ONE YEAR ON FROM THE SAHEL CRISIS: A REVIEW OF THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

–– OUTCOME DOCUMENT ––

One year after the international community launched a massive humanitarian response to the food and nutritional crisis in the Sahel region of Africa, leaders of humanitarian and development agencies, government representatives from affected countries and major donors met on 20 February 2013 at the headquarters of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in Rome for a High-level Event to: review progress made; discuss lessons learned during the response; and identify additional steps to build resilience in the Sahel.

Leaders agreed that the large-scale response helped to avert a humanitarian catastrophe. However, the achievements of the timely and effective response to the crisis need to be maintained and protected by robust efforts to build resilience in the Sahel: Millions of people in the region are still affected by drought, with close to 1.5 million children under the age of five at risk of severe acute malnutrition. There is a high risk of future shocks, due to increased rates of poverty and chronic malnutrition, extreme weather, environmental degradation, low investment in agriculture, market volatility and continuously high prices. In addition, conflict in Mali and its spill-over humanitarian and development effects is threatening to reverse progress made in the region.

The successful response in 2012 must be considered the beginning of a collective effort to change the pattern of recurring drought and food insecurity, address the root causes of the crisis and build long-term resilience. This requires continued commitment to integrated, multi-sectoral programmes. Humanitarian and development action should be closely linked to meet the immediate food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable while concurrently investing in the capacity of vulnerable people and countries to manage risks on their own and build resilience.

Participants highlighted the following success factors of the response:

1. **Early warning and early action**. Early warning and preparedness paid off, allowing for a fast and effective response by governments and many donors. It helped to avert a major crisis. The Sahel crisis response illustrated that preventive action, including governments' early action to address the deteriorating nutrition levels through anticipatory response measures and programmes, made a real difference.

2. **Government leadership**. The fact that national and regional strategies were soon in place, based on early warning and comprehensive vulnerability assessments, was key. These national and regional plans provided an essential

platform for a coordinated and sustainable response supported by the international community.

3. **Multi-sectoral approaches.** Based on the recognition that a food or nutrition crisis is not about food alone, the international community delivered an integrated multi-sectoral response, which addressed food, agriculture, nutrition, water and sanitation, and health. In addition, efficient response tools were used, for instance: cash and vouchers; special nutrition programmes to prevent severe malnutrition; or food-for-work programmes that build smallholder farmers' self-reliance and resilience.

4. **Combined humanitarian and development assistance.** Delivering an integrated response implied a closer and more strategic alignment of humanitarian and development interventions, based on a common assessment of the needs and with the common objective of building community resilience at scale. Many donors recognized that investing in various areas helped mobilize both humanitarian and development funds, thus permitting collective action.

5. **Focus on the most vulnerable.** The response was focused on the most vulnerable, including children under the age of five and women, whose coping capacity had been further eroded since the 2010 crisis. Comprehensive analysis proved essential in enabling a targeted response.

Participants also highlighted a number of challenges and issues that deserve future attention:

1. **Building systemic resilience.** Challenges remain in supporting long-term, sustainable solutions to recurring food and nutrition crises. The objective must be to build "systemic resilience", which includes peace-building, governance, stabilization, etc., to address the underlying drivers of crises, alongside investments in food and agriculture. In this respect, participants looked forward to the integrated UN strategy for the Sahel prepared under the responsibility of UNSG Special Envoy Romano Prodi. Without a broad approach to resilience based on a common understanding of risks and vulnerability, there is a danger that conflict, fragility and instability undermine progress. The crisis in Mali illustrates the close linkages between food security and national and regional security.

2. **Moving the development agenda.** To avoid future crises in the Sahel, meaningful progress towards long-term, inclusive development and good governance is essential. Responsible investments that create economic opportunity and decent work, as well as social protection floors are urgently

needed to address the factors that have contributed to a continuously deteriorating situation in the Sahel. Priority action areas include sustainable agricultural production and food and nutrition security, as well as livestock, soils, water, energy, education, health etc. At the same time, the right policy framework must be in place to foster inclusive development efforts, and pressing food and nutrition needs must be addressed alongside long-term resilience building.

3. **Investing in the capacity of governments, communities and women**. Despite strong government leadership in the Sahel crisis response, a greater focus on national capacity building is needed, including thorough strengthening of national and regional early warning, risk management and recovery institutions and safety nets. Investing in resilience building strategies, inclusive governance and development pathways that involve everyone on the ground helps promote good, sustainable development outcomes; development in turn promotes improved security and governance. Particular emphasis must focus not only on building the adaptive capacity of communities, given an increasing risk of extreme weather events spurred by climate change, as well as on empowering women their vital role in agriculture, food security and nutrition.

4. **Partnering for resilience**. More effective partnerships among development and humanitarian actors are needed, particularly in programmes on the ground such as in the case of Niger's "3N" initiative or the AGIR-Sahel alliance. Resilience approaches must be inclusive, involving national governments and regional organizations. Concrete resilience-building outcomes such as strengthening livelihoods and boosting water harvesting and irrigation must be delivered in 2013. This requires strong support from donors to align humanitarian intervention with the region's development agenda; reform of the aid architecture; address the challenge of funding prevention efforts; as well as the strong commitment of UN agencies to enhance cooperation on the ground and move the resilience agenda forward together. The AGIR-Sahel alliance offers a useful platform for mobilizing key stakeholders around concrete resilience-building actions in the Sahel.

5. S**ustaining progress**. The focus on resilience and the commitment to collaborate must be maintained over the coming years. Success breeds success, thus commitment must not fade along with media attention. This requires good documentation of the successes and achievements as well as of the lessons learned. It also requires readiness by all actors in the international community to take rapid and concerted action when faced with early warning signs of a potential humanitarian disaster. And it requires predictability and sustainability of investments in development at the local and regional level.