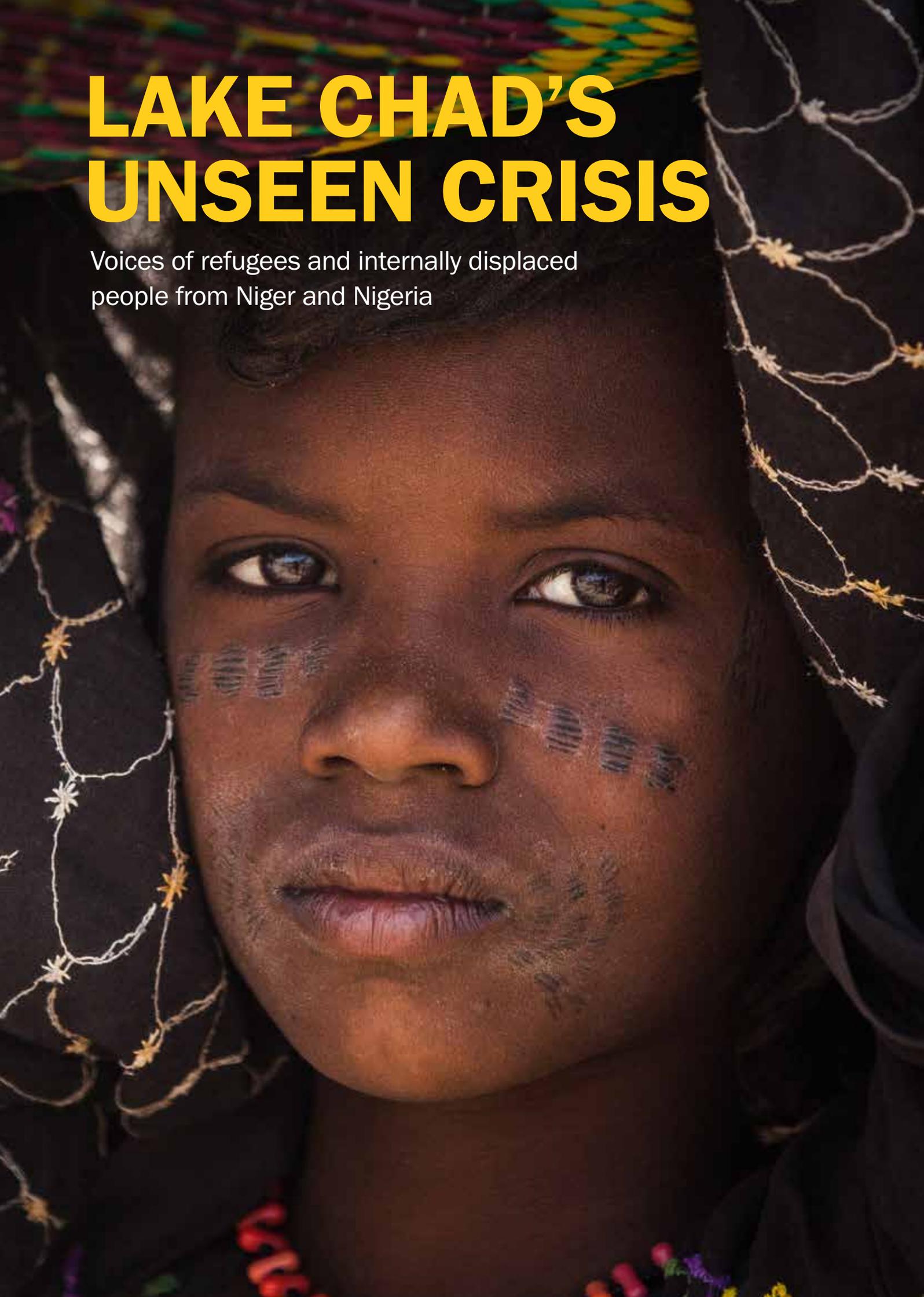


# LAKE CHAD'S UNSEEN CRISIS

Voices of refugees and internally displaced  
people from Niger and Nigeria



“ The Lake Chad Basin, to my mind, at this stage, is the most under-reported and most under-funded and least addressed of the big crises we face.”

United Nations  
Emergency  
Relief Coordinator,  
Stephen O'Brien,  
24 May, 2016.



