

2018/19 severe drought and current below-average forecast to drive significant assistance needs in 2020

Across Southern Africa, the October 2019 to March 2020 season started poorly with widespread rainfall deficits. International forecasting models anticipate a high probability of below-average rainfall through March (Figure 1), including in surplus-producing Zambia and South Africa. This follows the poor 2018/19 season, during which widespread drought resulted in poor agricultural production and deteriorated livestock conditions. These trends are compounded by flooding and conflict in DRC and very poor macroeconomic conditions in Zimbabwe. The population expected to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse outcomes across Southern Africa through the March 2020 peak of the lean season will be well above average, and needs are expected to only rise further in late 2020, at the start of the next lean season. Donors and humanitarian partners should prepare for atypically high food assistance needs throughout 2020.

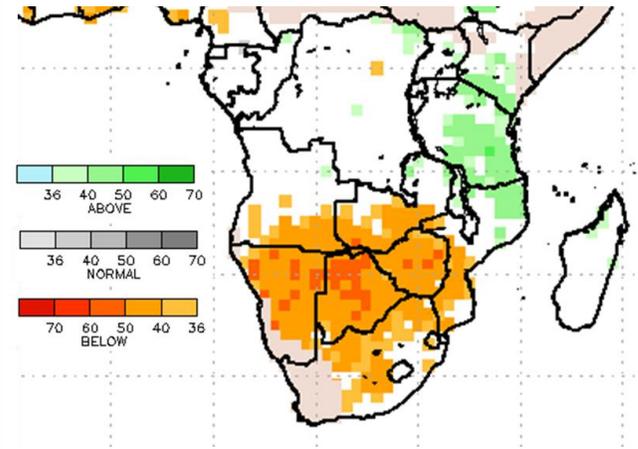
Large-scale crop losses occurred at the end of the 2018/19 rainfall season, which was characterized by severe drought and abnormal dryness across much of the region and tropical cyclones that hit the eastern coast. Regional maize grain supply for the current marketing year is slightly below the five-year average, reaching their lowest levels since the 2016/17 marketing year. As a result, maize prices are significantly above average across the region. Many poor agropastoral households depleted their food stocks atypically early, resulting in earlier than usual reliance on market purchases.

The start of the 2019/20 rainy season has been erratic, with early season deficits, and international forecasts are all indicating January to March 2020 rainfall is expected to be below average. Recent heavy rainfall over areas of South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Angola lessened but did not eliminate early season deficits. Regional pasture and vegetative conditions have improved gradually with recent rains, though livestock body conditions are well below normal. Planting is ongoing, although at below average rates due to erratic onset of rains. The combination of atypically high food prices coupled with limited incomes (from low livestock prices and agricultural labor opportunities) have reduced household purchasing power. Rainfall during the December to March period is critical for crop development and likely below-average rainfall is expected to have negative impacts on rainfed crops, pasture, and water availability. Irrigated crops are also expected to be negatively impacted due to the multiple years of poor rainfall that have resulted in below-average groundwater levels. Late season rainfall may be average but would only slightly reduce cumulative rainfall deficits and potentially improve water and pasture availability, while having no significant impact on crop production.

Below-average production is anticipated in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and average to below-average production is likely in South Africa and Mozambique. Since Zambia and South Africa produce more than 70 percent of regional maize grain, regional maize grain supply for the 2020/21 marketing year is expected to be below 2019/20 and the five-year average. As a result, maize grain prices across the region in 2020 are anticipated to remain high and exceeding 2019 prices.

Lower than average access to labor opportunities are anticipated throughout 2020. Livestock body conditions are anticipated to improve in the short term as pastureland slowly regenerates, although grazing conditions are expected to deteriorate atypically early. Higher than average livestock deaths are again anticipated in the latter half of 2020 until the start of the 2020/21 rainy season. These trends, coupled with above-average staple food prices, will limit poor households' ability to purchase sufficient food to meet their needs across much of the region. The exceptions include northern Madagascar and northern and central Mozambique and Malawi where average to above average rainfall is anticipated to support normal crop

Figure 1. North American Multi-Model Ensemble (NMME) probabilistic forecast for precipitation for January to March 2020 (December Initial Conditions)



Source: NOAA/CPC

production, livestock conditions, and labor opportunities. In DRC, although favorable rainfall is forecast, conflict continues to limit income-earning opportunities and agricultural production.

The population in need of humanitarian assistance across Southern Africa will remain high throughout 2020. Food security outcomes in most areas of the region are anticipated to temporarily improve with the harvest in April/May; however, these improvements are expected to be short-lived. In worst-affected areas of the region, Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes will likely persist during the post-harvest period. In late 2020, at the start of the 2020/21 lean season, FEWS NET anticipates regional food assistance needs will increase even higher than needs during the first quarter of 2020, and some poor households in the worst-affected areas are expected to face large food consumption gaps in the absence of humanitarian food assistance. Donors and humanitarian partners should prepare for considerable food assistance needs throughout 2020, with the likely need to further scale up humanitarian assistance in late 2020 with the start of the lean season.