

COVID-19 pandemic drives global increase in humanitarian food assistance needs
Labor migration restrictions limit seasonal income earning opportunities and crop production potential

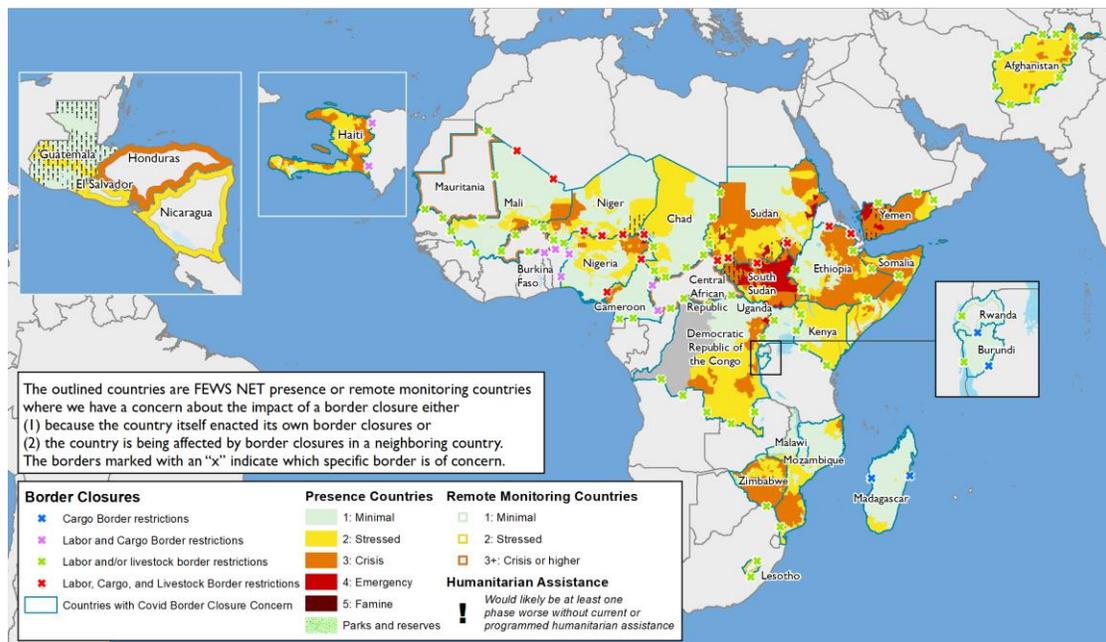
FEWS NET is monitoring the multiple impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity in the countries it covers. This Global Food Security Alert is a part of a monthly series that aims to provide an update of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity across FEWS NET geographies, highlighting countries of greatest concern. To find out more about how FEWS NET incorporates COVID-19 into its analysis, click [here](#).

COVID-19 containment measures have varied over the past month as governments balance mitigating the virus' spread with limiting the negative economic and social effects of protracted lockdowns. These measures, including border restrictions (Figure 1), limit household access to key income generating activities and contribute to atypical price volatility in some areas. The broad trend has been towards easing restrictions, although the global economic contraction continues to limit labor and self-employment opportunities. Due to this decline in income among poor households, as well as the persistence of other drivers of acute food insecurity, including conflict and weather shocks, FEWS NET estimates 90 to 100 million¹ people will be in need of humanitarian food assistance in 2020 across its 29 presence and remotely monitored countries², in line with FEWS NET's estimate in May 2020. This represents a roughly 25 percent increase relative to anticipated needs prior to the pandemic.

Status of the pandemic

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates there were 142,283 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 4,241 deaths in the 29 countries FEWS NET monitors, as of June 22, 2020. FEWS NET-monitored countries comprise about 10 percent of the global population but only 1.4 percent of confirmed COVID-19 cases to date. However, these cases are increasing exponentially, with an average of 3,290 reported daily cases in the first half of June, compared to 1,750 in May, and 340 in April. The true scale of the outbreak is likely underreported, highlighted by relatively high rates of positive tests in a number of countries, suggesting that tests are being selectively administered to those with more severe cases.

Figure 1. Border restrictions in place as of June 2020 and projected food security outcomes, June to September 2020



Source: FEWS NET

¹ FEWS NET will continue to update 2020 peak needs estimates for monitored countries each month as the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it evolve, while also accounting for potential shifts in other food security drivers. While the net total is likely to vary somewhat from the 94 million noted in April, FEWS NET expects it to remain within the range of 90 to 100 million.

