Global Food Security Alert — August 28, 2020

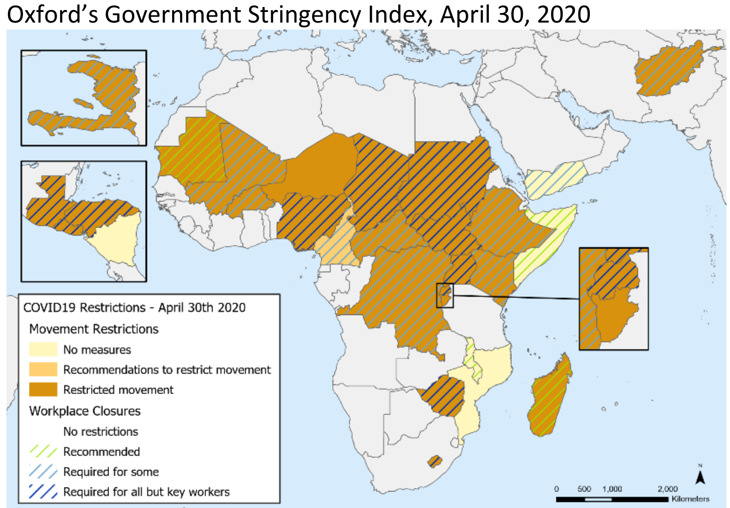
COVID-19 pandemic drives global increase in humanitarian food assistance needs

As internal movement restrictions ease, limitations to cross-border labor movements remain in place

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.

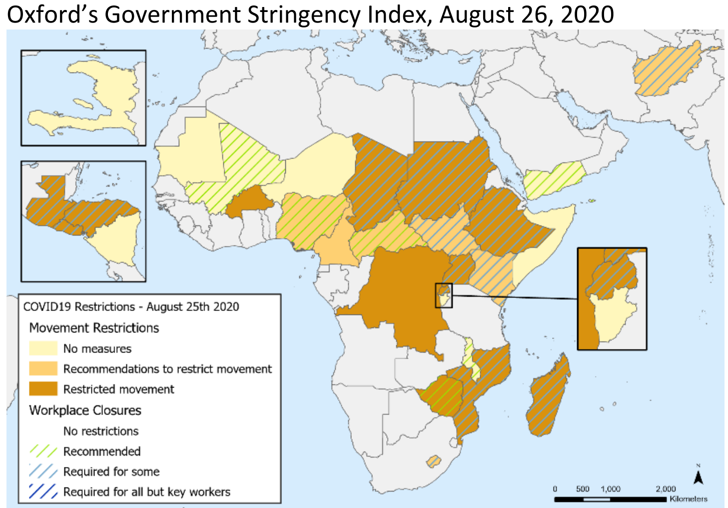
Since the WHO's pandemic declaration on March 11, 2020, measures implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19 have varied in scope, intensity, and timing across FEWS NET monitored countries. Relatively stringent measures restricting population movement were enforced in March and April, but these have eased since May. While internal movement restrictions have been gradually reduced, international border controls limiting migratory labor remain in place in most geographies. Food availability and prices are broadly following seasonal trends. However, poorer households' access to food remains limited as a result of reduced income – due to the interrelated factors of movement restrictions and reduced economic activity. FEWS NET estimates that this shock, combined with the persistence of other drivers of acute food insecurity, including conflict and economic and rainfall shocks, will result in 90 to 100 million people in need of humanitarian food assistance in 2020 across its 29 presence and remotely monitored countries.

Figure 1. Internal movement restrictions and business closures, Oxford's Government Stringency Index, April 30, 2020



Source: Data from the University of Oxford; Our Word in Data

Figure 2. Internal movement restrictions and business closures, Oxford's Government Stringency Index, August 26, 2020



Source: Data from the University of Oxford; Our Word in Data

Status of the pandemic

Across the countries monitored by FEWS NET, the number of reported COVID-19 cases continues to climb, though recorded cases are likely an underestimate of the true scale of the outbreak. As of August 28, 2020, the WHO estimates there were over 442,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 12,564 deaths in the 29 countries that FEWS NET monitors. Roughly 35 percent of these cases remain active, a decline from around 60 percent in early July. The absolute number of active cases grew from approximately 120,000 to over 150,000 over the same time period. The true scale of the outbreak remains largely unknown, though, given continued limitations to testing: across the countries covered by FEWS NET for which data is available, less than 5 percent of the population has been tested for COVID-19 as of late August. In several countries, a high positive test rate also persists, including in Guatemala at 30 percent, Madagascar at 24 percent, Afghanistan at 17 percent, and Malawi at 13 percent, suggesting that significantly more cases remain undetected.

