



Food security community-based surveillance mechanism:

Experiences and lessons learned from national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in the Sahel region

Introduction

Since 2020, three National Societies (NSs) in the Sahel, namely the Mauritanian Red Crescent, the Burkina Faso Red Cross and the Chad Red Cross, have been engaged in **food security and livelihoods community-based surveillance** by establishing **community based sentinel sites (CSSs)**. These sentinel sites, chosen according to criteria detailed in the [Village Selection](#) section, aim to represent a specific geographical or administrative area. Sentinel sites are used to **monitor the food and market situation** in agro-pastoral areas facing high levels of food and nutrition insecurity, and are integrated into **National Early Warning Mechanisms**. This system is described as community-based because it is driven by the communities that ensure its functioning.

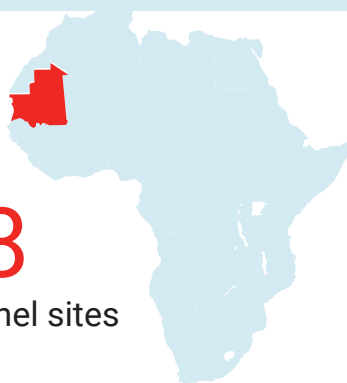
This community-based surveillance approach has many advantages:



- It makes it possible to collect information as close as possible to local realities, thus offering a precise vision of community needs and dynamics.
- It provides data faster than national mechanisms, which are often more complex and take longer to deploy.
- It facilitates direct discussion between different community members, thus strengthening collaboration and mutual understanding.
- It actively engages communities in the evaluation and monitoring of their own situation, promoting their ownership and autonomy.
- It helps to identify the underlying causes of problems related to food, nutrition, livelihoods and markets, and to co-create local, adapted and sustainable solutions.

28

sentinel sites

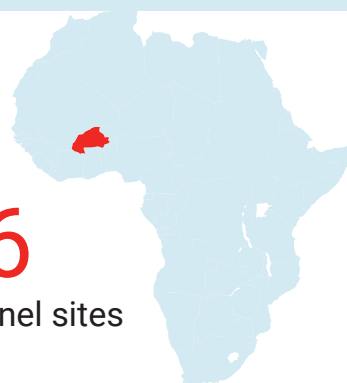


Mauritania

In Mauritania, the Red Crescent (MRC) has, since 2020, established a food security and livelihood community-based surveillance mechanism (FSL CBS) in the Assaba region in the southwest of the country. To date, this system extends over the five departments of the region with **28 community-based sentinel sites**.

16

sentinel sites

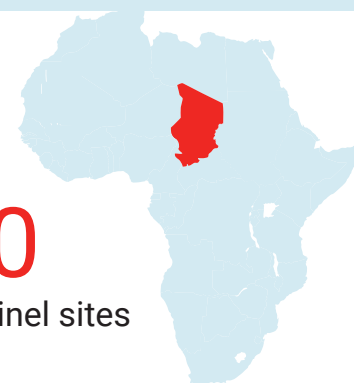


Burkina Faso

The **Burkinabe Red Cross (CRBF)** began its activities in this sector at the end of 2021. Currently, it manages **16 sentinel sites** spread between the province of Sanmatenga and the province of Bam, in the North-Central region.

30

sentinel sites



Chad

As for the **Red Cross of Chad (CRT)**, it also began its intervention in 2021. The monitoring mechanism is currently provided by **30 sentinel sites**, including 20 in the department of Batha West and 10 in the department of Kimiti.



Mauritanian Red Crescent staff talking with a member of the Ghabra sentinel site, Barkeol department, Mauritania, © British Red Cross