Cover image: A young internally displaced girl from Niger, Assaga Camp, Diffa Region, Niger. Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam.  
Above: Women in Assaga displacement camp, Niger. Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam

The violent seven-year conflict originating in Nigeria has intensified in the last three years and spread across borders into Niger, Chad and Cameroon, causing a growing humanitarian crisis in a region known as the Lake Chad Basin.

This is Africa's fastest growing displacement crisis. It is taking place in one of the poorest and most fragile parts of the world – out of sight and out of mind of world leaders. Across the Lake Chad Basin countries, 21 million people are affected by the crisis. 9.2 million are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, and over 2.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety and protection.

There is no sign that the conflict will end in the near future. With the onset of both the lean season and the rainy season from July till September, Nigeria is officially experiencing an economic crisis, and predicted severe flooding makes the prospects for the region grim. Despite the scale of the crisis, it receives very little attention; knowledge of it is not widespread and only 25 percent of the \$562m requested for the Lake Chad Basin humanitarian response has been received as of 15 August 2016.

Millions of people remain unassisted. With both host and displaced communities exhausting their resources and falling deeper into poverty; with localized famine-like situations developing, and high mortality rates from malnutrition and disease; and with people at risk of neglect, violence and exploitation even within official camps, the humanitarian response needs to rapidly improve to save lives and protect those in need.

This paper aims to give a voice to some of the women, girls, boys and men displaced by this violence, as well as to their generous hosts. 35 displaced people and host families living in seven locations in Nigeria and Niger were interviewed during April and May 2016. They told us that one of their main challenges was access to food and income-earning opportunities; they do not want to depend on others. They recounted some of the violence and abuses they had experienced and their ongoing insecurity, and expressed a simple wish for education, healthcare and water for their children.

“ Our biggest problem is food: we can't find enough to eat. We don't have any money-making activities to buy enough food. We receive aid, but it is insufficient.”

40 year old Hadjia

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Donor governments and United Nations agencies must:

- **Urgently increase political and financial support** to save hundreds of thousands of lives, particularly in north-eastern Nigeria.
- **Urgently scale up emergency food assistance, nutrition and livelihood support** to guard against potential famine, with a focus on interventions which give people the self-sufficiency they want.
- **Provide access to food and basic services – including free healthcare, water and sanitation and education – as well as income-generating opportunities**, for displaced people who are living outside formal camps.
- **Ensure host communities as well as IDPs are equally prioritized for humanitarian and development assistance.** Host communities have generously shared their meagre resources and also need access to food, basic services and livelihoods support.
- **Protect the vulnerable through the scale-up of protection support services** such as social and psychosocial services, access to healthcare and education. Strengthen the UN Rights Up Front mechanisms to ensure a collective responsibility to prevent the most serious violations, including forced recruitment and arbitrary arrest and detention of men and boys. **Particular attention should be paid to the needs of women and girls, who are at high risk from protection threats**, including specific livelihood and prevention strategies that protect women and girls from violence, rape and sexual exploitation; **support the Nigerian government to implement the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, which it has endorsed.**
- **Invest in further strengthening UN, government and NGO leadership, decision making, coordination and accountability of the humanitarian response.** Strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of local actors and coordination in field locations closer to affected populations.

## The governments of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Niger must:

- **Alert the world to the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis and the scale of need in the Lake Chad Basin;** ensure regular and up-to-date information is shared so as to facilitate a rapid scale-up of the response through the mobilization of resources and support from regional and international donor governments alongside increased investment from the national budget.
- **Provide safe and unhindered access to communities**, particularly in insecure and inaccessible areas; introduce fast-track measures and clear, systematic processes to facilitate visas for international humanitarian workers and the importation of urgent relief items; and reduce other administrative barriers.
- **Prioritize the safety of civilians, their dignity and human rights** under national laws, as well as regional frameworks such as the Kampala Convention and the AU Refugee Convention, and international human rights and humanitarian law and standards, including UN Security Council Resolution 1325 for the protection and empowerment of women living through conflict and insecurity. Train military and civilian government personnel on their obligations and people's rights under these laws, and strengthen accountability mechanisms.
- **Ensure adequate security and protection for affected persons against physical abuse, assault, sexual violence, exploitation or loss of life in camps**, and guarantee their freedom of movement without discrimination. Maintain the civilian character of the camps for displaced people; management and security should be provided by civilian bodies and civilian law enforcement agencies.
- **Uphold the right of people to flee conflict and find refuge from violence.** Ensure that relocation, including that which forms part of military operations, and return of people, take place voluntarily to well-prepared sites where adequate assistance, living conditions and protection are available.
- **Develop a framework for durable solutions to displacement** that involves voluntary, safe and dignified returns, local integration or settlement elsewhere, based on informed decisions by displaced people themselves.
- **Protect and facilitate people's freedom of movement and access to their livelihoods** including fishing, farming and markets.
- **National governments should work with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and international donors to address the root causes of the conflict through investing significantly from national budgets and aid programmes in marginalized areas affected by the conflict.** This should include increasing support to state and local authorities, investing in infrastructure and basic service provision, supporting sustainable livelihoods and policies to tackle environmental degradation in the Lake Chad Basin area, and strengthening people's access to justice.