Current and anticipated impacts on food availability and access

The key drivers of acute food insecurity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic remain the interrelated factors of movement restrictions and reduced economic activity, which are together resulting in lost income at the household level. Most governments of the countries monitored by FEWS NET enacted measures to slow the spread of the virus in March and April, including movement restrictions and business closures (Figure 1), and began easing these restrictions from May through August (Figure 2). Several countries kept relatively stronger measures in place through July and are only recently easing internal movement restrictions, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Sudan, Uganda, DRC, and Nigeria. In Ethiopia, while the government has not officially lifted movement restrictions, available information suggests that the public is broadly not adhering to restrictions, and enforcement is limited. Despite the trend toward easing movement controls, measures remain relatively strict in Chad.

The situation remains volatile, though, with the potential for the reinstatement of movement restrictions, as occurred in Madagascar when a lockdown was reinstituted in Antananarivo in July following an increase in confirmed COVID-19 cases. In Zimbabwe, a spike in cases in July also led the government to reinstate restrictions that were eased in May, with these control measures significantly restricting informal business operations and casual labor activities just as these activities were starting to resume. Although not officially announced, the re-establishment of movement restrictions and business closures is possible in Uganda in the near-term, following a spike in cases and fatalities in Kampala in August.

While internal movement restrictions have gradually eased between May and August, most international borders remain closed to labor migration. Most countries in Africa continue to implement border controls to prohibit migratory casual labor, which is a key source of income for many poor households across the continent. Similarly, in Afghanistan, while there has been a recent surge in people crossing to and from Pakistan following the easing of restrictions at the Chaman border point, movement to Iran remains restricted and labor migration likely remains limited overall. Labor migration from Haiti to the Dominican Republic also remains prohibited.

