When I visited Niger in 2010, I was concerned that the Government of Niger and international community had not acted sufficiently and quickly on the early warnings which would have prevented a rapid deterioration in the food security situation. This year is different with a commitment from the Government and the international community to act from lessons learned from the last drought. The Government of Niger, like many others in the Sahel, raised the alarm early that this would be a difficult year. The situation is severe, with chronic food insecurity and persistently high rates of malnutrition compounded by insecurity.

I was pleased to undertake this visit with Helen Clark to show the importance of dealing with the immediate humanitarian situation and the need to build the long term resilience of communities in Niger. We were briefed by the Prime Minister of Niger and Government officials on the ambitious national emergency response plan that was drawn up to help meet the needs of people affected by the food and nutrition crisis. The Government intends to provide over 850,000 households with targeted assistance until the end of the lean season, and has already raised 90,000 billion FCFA (US$185 million) out of the requested 211 billion FCFA ($425 million) to cover the entire response.

The Nigerien Government’s plans cover both emergency response, as well as building longer-term resilience. This represents a comprehensive approach to food and nutrition security. However, the Prime Minister and Government officials reminded us that a number of issues need to be addressed simultaneously for this approach to work. Population growth and management of natural resources, especially water, are two areas where urgent attention is critical.

The international humanitarian community is supporting this plan through the strategy outlined in the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) for 2012, which covers the areas of food security, nutrition, health, water and sanitation (WASH), protection and early recovery. It includes 44 projects with a total budget of US$229 million. The CAP is currently 10 per cent funded and will be revised in line with the most recent assessment.

UN agencies and their partners are committed to building national capacity and have included this as a core element of UN programming. This will reaffirm national ownership and ensure a lasting impact. We also recognize the importance of focusing on household economies and empowering women, who often have to support large families while men leave for long periods of time to look for work.
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Humanitarian interventions are crucial to save lives and alleviate suffering, but they will not put an end to chronic vulnerability in the Sahel. That is why we must better align humanitarian interventions and longer-term development initiatives under a common framework.

This is already happening. During our mission we visited a gardening project which showed the capacity of Nigerien communities to build resilience to drought by using new irrigation technologies and diversifying their diets to prevent malnutrition. Such initiatives are not yet being done at scale but they are the kind of interventions promoted by the Presidential plan “Nigeriens to Feed Nigeriens.”

There is still a lot more to do. During our mission we also visited a health centre in the Tillabery area that provides nutritional support. It was crowded with women and their children. Some of the mothers had walked more than two hours to reach the centre which had little capacity to cope with the demand – and demand will only increase with the approaching lean season. Properly resourced early action projects to meet people’s needs before they reach crisis point and require emergency intervention would mean centres like the one we saw in Tillabery would be empty. That is our goal.

It is urgent that donors provide the funding needs outlined in the Niger CAP to support early response, such as the nutrition centre, while also investing in longer term development, including through the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Accelerated Framework. Investing now will help save lives and strengthen the resilience of millions of people that we know are chronically vulnerable. Moreover, as the lessons of past crises have taught us, an early response will cost less than delayed action.

Such an approach requires that we strengthen dialogue and collaboration between humanitarian and development actors, and we must be sure to involve Governments, regional organizations, civil society, development partners and the private sector, building on existing Government plans.

Thank you