# ESCALATING HUNGER AND LIVELIHOODS CRISIS

Across the Lake Chad basin countries of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, 6.3 million people are severely food insecure; 4.4 million of these people are in Nigeria. The people in the Lake Chad Basin region are some of the poorest in the world and even under normal circumstance suffer from high levels of hunger and malnutrition.

More than 65,000 people in pockets of North East Nigeria are already experiencing famine, and over one million people are one step away from famine. These are the people located in newly accessible areas, and areas which are on the frontlines of the conflict with active military operations ongoing.

Violence and displacement are taking a toll on people's livelihoods. Insecurity is preventing people from farming, fishing and trading across borders. Many farmers have not cultivated their lands for three consecutive years because of the insecurity; the river and lake on which fishers have relied have been declared off-limits by some of the governments as part of military operations. The conflict has led to the closure of some of the largest markets in Africa, impacting cross-border trade in cattle, dried fish and agricultural products. The devaluation of the Nigerian naira as a result of the drop in global oil prices, combined with the scarcity of agricultural produce as a result of the conflict, has caused the cost of food to more than double in Nigeria, with similar risks posed to its neighbouring countries.

“We have been living here for six months now. We remain hopeful. In particular, we hope they (government) will allow the market to take place again. The government has so far forbidden it on the grounds that it supports Boko Haram.”

Ibrahim, 60, a male IDP in Kindanji spontaneous displacement site, Niger.

While internally displaced persons (IDPs) are the most food insecure, generous communities have taken them in, sharing what little resources and assets they have. The host population themselves are therefore very vulnerable, and the economic situation in Nigeria and the regional countries is plunging them in to hunger.

Many families are reaching breaking point because of the hunger and are being forced into extreme coping strategies as a result, including begging. Women struggling to feed their families are being

forced into transactional sex in exchange for food or money, or to secure permission to leave camps where movement is restricted.

Unless they receive urgent food and nutritional support, an estimated 49,000 children – out of approximately 244,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition in Nigeria's Borno state – will die by the end of the year if they do not receive treatment.

With food and income ranking as people's top concerns, access to earning opportunities and markets are vital in tackling the growing hunger.



“We come from Damassak in Nigeria. We fled to a village in Niger after Boko Haram attacked our city. The Government of Niger then moved us to a camp. Thank God, because we generally get to eat and have water here. The real problem is that we do not have money to invest in our livelihoods. It is difficult to buy clothes for the children, shoes or food to supplement what we are given. I live in this hut with my wife and children.”

Abba, 61, male, Nigerian refugee, Sayam camp, Niger. Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam

# PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

Everyone shared stories of violence, fear and abuse.

Men and boys have been targeted in killings, forced recruitment and arbitrary detention, including by security forces and civilian vigilante groups. Women and girls have suffered and continue to face grave violations including forced marriage, sexual violence and exploitation. Over 2,000 women and girls have so far been abducted. The use of rape as a weapon of war is a common feature

