season starts in order to protect household food security status. Concern's intervention** prevented over 30% of the targeted households falling into food insecurity. In other words, Concern's Early Action through cash transfers and in-kind (food) protected households food security before and during the lean season.
- The implementation of a **Cash Plus approach**, which included the distribution of fortified flour to complement the multipurpose cash for households with children under 2 years, is likely to be an effective option when the protection of nutritional status of households susceptible to food insecurity. This combination of modalities was likely contributing to the improved FCS scores in the present case study, which focused on households with children under the age of five.
- The data indicates that households receiving Early Action interventions experienced **a shorter post-harvest recovery period** compared to households that solely received emergency support (via the Emergency Response) during the three-month lean season.

2) TIMELY COORDINATION

- **Timely coordination** played a crucial role in achieving the desired outcomes. The year 2022 presented a crisis situation in Niger due to the harvest failure, leading to a significant surge in prices of staple foods that became unaffordable for a substantial portion of the population during the lean season. This called for coordinated emergency support. Having key context information at the start of the year enabled the timely recognition of the need to implement Early Action measures and carefully plan their sequencing alongside additional support for households.

3) MINIMUM NUMBER OF DISTRIBUTION ROUNDS

- To reduce the risk of food insecurity among households and accelerate the post-lean season recovery, it is **essential to consider a minimum number of distribution rounds**. The data indicates that a minimum of six distribution rounds is necessary to have a lasting impact on households' food security. This conclusion aligns with the findings of a previous evaluation conducted by Concern in 2019⁵.

4) TRANSFER VALUE

- As per overall ERNE programme learning⁶ low Early Action transfer values remain a promising approach to explore in less extreme food insecurity contexts. However, in the context of recurring failed rainy seasons and high levels of vulnerability, to offset the underlying burden, higher transfer values should be a strong consideration. Further experience would be useful to determine the most suitable % of food basket / minimum expenditure basket in those circumstances.

⁴ Cash plus is generally defined as the combination of cash transfers with complementary interventions as per the CALP glossary (<https://www.calpnetwork.org/resources/glossary-of-terms/?letter=C>), here referring to cash transfers combined with fortified flour.

⁵ Évaluation d'impact des Transferts Monétaires productifs et anticipés sur la sécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle des ménages (Report, Concern Worldwide, Niger, 2019)

⁶ As well as, flooding and conflict-induced displacement affected populations, as per "Implementing Nutrition Sensitive Early Warning Early Action - Experiences from Concern in 5 countries under the Enhanced Responses to Nutrition Emergencies (ERNE)", May 2023.