² FEWS NET's presence countries include Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Yemen, and Zimbabwe; FEWS NET's remotely monitored countries include Burkina Faso, CAR, El Salvador, Honduras, Lesotho, Mauritania, Nicaragua, and Rwanda.

Current and anticipated impacts on food availability and access

The direct impacts of COVID-19 are likely negatively affecting some poor households' food security because infected households may face limited ability to engage in productive activities while sick or being quarantined. This, coupled with possible increased expenditure on health, is likely to result in fewer resources available to purchase food among infected households. The most extensive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity, though, continue to be the indirect ones, notably the loss of income-earning opportunities. As many countries have eased at least some containment measures over the past month, movement and the related engagement in casual labor and self-employment has increased in several areas, including parts of East Africa and Afghanistan. However, the COVID-19-related measures that do remain in place, including border closures that limit labor migration and restrictions on livestock markets, continue to slow trade flows and limit income-generating activities. Furthermore, global economic decline is driving lower demand for many services that generate employment opportunities for poor households. Consequently, while opportunities for earning cash have increased somewhat, compared to April when more stringent lockdown measures were in place, poor households' capacity to engage fully in labor and self-employment activities is still more limited than it was in early 2020.

Of particular concern are restrictions on the movement of agricultural labor, both within and across countries. Migratory labor constitutes a significant portion of annual cash income for many poor households, and the loss of this income increases their risk of acute food insecurity. Lower flows of migratory agricultural labor — which are being observed in some areas of East Africa (Ethiopia and South Sudan to Sudan) and West Africa (Niger/Nigeria) during the main cultivation period — also limits production potential in typically surplus-producing areas where this labor is crucial, raising concerns about the potential impact on the upcoming September/October harvest.

Furthermore, given the ongoing movement restrictions and related higher transportation costs, farmers in several areas are reporting selling their crops closer to their farm gate and at lower prices. These lower prices translate into potential gaps in annual income for poorer households. For better-off households, reduced income from crop sales may limit their capacity to hire poor households as seasonal agricultural laborers, further reducing poor households' income, while simultaneously limiting production potential.

According to available information, remittances, a key source of income for many households in the countries that FEWS NET monitors, declined in April and May relative to both early 2020 and the same time last year. In Guatemala and El Salvador, monthly remittances increased in May after a sharp decline in April, although transfers in both months were lower than the same months in 2019 and the five-year average.

Global food commodity supply chains continue to operate at near-normal levels, and in most of FEWS NET's countries, staple food prices in May followed seasonal trends with no significant deviations from April prices. Nevertheless, staple food prices remain higher than average in several countries due mostly to panic buying and trade slowdowns. Notable examples include higher prices for wheat and pulses in Afghanistan and imported staple foods in West Africa. Reductions in export earnings across FEWS NET-monitored countries, leading to local currency depreciation in countries like Nigeria and DRC, remain of high concern. In Haiti, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and South Sudan, where currencies were already depreciating on the parallel market, COVID-19 is reinforcing this downward trend. This is expected to put steady upward pressure on the prices of imported staple foods and local substitutes in these countries in the coming months. Overall, with lower income and somewhat higher staple food prices, poor households' purchasing capacity is likely to remain below normal in 2020.

Many governments and humanitarian partners have distributed high levels of assistance over the past two months. This assistance is expected to meet at least part of the increased need in several areas, including across much of Central America and in city centers of Afghanistan, Sudan, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, among others. However, the scale of need continues to exceed the assistance provided.

Projected humanitarian food assistance needs

While COVID-19 containment measures have eased in several countries, millions of households continue to face reduced income. Across the 29 countries monitored by FEWS NET, 90 to 100 million people are likely to face [Crisis \(IPC Phase 3\)](#) or worse outcomes and need urgent humanitarian food assistance in 2020 (Figure 2), an approximate 25 percent increase in food assistance needs compared to needs in 2019 and prior to the pandemic. Greater severity of acute food insecurity is also likely among some, as there were populations already in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) who now face additional reductions in income. FEWS NET also provides a peak global needs estimates for an additional 17 countries³ that it does not directly monitor. The combined estimated peak global needs for these 46 countries in 2020 is 113 million people. The high level of need is also driven by conflict, macroeconomic decline unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic, and weather shocks.

³ Angola, Botswana, Djibouti, Eswatini, Guinea, Iraq, Liberia, Namibia, Pakistan, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Syria, Tanzania, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Zambia