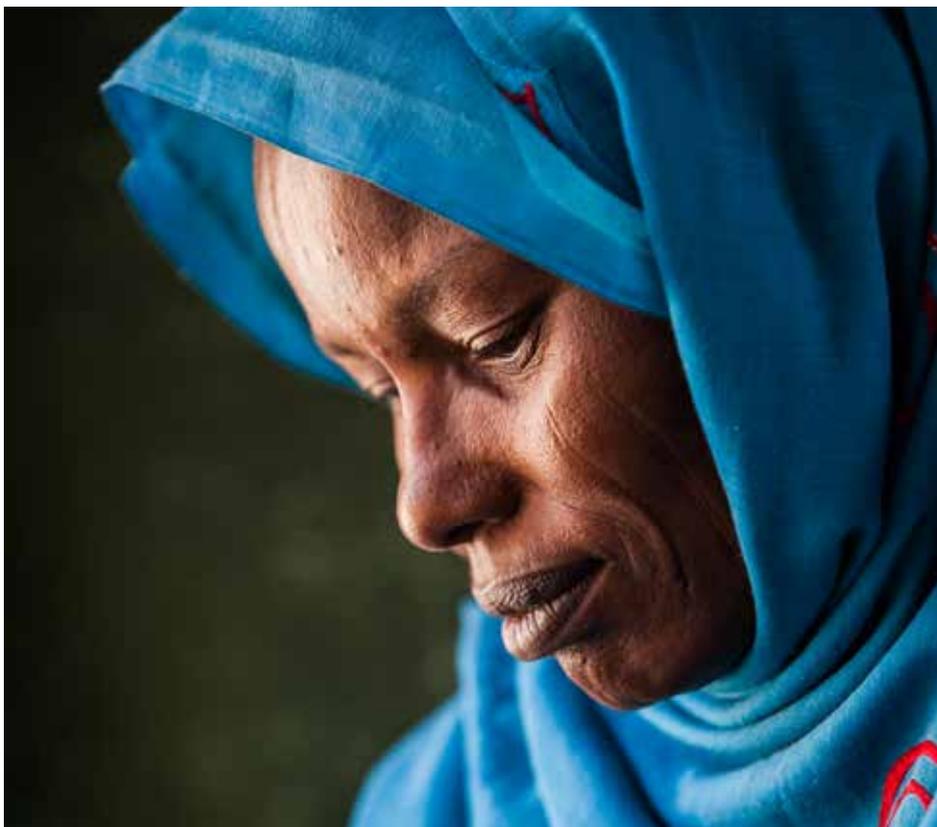
of this conflict, and thousands of women and girls have found themselves pregnant and subject to stigmatization by their communities as a result.

Within the camps and communities, heavy-handed military and security tactics are also contributing to feelings of persecution and vulnerability.

“They [the insurgents] told us that if we ‘tried anything stupid’, they would kill us. They came shooting and shouting at people to surrender to them. I was among those they captured, but my grandmother escaped. **We were held hostage in a building for about three days.** The building next to us also had hostages in it. Some days later we heard the sound of airplanes, and before we knew what was happening we heard bombs falling and explosions. Some people were injured, like me, and some died. I suffered a broken arm and wounds to my leg. The insurgents tried to treat our wounds, but later they left us to our fate. Luckily someone found us, and he went to seek help. So far I have had three operations on my hands and three on my legs.”



Grace, 22, Yola IDP Camp, Nigeria (pictured above). Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam



“The military associate us with Boko Haram. We do not understand why, but that is how it is. We suffer from stigmatization, especially the young people. But if we had connections with Boko Haram, we would not have fled and suffered here.”

Dalla, 40, female IDP, Kindanji spontaneous displacement site, Niger. Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam

## A Risky Return

People return to their towns and villages, often to find their homes and communities destroyed. Others, who return too early, are subject to renewed attacks, repeated displacement and loss of life.

“We went back to Madagali in March 2015 for six weeks. Everything had been destroyed. One day, while working on our farms we were attacked by the insurgents, about 10 people were killed and several injured. Most of us took refuge in the bush for three days. The insurgents stole our food and cattle and some people were captured including my wife and 25-year-old daughter, I couldn't do anything to save them. I had to come back to St Theresa Catholic Church. **Each day that passes I can't help but imagine what my family are going through. I wish we never went back.**”

Ouseini, 64, male IDP, St Theresa Catholic Church, Yola, Nigeria.

“I am a wife and mother of 11 children. We ran from Madagali about eight months ago when we were attacked by the insurgents. It was horrific. We walked for days in the bush until we got to Yola. I went back in May 2015 to give my mum some food. Since she was too old to run with us we had to leave her and my disabled daughter behind. I have been really worried about them and heard of the torture my mum was put through by the insurgents. She was beaten mercilessly, stripped naked and then left without food. **Madagali is still not safe to return to; there are no facilities there – everything has been destroyed. There is no clean water for drinking and other purposes, no health facilities, no schools for our children; in fact there is no life there.** It was so scary going back with the constant sounds of the guns.”

