

# Country profile Niger

World Vision

## GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of Niger is a landlocked country in western Africa and is over 650 kilometres from the sea. Its area is approximately the same as the Northern Territory.

It is one of the hottest countries in the world, with the Sahara Desert occupying much of the northern section. The climate in the north is mostly hot, dry and dusty. There is a rainy season from July to October each year, during which time almost all the annual rain falls. The hot season lasts from February to June, during which time temperatures regularly reach 50 degrees centigrade, and when dust-storms are common.

## PEOPLE

Niger's population is 16.1 million. Nearly 90% of the population lives in the greener south. The main ethnic groups are Hausa (56%), Djerma (22%), Fulani (8.5%) and Tuareg (8%). The Fulani and Tuareg are both nomadic people living mainly in the north of the country.

The official language is French, but Hausa, Arabic and Songhai are other major languages. Some 85% of the population is Muslim; the remainder are Christian or animist.

## HISTORY

Niger once shared the destiny of several great African empires and kingdoms. These included the Songhai, Bournou and Hausa kingdoms. From the 13th century, these were receptive to Islam and adopted Arabic writing.

The colonial conquest of Niger was accomplished by the French in 1900. There was ethnic resistance to this conquest, particularly in the north where a Tuareg revolt took place from 1916-1919. Niger formally became a French colony in 1922.

Niger colonial history and development then paralleled that of other French West African territories. Niger became an independent Republic in 1960 and was led by an elected president and government until a military coup in 1974.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries  
The University of Texas at Austin.

The next twenty five years were marked by political instability, military coups and droughts that left Niger one of the poorest and least developed nations in the world.

In 1999, Mamadou Tandja was democratically elected and won a second term in December 2004.

## ECONOMY

Niger is listed on the UNDP's Human Development Index as the second poorest country in the world. A key economic reality for Niger is its extremely harsh climate and inhospitable geographical features – it is landlocked and less than 3% of the land is productive. However, subsistence farming and stock-rearing contribute approximately 50% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and nearly three-quarters of the labour force is employed in this sector. Based principally on agriculture and livestock breeding, the country's economy is still largely at the mercy of the varied climate.

Recent industrialization has included the development of mining, particularly uranium, gold mining and oil exploration. The main food crops are: millet, sorghum, peanuts, black-eyed beans, rice, maize, potatoes, sugar cane, manioc (cassava). Although agriculture dominates the economy, agricultural exports do not earn high enough prices to cover the cost of imports. Locust infestations and inadequate rainfall resulted in a major food crisis in 2005 that continues to impact some 3.3 million people in almost 4,000 villages.

Niger depends upon large amounts of overseas aid. Facing a huge foreign debt in the 1980s, Niger accepted loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and had to agree to strict conditions including devaluing the currency, spending cuts and reduction of public service staff. In 2006, Niger qualified for cancellation of all of its IMF debt.



A Nigerien girl drinks water from a borehole constructed in her community with World Vision's help.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

Traditionally, many Nigeriens lived in family clusters of huts on their own farmland, while others like the Tuareg and Fulani are nomadic. However, chronic food shortages force increasing numbers into the towns and cities in search of food supplies, and many men travel to neighbouring countries in search of employment.

Rural homes are usually built of banco (mud-brick) and are square and flat-roofed. Some use newer building materials such as cement, with tin roofs. In rural areas most families do not have safe clean water or sanitation and women and girls commonly walk 4–6 kilometres to fetch water that may well be contaminated. The basic diet consists of millet, a cereal which makes up around 90% of Niger's crop production. Women and girls spend long hours each day pounding millet in wooden buckets to grind it down into a flour which can be cooked as a paste. It is also fed to young children, although it does not have the nutrients necessary to maintain healthy growth.

Conditions are impoverished, and most rural communities do not have electricity or running water. Most communities are reachable only along unsealed roads of earth or sand which become impassable during the rainy season.

## HEALTH

The country holds one of the highest under-five mortality rates in the world (160 per 1000 live births).

Serious health problems include malnutrition, malaria (spread by mosquitoes) and infectious diseases. Women's health particularly is affected by heavy workloads and anaemia (iron deficiency), made worse by malaria. Maternal mortality rates are also amongst the highest in the world. The extremely high chronic (long-term) child malnutrition rates mean that when food-shocks (such as the 2005-6 crisis) do occur, large numbers of children are highly vulnerable and succumb to starvation and diseases, with high resulting death-rates.



Mothers and children outside the clinic gather for nutrition training by World Vision.

## Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	NIGER	AUSTRALIA
Population	16.1 million	22.6 million
Urban population (as % of total)	17.2%	89.3 %
GNI per capita (PPP US\$)	\$641	\$34,431
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	52%	100%
Population living on less than \$1.25 a day (PPP US\$)	43.1%	0%
Adult literacy rate	28.7%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	54.7 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	160	3

United Nations Development Programme.  
Human Development Report 2011, UNICEF 2008

## EDUCATION

Niger has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world and less than half the children are enrolled in primary school. Fewer girls attend school than boys.

In 2000, the government held widespread consultations with teachers' unions, parents, and aid donors and developed a 10 year program to improve education outcomes. Enrolments have increased, but even greater progress is needed if Niger's youth are to have a chance at a meaningful education.

Child labour is high. Many children are kept out of schools to work on the land during harvest time. Children are used in a wide variety of jobs visible to the public, including basic services (litter-picking), working in markets, herding and driving animals, selling items (such as cell-phone cards) on the street, and transporting goods (e.g. pulling carts, carrying boxes). This also has a negative impact on education.

## WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN NIGER

- has a large water-provision scheme aimed at providing clean water for rural communities.
- runs a variety of health initiatives to improve the health status of rural communities to compliment nutrition and water programming.
- maintains child nutrition programs for malnourished children under five in the Tillaberi, Zinder and Maradi regions of Niger. Pregnant and breast-feeding women are also being targeted by these programs.
- distributes, in partnership with the World Food Programme, cereal, beans, high energy food supplements and oil to beneficiaries from villages near the Maradi region.
- constructs cereal banks in addition to those that already exist and is running an agro-forestry program to address long-term food security.

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