



Historic high needs anticipated across Southern Africa through early 2025

Food assistance needs across countries regularly monitored by FEWS NET in southern Africa¹ are expected to exceed 30 million people during the October 2024-March 2025 lean season, driven by the 2023/24 El Niño drought across much of the region and conflict in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mozambique.

In FEWS NET's drought-affected countries (excluding the DRC), needs are assessed to be 50 percent higher than the 2023/24 lean season and higher than was estimated during the peak of the last strong El Niño in 2016/17.² Since [November 2023](#), FEWS NET has warned that the strong El Niño event in 2023/24 would most likely result in drought-induced, below-average 2024 harvests across much of southern Africa, including in two of the region's key suppliers, South Africa and Zambia. Indeed, a [historic dry spell](#) and above-average temperatures in early 2024 led to [well below-average maize harvests](#) across the region (Figure 1),

ranging from a 10 percent deficit in South Africa to a 60 percent deficit in Zimbabwe compared to their respective five-year averages, according to national government and FEWS NET estimates. As of August, many poor households in the region have either nearly or completely exhausted their stocks from the 2024 harvest and are increasingly resorting to unsustainable coping strategies or experiencing food consumption gaps. Most of [Zimbabwe](#), southern [Malawi](#), southern and central [Mozambique](#), southern [Angola](#), and conflict-affected areas of [the DRC](#) are of highest concern. Governments, donors, humanitarian partners, and other stakeholders should rapidly mobilize now to respond to high food assistance needs through early 2025.

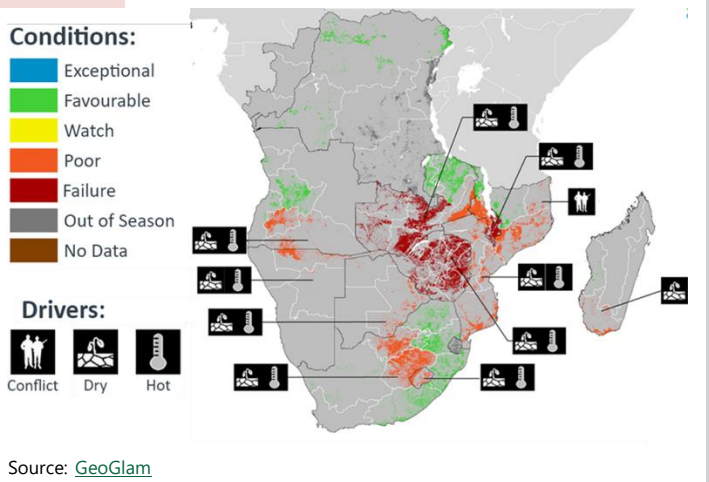
While weather forecasts provided early warning of below-average rainfall during the 2023/24 crop production season, production prospects sharply deteriorated during a historic dry spell and hot temperatures in February and March 2024. The [poor harvest](#) across the region – including in [South Africa](#) (10 percent below average) and Zambia (50 percent below average) – has resulted in tight regional maize market supply. South Africa's diminished surplus is sufficient to meet the import needs of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and Eswatini, and Tanzania's above-average surplus is also expected to partially mitigate regional supply deficits. However, FEWS NET estimates that at least an additional [3 million tons](#) of imported maize is necessary to meet total regional demand. While several countries are in the process of securing contracts to import maize from international markets, particularly in South America, constrained regional market supply is [driving inflated maize prices](#), with prices in most markets trending well above both last year and the five-year average despite seasonal declines in the post-harvest period. In [Malawi](#) and Zimbabwe, for example, maize grain prices are already around 130-150 percent above average for this time of year.

Although not a key income source for most poor households, there is also concern regarding the impacts of the strong El Niño on livestock production, particularly among cattle. Many surface water sources are already dry at the start of the July-September dry season following the poor regeneration of water and pasture conditions during the 2023/24 rainy season. While there have not been significant reports of atypical livestock deaths as of the end of July 2024, livestock deaths will likely rise in August and September during the peak of the dry season. Many poor households are already resorting to distressed livestock sales, with reported sale prices dropping to around only a quarter of normal due to atypically high supply. The

¹ FEWS NET produces monthly reports monitoring and forecasting acute food insecurity in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.

² In absolute terms, FEWS NET estimates peak food assistance needs are around 25 percent higher in 2024/25 compared to 2016/17; however, the total base population also grew by 20 percent over the same period of time. In relative terms, the share of the population in need has risen from 12 percent in 2016/17 to 13 percent in 2024/25.

Figure 1 Maize cropping conditions across southern Africa at the conclusion of the 2024 harvest



increased engagement in distressed livestock sales (particularly of cattle) to earn income for food purchases or to buy supplementary feed for the remainder of the herd, is eroding households' assets and reducing their ability to cope with future shocks.

Household access to water is also expected to become critical during the July-October dry season, given increased pressure on the water supply that is leading to atypically high rates of borehole breakdowns. The increased time and/or expenditures needed for households to either collect or purchase water is also affecting household engagement in other livelihood activities and income to purchase food. Additionally, the [Kariba Reservoir](#) – a critical water source that also generates electricity, particularly in Zimbabwe and Zambia – is only around 11 percent full (477 m) and close to the minimum operating level of 475.5 m as of late July due to the poor recharge of water sources through the 2023/24 season. More frequent and extended power cuts (rolling blackouts) will likely affect industrial and general economic activity, which will in turn likely disrupt household income-generating opportunities from off-own-farm sources.

Although [La Niña](#) conditions – associated with favorable rainfall in the southern Africa region – will become [the dominant ENSO state](#) in September-November, the long-term impacts of El Niño will persist during the October 2024-March 2025 main agricultural season. Labor demand associated with land preparation and planting is expected to be below normal due to low liquidity and a lack of in-kind payment options among middle and better-off households, who had a significant reduction in revenue from the 2023/24 harvest and typically hire poor households as laborers. Most poor households also typically rely on income from casual labor and petty trade, but increased competition and reduced demand due to lower-than-normal liquidity among middle and better-off households will likely also limit households' earnings. While the diversification of poor households' income sources – including migration to urban and economic centers to seek employment and send remittances home – is expected to mitigate the severity of food consumption gaps, the multiple constraints on sources of food and income combined with high food prices will lead to historically high food assistance needs overall.

Overall, the impacts of the 2023/24 El Niño and associated poor 2024 harvests will drive high humanitarian food assistance needs in the region until at least March 2025, when the 2024/25 harvest will begin. In the areas of highest concern (Zimbabwe, southern Malawi, southern and central Mozambique, and southern Angola) where crop production losses were highest, widespread Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes will likely persist; furthermore, some poor households are in need of food assistance to prevent more severe food consumption gaps indicative of Emergency (IPC Phase 4). Conflict in the eastern DRC and Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, will also contribute to food assistance needs by limiting income-earning opportunities and agricultural production in these locations. Despite early warning of the El Niño drought's impacts, the [Zimbabwe Drought Flash Appeal](#) is currently only 11.3 percent funded and the [Malawi Drought Flash Appeal](#) has yet to receive funding; resources allocated to the food assistance response in drought-affected areas of Mozambique and Angola also remain low. **Governments, donors, and humanitarian partners must promptly mobilize resources to respond to high food assistance needs and mitigate rising levels of hunger and acute malnutrition now and through early 2025.**

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