Christina, 40, female IDP, St Theresa, Catholic Church camp, Yola, Nigeria

## HOST COMMUNITIES UNDER PRESSURE

Over 80 percent of displaced people in the region are seeking refuge among host communities, including relatives, friends or even strangers. As a result, some of the poorest people in the world have been sharing what meagre resources they have for up to two to three years.

In addition to the 11 people in his own family, Elhadjimi (pictured below) is also hosting a displaced family of 10 in his house in Toumour village, Niger. Although he doesn't complain, the situation is placing considerable strain on him and his family.

As result of this generosity, communities are becoming quickly impoverished, multiplying the numbers of people already in need of assistance and forcing both host communities and displaced people to put themselves in danger to meet their basic needs.



“We eat together, we pray together, we share the water, the courtyard, and our food. They must remain here as long as it takes for the situation to stabilize.”

Elhadjimi, 63, host, Toumour village, Niger.  
Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam

# THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE RESPONSE

Overshadowed by governments' focus on political and military objectives, the magnitude of this unfolding humanitarian crisis goes woefully unseen and unaddressed.

The international community and the governments of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon were slow to recognize and acknowledge the scale of this crisis, and as a result, the humanitarian response has lacked capacity, coordination and funds.

World leaders will meet on 19 and 20 September 2016 at two high level summits in New York to discuss how to share responsibility for refugees. IDPs, however, will receive hardly any attention. The Lake Chad Basin highlights why focusing only on displaced people who have crossed borders overlooks a large group of displaced people who have similar protection and assistance needs to refugees. While rich countries accept less than 20 percent of the world's refugees, they also give too little support to the world's poorest communities that provide the lion's share of support to refugees and displaced people. Governments in the region and international donors need to think beyond military and political approaches and take urgent action to stop people's rapid decline into poverty and potential famine.

A security approach alone will not provide a long-term solution to this crisis. The Lake Chad Basin has long suffered inequality, marginalization and underdevelopment, which have in turn bred conflict. To address this requires a comprehensive response



Child playing at St Theresa Catholic Church, Yola, Nigeria. Photo: Ibrahim Dung/Oxfam.

from those working in the humanitarian, development and security sectors. As well as an urgent increase in the humanitarian response, attention must be paid to addressing the underlying drivers and root causes of the conflict.

## Our Collective Response

ACF, Action Aid, Christian Aid, COOPI, CRS, DRC, International Medical Corps, Intersos, IRC, Mercy Corps, NRC, Oxfam, Plan International, PUI and Save the Children are supporting people affected by the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin through providing water, sanitation, hygiene, food, nutrition and livelihood support, shelter, education, health and protection activities.

All sources can be found in the full-length version of this report, published on 19 August 2016.

*Lake Chad's Unseen Crisis: Voices of refugees and internally displaced people from Niger and Nigeria.*  
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/lake-chads-unseen-crisis-voices-of-refugees-and-internally-displaced-people-fro-618488>



Young girl, Sayam refugee camp, Diffa, Niger. Photo: Vincent Tremeau/Oxfam

“ We planned to sleep in the jungle at night and return to our land during the day. Unfortunately it did not work and the market of Tchoukoudjani was attacked, they abducted people, burned houses. It’s been a year since we fled, and now we will have to start over again.”

Madou, 48, male IDP, who was moving with his family from Kindjandi spontaneous site in Niger to a camp to try to access assistance

“ We have been here for 13 months and will never return to our village. I was a wholesaler. I exported merchandise to Cameroon. I had a house and a car, but now we have nothing.”

Moustafa, 60, male refugee from Bama, Nigeria, now living in Gagamari village, Niger

“ For now, I can’t go home. But if peace comes, I hope we will return.”

Maikossai, 45, female refugee from Damassak, Nigeria, now living in Gagamari village, Niger

“ I decided to go back to see things for myself. There were no schools, the water had been contaminated with dead bodies; only the elderly were living there. The daily sound of gunfire and bombs frightened me. We agreed that I would stay in Yola with the children since they have started school. It makes me very happy that they have their education after everything that’s happened. We’ve been relying on the church for food and on organizations like Oxfam and ICRC.”

Brenda, 38, female IDP, St Theresa Catholic Church, Yola, Nigeria