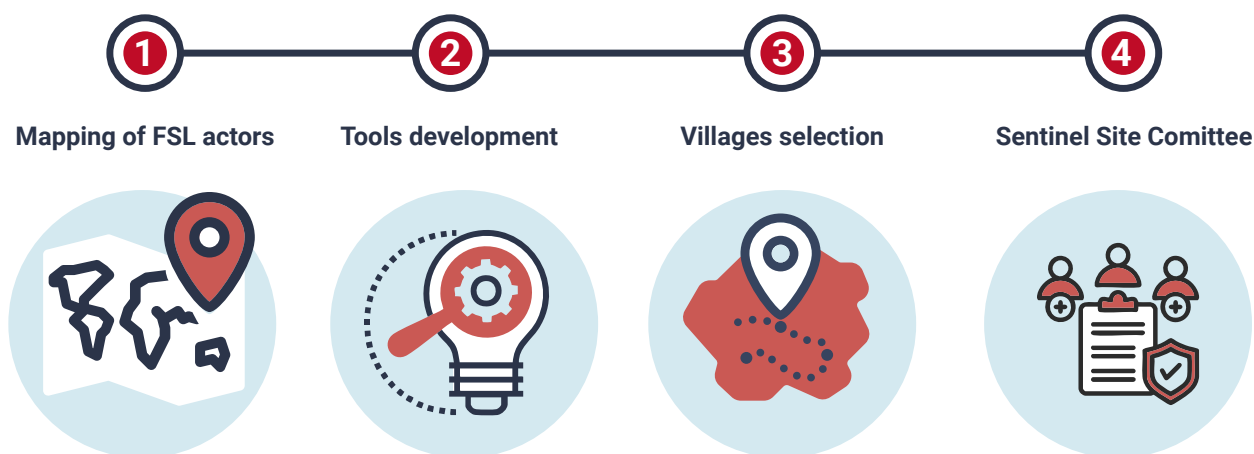
Objective of a Community- Based Surveillance Mechanism

This mechanism contributes to the regular production of data to **monitor the evolution of the food security situation** and to alert key actors (National Early Warning Systems, State Services, NGOs, UN agencies, donors, and communities) in real-time on the deterioration of food security in targeted areas. This facilitates the precise identification of affected areas and allows for anticipatory action before a crisis emerges, thus minimizing damage and the number of people impacted.

Various indicators such as **rainfall, crop production, livestock health, food consumption, market dynamics, coping strategies, and nutrition** are collected via tablets/phones and Kobo tools by community volunteers.

A very specific example of the use of this data is in the Cadre Harmonisé analyses¹. The data collected by the NSs are used as “sufficiently reliable” evidence to classify the levels of food and nutrition insecurity in a targeted area (IPC analysis). Other practical applications include integrating these data into Early Warning and Early Action Protocols (or forecast-based financing – see the [comparative advantages of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the community-based surveillance mechanisms](#) section for more details) or sharing this information with communities so that they can incorporate it into their communal development plans or contingency plans.

Implementation steps



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¹ **The Cadre Harmonisé** is a tool used in the Sahel and West Africa regions to classify the levels of food and nutrition insecurity. It makes it possible to coordinate actors (governments, and humanitarian agencies) using a common methodology to analyse the risks of food and nutrition insecurity. The aim is to provide reliable and comparable information to anticipate food crises and guide interventions. It classifies areas into different phases of food insecurity (from 1 to 5), thus facilitating decision-making and humanitarian response. <http://cadreharmonise.org/>

1



Mapping of other actors working in surveillance

It is essential to list and contact the different actors working in this area. These can be State actors (such as the National Early Warning System, the High Commission for Food Security, or any other depending on the country), NGOs (OXFAM, Action Against Hunger, Vétérinaires Sans Frontières...), FewNet, FAO, WFP, etc.

2



Tools Development

For the development of monitoring tools and processes (data collection, storage servers, analysis tools, validation processes, newsletters, etc.), it is essential to start by looking at existing resources at the national level as well as those used by actors involved in community-based surveillance. The goal is to align with the tools and processes already in place, to avoid the creation of a parallel system.

3



Villages selection

The choice of villages for the location of the sentinel sites is made following pre-established criteria which ensures that each sentinel site represents a large geographical area with similar conditions.

1. Geography: at least one sentinel site per commune and per Livelihood Zone.
2. Market accessibility: the objective is to represent both villages located far from the markets and those nearby, to reflect the different economic realities.
3. Demographic representativeness: ensure that the selected sites are representative of the population in size and diversity.
4. Safe accessibility: sentinel sites must be located in areas where access is possible without a major security risk for those who travel.

When villages in a commune have many differences in livelihood strategies, 2 CSSs are installed to represent the livelihood zones. Similarly, if the municipality is too large, 2 CSSs are installed.

