



### Strong El Niño will drive high needs across Southern Africa through early 2025

The ongoing [strong El Niño event](#), which is forecast to reach peak intensity in late 2023 and dissipate by mid-2024, is expected to drive below-average rainfall across much of Southern Africa (Figure 1). The rainfall deficits will likely result in below-average 2024 harvests, including in surplus-producing South Africa and Zambia. Furthermore, this shock follows localized below-average harvests in 2023 and poor macroeconomic conditions in Malawi and Zimbabwe. The negative impacts of the El Niño during the 2023/24 rainy season, including low labor opportunities and high food prices, are expected to offset any recent improvements from declining inflation. Meanwhile, other hazards in the region are also contributing to food assistance needs, including conflict in the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) (DRC) and Mozambique.

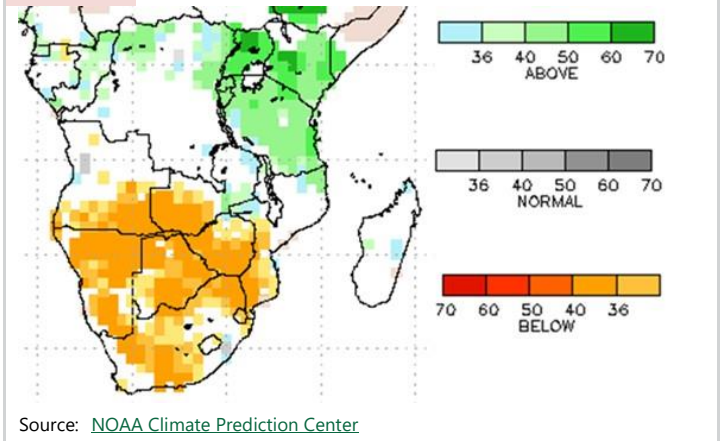
Overall, it is estimated that over 20 million people will be in need of food assistance during the January-to-March 2024 peak of the lean season. Furthermore, the expected below-average 2024 harvests will be exhausted earlier than usual, leading to comparably high food assistance needs at the start of the following lean season in late 2024 and signaling even higher needs when the lean season peaks in early 2025. Deficit-producing areas of [Zimbabwe](#), southern [Malawi](#), southern and central [Mozambique](#), and southern [Madagascar](#) are of highest concern. Governments, donors, humanitarian partners, and other stakeholders should prepare for high food assistance needs through early 2025.

The various weather shocks during the 2022/23 agricultural season resulted in [mixed harvests](#) across the region, with a bumper harvest (the second largest since 1960) in the maize triangle of South Africa. However, hot and dry conditions in the western parts of the region, and the impact of Cyclone Freddy in the eastern parts of the region, resulted in poor harvests in parts of southern Zimbabwe, southern Mozambique, and southern Malawi. Nevertheless, the above-average harvests in South Africa and Tanzania are supporting above-average [regional maize supplies](#) during the 2023/24 marketing year (MY), estimated at 6 percent above last year and 9 percent above the five-year average. During the ongoing marketing year, the Southern Africa region, which is typically self-sufficient in maize, is expected to maintain a minor surplus. This has helped stabilize maize prices, although they remain higher than last year and the five-year average across many markets in the region.

An erratic start to the 2023/24 rainy season is expected to result in below-normal labor opportunities for land preparation and planting, with a similar trend likely to occur in early to mid-2024 during the anticipated below-average 2024 harvest. Most poor households typically rely on income from casual labor and petty trade, but increased competition and lower-than-normal liquidity among middle and better-off households will likely limit households' earnings. In order to compensate, poor households are expected to continue to pursue or expand other income-earning opportunities. For example, as household dependence on market purchases for food increases, some able-bodied household members are increasingly likely to travel to urban and economic centers to seek employment and send remittances home during the July-September 2024 dry season. However, the labor market is likely inadequate to absorb this influx, and many households are likely to continue to engage in negative coping strategies in order to minimize food consumption gaps amid high staple food prices and limited purchasing power.

The anticipated below-average cereal and cash crop harvests in 2024 will also lead to an atypical increase in imported maize volumes from outside the region to meet consumer demand during the 2024/25 MY, exacerbating [already-inflated maize prices](#). Staple food prices across the region are likely to be higher than both last year and the five-year average, and the combination of high food prices and limited access to income are expected to keep household purchasing power low across the region. By the start of the 2024/25 agricultural season in October, income-earning opportunities from agricultural labor will likely be further

**Figure 1** Likelihood of below-average rainfall (shown in orange) in Southern Africa in December 2023-February 2024.



constrained by low liquidity among better-off households given a likely reduction in revenue from the expected below-average 2024 harvest.

Although not a key income source for most poor households, there is also moderate concern for impacts on livestock production. Initially, livestock body conditions are anticipated to improve in the short term as pastureland slowly regenerates with the below-average 2023/24 rainy season; however, grazing conditions are expected to deteriorate atypically early in 2024. Poor pasture and water conditions will increase the risk of an atypically high number of livestock deaths during the July to September 2024 dry season until the start of the 2024/25 rainy season in October.

Overall, the impacts of El Niño will limit poor households' ability to purchase sufficient food to meet their needs across much of the region. The exceptions include the DRC, northern Madagascar, northern Mozambique, and central and northern Malawi, where average to above-average rainfall is anticipated to support normal crop production, livestock conditions, and labor opportunities. However, in eastern DRC and Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, conflict will likely continue to limit income-earning opportunities and agricultural production despite the forecast of favorable rainfall.

Ultimately, the population in need of humanitarian assistance across Southern Africa will remain high through early 2025. After an initial peak in needs during the 2024 lean season, seasonal improvements in food security outcomes associated with the harvest in April/May 2024 are expected to be short-lived across much of the region, as household and locally produced market stocks will decline atypically early. Furthermore, in the areas of highest concern – including southern and western Zimbabwe, southern Malawi, southern and central Mozambique, and southern Madagascar – that are worst affected by rainfall deficits, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes will likely persist during the post-harvest period. At the peak of the 2024/25 lean season in early 2025, FEWS NET anticipates regional food assistance needs will rise to even higher levels than the first quarter of 2024, and some poor households in the worst-affected areas are expected to face large food consumption gaps indicative of Emergency (IPC Phase 4) in the absence of humanitarian food assistance. Governments, donors, humanitarian partners, and other stakeholders should prepare for not only considerable food assistance needs throughout 2024, but also a likely need to further scale up humanitarian assistance in late 2024 with the start of the 2024/25 lean season.

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