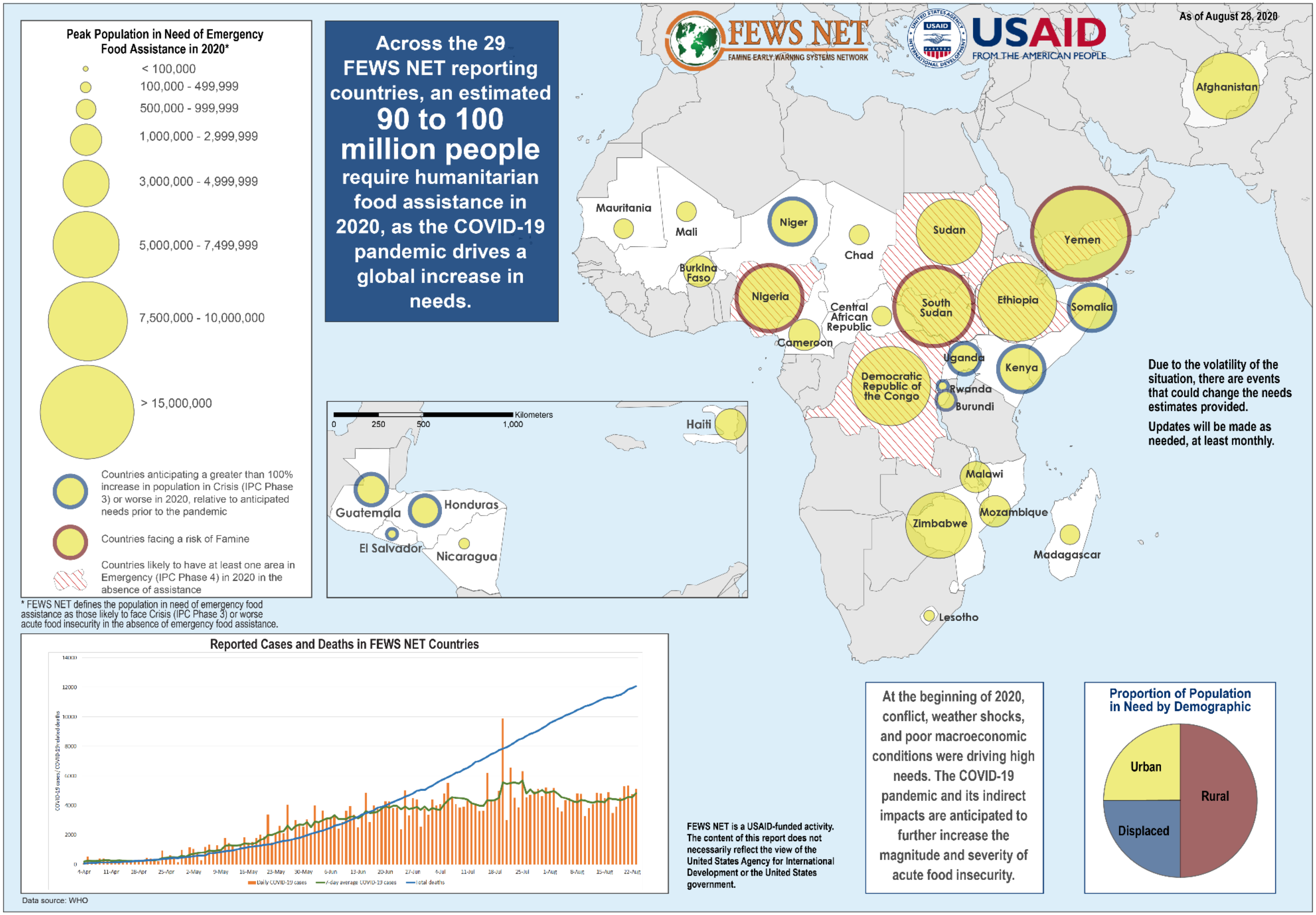
As movement restrictions persist, poor households' access to typical income-earning activities remain limited. This is coupled with the impacts of the broader contraction of local and global economic activities that has led to reduced demand for goods and services from which millions of poor households derive a livelihood. These include lower demand for transportation, custodial, and food services, among others. Available evidence also indicates that, as COVID-19 prevention measures have led to increased transportation costs, it has become more expensive for poor households to engage in casual labor.

While poor households' food access continues to be adversely affected by reduced income, food availability and prices continue to follow seasonal trends across countries monitored by FEWS NET. Global cereal prices remain near average and global supply chains are operating at near-normal levels, though disruptions at the local level are causing some price volatility. In East Africa, staple food price trends vary, and are average to above average in most markets, though food prices were already above average prior to the pandemic. In West Africa, staple food prices are below average across much of the Sahel but remain above average in conflict-affected and deficit areas. In Southern Africa, maize prices have seasonally declined or stabilized, but remain somewhat above average. In DRC, staple food prices doubled or tripled between March and May in many markets but have since significantly reduced. In Central America and Haiti, maize and bean prices are seasonally decreasing but remain slightly to moderately above average. Wheat prices are stable in Afghanistan, though remain above average. In Yemen, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Sudan, and Sudan, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbating ongoing macroeconomic issues that were already putting upward pressure on staple food prices. In countries and regions with high food prices, the combination of these prices and lower income is driving further declines in purchasing capacity among many poor households.

Projected humanitarian food assistance needs

Millions of poor households are expected to continue to experience reductions in income due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and are either facing food consumption gaps or engaging in negative coping to mitigate consumption gaps. Across the 29 countries monitored by FEWS NET, 90 to 100 million people are likely to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse outcomes in 2020 and need urgent humanitarian food assistance (Figure 2). FEWS NET also provides a peak global needs estimates for an additional 17 countries that it does not directly monitor. The combined estimated peak global needs for these 46 countries in 2020 is 113 million people. COVID-19 and its indirect impacts have increased the scale and severity of acute food insecurity across FEWS NET's monitored countries; however, the overall high level of need is primarily driven by conflict and macroeconomic and rainfall shocks.

Figure 2. FEWS NET's anticipated peak needs in 2020 across 29 countries, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, August 2020



Source: FEWS NET

For more detail on each country, please see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting at fews.net