The administrative authorities at the municipal, provincial/regional and departmental levels (town hall, provincial officials, prefectures or others) are consulted in the selection of CSSs. In some countries, it is the administrative authority that officially validates the creation of the CSS committee.

The administrative and communal authorities are informed and sensitized on the objectives of the project, on the creation of CSSs, on the process of identifying members of village committees including focal points, on their roles and responsibilities, as well as on the data collection methodology.

Representatives of the local Red Cross/Red Crescent committees (regional/provincial/county) participate in all communication about the project and in the formation of CSS committees.

4



Sentinel Site Committee

The identification of CSS committee members is done in consultation with the Village General Assemblies at the site level, to ensure inclusive representation of the whole community in the committees. It is essential to ensure the involvement of village chiefs and key people in the community, and to ensure compliance with the prerequisites defined and specified below.

The committee is made up of people from the community (including the surrounding villages) who have voluntarily decided to become members.

The committee must be made up of 10 to 15 people, a reasonable number that allows for effective management, and facilitates decision-making while ensuring a diversity of profiles.

The members of the CSS committee have different profiles, representing the socio-economic composition of the community, namely:

- the diversity of livelihood groups (farmers, herders, cooperative members, traders, teachers, health workers, etc.),
- gender, i.e. a good balance between women and men,
- age, i.e. a good distribution between young and old,
- cultural or ethnic representativeness,
- levels of vulnerability (people living with disabilities, level of wealth, etc.)

The focal point will be identified among the members of the committee. They are a volunteer and should live in the locality to ensure they are well positioned to understand local dynamics. Focal points are trained, in the local language, on the approach to community-based sentinel sites, the use of tools, data recording and collection.

The National Red Cross/Red Crescent creates a WhatsApp group that includes all focal points from all CSSs. This mechanism aims to facilitate communication, strengthen coordination and allow for quick troubleshooting related to the questionnaire or entry in KOB0. Audio messages can be exchanged for those who do not practice writing.

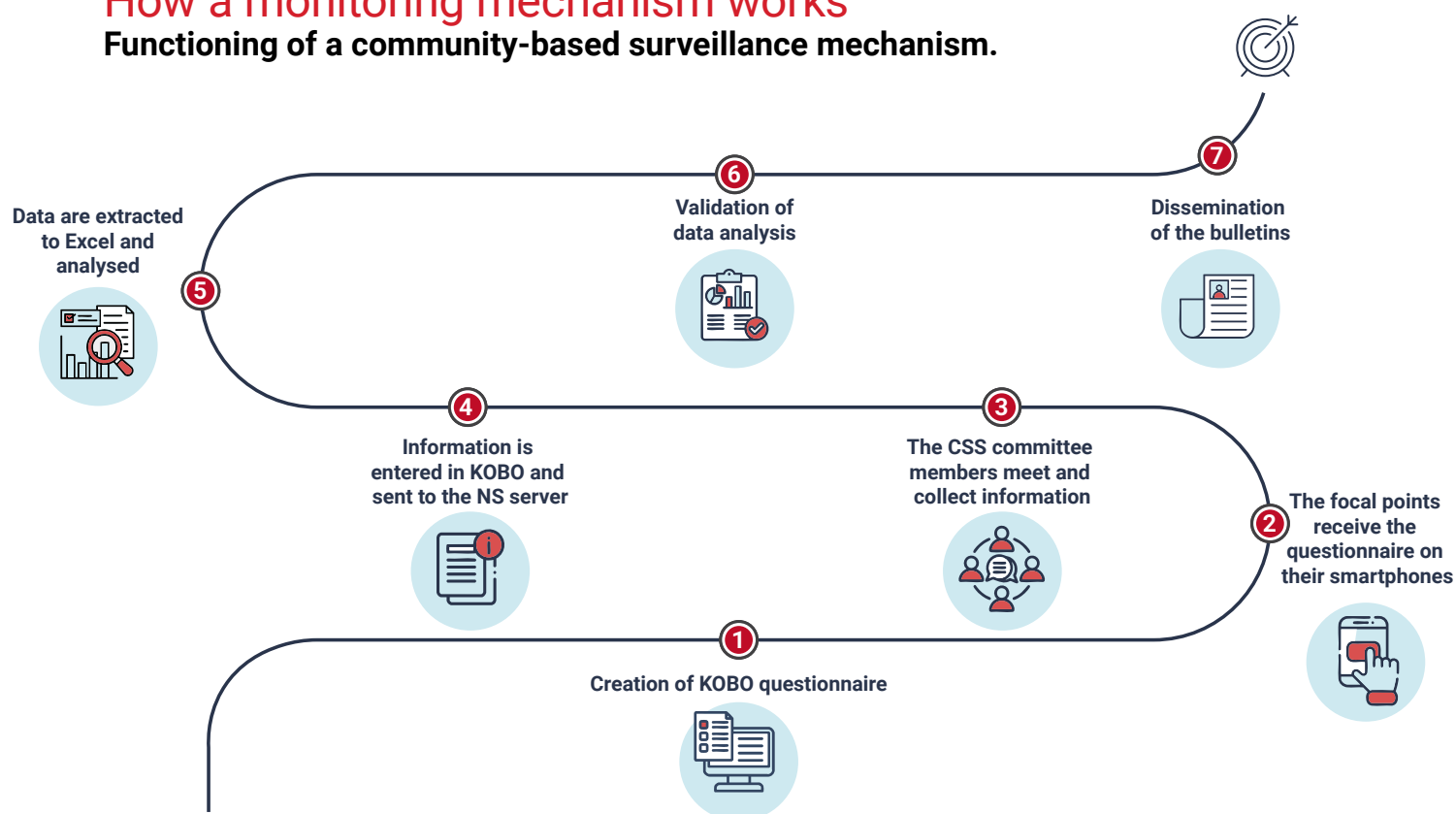
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Meeting with members of the community-based sentinel site in Dahisma, Sanmatenga province, Burkina Faso, © Burkina Faso Red Cross



How a monitoring mechanism works

Functioning of a community-based surveillance mechanism.



- 1** The NS develops a questionnaire/collection tool on Kobo to collect required information.
- 2** A volunteer focal point, identified among the members of the CSS committee, receives the questionnaire/collection tool on the smartphone provided to them by the NS.
- 3** The focal point is responsible for convening the monthly meeting with all members of the committee to coordinate the data collection. The data should be collected towards the end of the month to ensure as much data as possible for the month concerned is gathered.
- 4** The focal point completes the data collection form and sends it to the NS server on time, before the end of the month.
- 5** The data available on the server is exported to Excel for analysis by a coordinator at the NS headquarters. This data is analysed at least every quarter, but it is recommended that the data is reviewed monthly to ensure the data is of good quality and that all sentinel sites are sending the information regularly.
- 6** The data analysed on a quarterly basis is submitted for validation during a meeting with the regional and/or departmental authorities and the technical services. The quarterly data analysis and validation workshop makes it possible to triangulate the information collected by the CSSs and those available within the regional or departmental technical services of the State.
- 7** Once validated, the results of the data analysis are disseminated through a quarterly newsletter. The bulletin is shared with the other FSL actors in the country.

Comparative advantages of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the community-based surveillance mechanisms



National coverage thanks to the local branches: The NSs have branches located at regional, departmental and sometimes municipal levels. These structures are permanent in the country. This makes it possible to collect data at a fairly precise local level.

Privileged humanitarian access: NSs enjoy international and national recognition as humanitarian actors. Their community roots, humanitarian principles and status guarantee them privileged access even in isolated areas or where humanitarian access is restricted. Its local structures, having already been established before the emergence of conflict or insecurity, continue to function.



Auxiliary of the public authorities, a permanent member of the Humanitarian Country Team, in many cases, and an active member of the national Cadre Harmonisé unit: these statutes have led the National Early Warning Unit of Governments to request NSs for data collection to feed the Cadre Harmonisé and humanitarian data analyses.

Community anchoring that facilitates communication with communities and the dissemination of information: NSs rely on their decentralized structures and network of volunteers from the local communities in which they live, share the same conditions and the same language. They are well placed to popularize information and make it understandable by the general public and at the same time raise the expectations and realities of communities. The information from the bulletins and alerts can therefore be disseminated quickly (relayed between the technical authorities and the communities).



Expertise in community-based preparedness and risk reduction NSs have tools and operational plans that integrate the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments of communities (VCA), and that identify the risks to which communities are exposed. These tools also include the development of community-based actions to mitigate these risks, including early action in the event of alerts. Thus, preparedness plans can be implemented with communities while waiting for the release of larger-scale response or mitigation plans.

Forecast-based financing: The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has been investing in the development of Early Warning and Early Action Mechanisms for several years. Based on climate and weather forecasts, risk analysis and vulnerability profiles, these mechanisms anticipate the coming of a disaster and its impact (floods, drought) and immediately release resources (financial or otherwise) to implement early action risk prevention or mitigation, already agreed in advance with various stakeholders in the form of an "Early Action Plan". Innovation rests on making funds available and taking action before disaster strikes. Funds are released from trigger levels. This mechanism can be implemented as soon as the first alerts are issued by the bulletins.



Lessons Learned

Complementarity/alignment. Complementarity and integration with existing national Early Warning Systems are essential in order to avoid the establishment of a parallel mechanism.

In **Mauritania**, the National Society has joined forces with other actors to spread out and expand the geographical coverage of the community monitoring mechanism set up by the Food Security Observatory, the World Food Programme and the NGO Action Against Hunger: each actor covers a region or a department.

In **Burkina Faso** and **Chad**, the government-led Early Warning System (EWS), which does not have an extended community-based surveillance mechanism down to the village level, is complemented by information collected by National Societies. The latter enriches the data collected at the provincial or regional levels by the EWS or during national food security surveys, with regular information to monitor the evolution of the indicators in the field.

Leadership and ownership of national Early Warning Systems. This aspect is especially important when creating tools or collection levels that are additional to existing systems. The government-led EWS team should be actively involved in the various stages and actively encouraged to take the lead. This promotes the integration of the mechanism into the national EWS, but above all, sustainability.

In **Chad**, the National Society signed a formal collaboration agreement with SISAAP (Information System on Food Security and Early Warning) at the beginning of this initiative. This has allowed SISAAP to take full ownership of the process, to manage the central server, and for the data collected by the CSSs to be transferred directly to this server. SISAAP then takes the lead in the processing and analysis of the data and participates in the dissemination of information jointly with the National Society.

Coordination/harmonisation of methodology and tools between all actors involved in the community-based surveillance at the national level, to ensure a common basis for analysis and comparison. It is also necessary to coordinate the geographical distribution to avoid duplication and to broaden the geographical coverage of the mechanism.

In the context of **Mauritania**, all actors working in community-based food security surveillance have adopted the same tools and methodology, so that the data collected are the same in all regions covered by the mechanism and are also comparable, facilitating the analysis and establishment of validated alert thresholds for all regions, and decision-making.

Coordination efforts are planned in **Chad** and **Burkina Faso** to move in the same direction and coordinate with other actors working in food security surveillance.



Workshop to define the methodology of the surveillance mechanism in Chad, with Government actors, and other organizations working in this field, © Red Cross of Chad

Decentralization: Working with the decentralized structures of the National EWS and local branches of the NS (as well as strengthening its capacity) is key in a community-based monitoring mechanism.

For example, in **Mauritania**, the National Society organizes quarterly data analysis and validation meetings involving the decentralized technical services of the State (agriculture, livestock, health, etc.). These meetings make it possible to cross-reference the data with the information collected by these services and to strengthen their analytical capacities. It is also these services that quickly notify the national system in the event of an alert, following the national Early Warning Protocol.

At the same time, the Mauritanian Red Crescent is working to build capacities of the National Society's local committees to ensure regular monitoring of activities, thus ensuring the quality of the data collected by CSSs before they are transmitted to the national level. This approach also aims to reduce the costs of the mechanism, making it more sustainable and less dependent on external financing.

Setting alert thresholds. Actors involved in the surveillance mechanism in Mauritania have established alert thresholds for some key slow-onset indicators. The idea is to monitor the evolution of these indicators on a monthly basis, and in real-time, and not wait until the end of each quarter, when the analysis of the data collected over the last 3 months is consolidated, to trigger the alert if the predefined thresholds are reached. This makes it possible to quickly trigger early actions adapted to the levels reached by these indicators.

Examples of alert thresholds are:

For agriculture: Trigger an alert, if data received within a Moughataa (department) show that more than 50% of CSSs report low to zero expected production levels at the end of September.

For livestock: Trigger an alert, if the data received within a Moughataa show that more than 50% of CSSs report very insufficient to insufficient grazing levels from the end of August.



Quarterly data validation workshop with technical services and regional authorities, September 2024, Assaba, Mauritania,
© Mauritanian Red Crescent

Monthly flash updates. Quarterly bulletins are shared with relevant stakeholders, but it is strongly recommended to complement this with a monthly update when the collected data shows something concerning. This approach enables timely sharing of critical points of attention, especially when indicators reach alert thresholds, without having to wait three months for the next bulletin. Delaying action by three months could significantly hinder effective responses to urgent needs.

In **Mauritania**, the World Food Programme is supporting the National Food Security Observatory to develop a dashboard to automatically analyze alert thresholds and facilitate closer monitoring as soon as information is collected each month. This will make it easier to publish and share monthly flash updates.

Sharing information with communities. A community-based surveillance mechanism should enable affected communities to analyse their own reality, identify actions to be taken promptly and respond at the local level.

The information collected by this mechanism is provided by the communities themselves, but it must be ensured that, after analysis, the information accompanied by the recommendations is returned to the communities, so that they can benefit from it and act accordingly.

The **Mauritanian Red Crescent** has opted for the development of WhatsApp audio messages in Arabic to summarize the key points from the quarterly bulletin. These messages are then shared with the Focal Points of each committee. They take advantage of the meetings of the sentinel site committees to disseminate this information to other members, as well as at other community meetings, in order to ensure wider dissemination to all members of the community.

For the **Red Cross of Chad**, the preferred channel for the communities has been community meetings. The Focal Points receive the bulletins every quarter in paper format, they have been trained to disseminate the key points of the bulletins at community meetings.

In **Burkina Faso**, the Focal Points share the information with existing Village Development Committees at the local level and with key persons from each community through regular meetings so that the members of these Committees can, in turn, share the information with the rest of the community. The Focal Points receive the quarterly newsletters in electronic format.

Systematic and wide dissemination of quarterly bulletins (and monthly flash updates, if needed) to ensure timely and informed responses, which is the primary objective of this mechanism.

Sharing of quarterly CSS bulletins:

With all the State actors concerned at different levels: the decentralized technical services – Agriculture, Livestock, Health, Water, Weather, the EWS at the different levels (national, regional, provincial), the prefectures and the town halls, etc.

With other humanitarian actors working in the coverage area: through possible coordination meetings at the area level but also through a mailing list.

With other FSL actors: this can be done through the Food Security Cluster or existing coordination mechanisms for this purpose at the national level.

With donors: through a mailing list – usually, they are also part of the Food Security Clusters.

Internally within the National Society: with the other technical departments and partners of the Movement, also through a mailing list.

Link to disaster risk reduction interventions/forecast-based financing/shock-responsive social protection: to maximize the use of data collected by this mechanism to effectively respond to needs.

How can the information collected through CBS be used beyond early warning?

Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction approach: Data from the surveillance mechanism can support communities and/or municipalities in developing contingency or local development plans (Communal Plans). These plans, tailored to the identified needs, enhance community resilience to risks and disasters.

Forecast-based financing or anticipatory actions: The information collected by the CSSs feeds into the databases of forecast-based financing mechanisms. For example, alert thresholds defined for certain key indicators can be integrated as triggers to activate such financing, enabling timely interventions before the situation deteriorates.

Shock-responsive social protection: The collected data and indicators can inform and guide decision-making on activating a shock-responsive component of a Government social protection program. This ensures a rapid response to emerging crises, targeting the most vulnerable populations.



Focus group with members of the Aldielcha Community Sentinel Site, West Batha Department, Batha Province, Chad, © Red Cross of Chad



Two women from Elveiya village food security monitoring group, Mauritania, © Mauritanian Red Crescent