

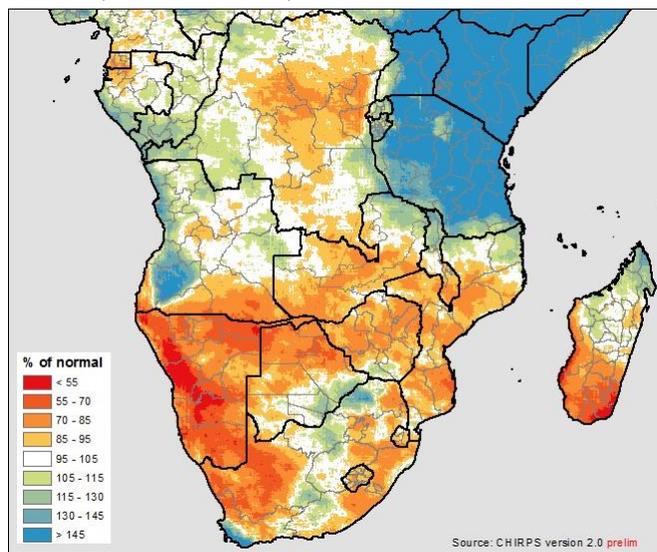
High food assistance needs persist due to consecutive droughts and erratic 2019/20 rainfall

Erratic and insufficient rains marked the 2019/20 rainy season, the fifth poor season in parts of Southern Africa since 2014. Although 2019/20 rainfall improved somewhat after a very poor start, the extreme **moisture deficits early in the season** resulted in agricultural drought¹ conditions across some of the region. Overall, below-average production, poor livestock body conditions, and lower labor opportunities are anticipated in worst-affected areas. Furthermore, consecutive poor seasons have led to sustained low access to typical food and income sources. These factors, combined with extremely unfavorable macroeconomic conditions in Zimbabwe and ongoing conflict in DRC, will result in continued high assistance needs across much of the region. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic risks driving even higher needs. Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are expected during the April to August harvest period in parts of DRC, southern Mozambique, and much of Zimbabwe. With an early start to the 2020/21 lean season likely by September/October in these areas, national governments and humanitarian actors should plan for high assistance needs across much of the region throughout 2020.

Rainfall during the 2019/20 season was poor, with multiple false starts and extended dry spells throughout the season. The October to December period was one of the driest on record. From late January to mid-February, precipitation levels were average to above average, partially offsetting seasonal deficits. However, in the final month of the season, **rainfall totals** were still less than 70 percent of normal across most of the region (Figure 1).

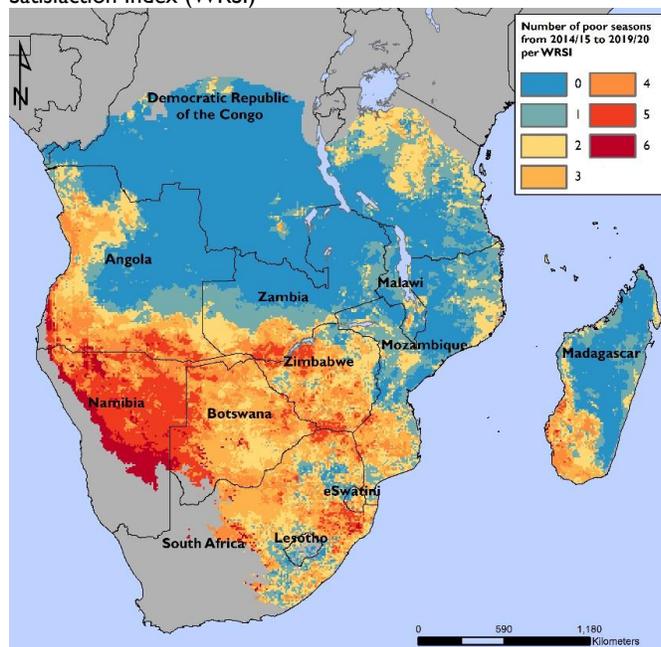
According to the **Water Requirement Satisfaction Index (WRSI)**, cropping conditions across much of the region are mediocre to failed. Of greatest concern are central Zimbabwe, southern Mozambique, and the far south of Madagascar, where significant crop losses are expected as a result of the **ongoing drought**. In these areas, where seasonal agricultural labor opportunities have declined, poor households, who rely on this labor income, have seen their options for generating cash decrease. Rainfall was favorable in much of DRC, though conflict and flooding are driving poor production in parts of eastern DRC. Rainfall in 2020 improved cropping conditions in parts of Zambia and South Africa, and this, combined with access to improved seeds, will likely result in near average

Figure 1. Cumulative precipitation as a percent of normal for October 1, 2019 to March 25, 2020



Source: CHIRPS version 2.0 *prelim*

Figure 2. Number of seasons between 2014/15 and 2019/20 in which the season was poor according to Water Requirement Satisfaction Index (WRSI)



Source: USGS/FEWS NET

¹ Agricultural drought is considered when the soil moisture availability to plants has dropped to such a level that it adversely affects the crop yield (Mannocchi et al (2004))

production in Zambia and above-average production in South Africa. Even though favorable 2020 production is now likely from the region's largest maize producers, FEWS NET still anticipates slightly below average aggregate regional maize supply during the 2020/21 marketing year, driven by the significantly below average carryover stocks, following the previous year's poor harvests.

Pasture and water availability for livestock are below average across much of the region, and conditions are likely to further deteriorate during the April to September dry season. Livestock body conditions are anticipated to remain poorer than normal in worst-affected areas, reducing income for households that rely on sales of livestock and livestock products. In areas of Angola, Namibia, Botswana, and Zambia, where FEWS NET does not have a presence, it is expected the severe rainfall deficits are also translating into negative livestock and crop production.

Another result of the consecutive poor seasons is that maize prices are significantly above the five-year average across much the region, and this trend is likely to continue throughout 2020. In Zimbabwe, where both drought and the macroeconomy are of concern, prices are expected to remain more than ten times higher than average. Zambia's continued export ban is expected to limit trade opportunities with the DRC, and the very low purchasing power and uncertainty over the ability of Zimbabwean importers to pay for goods is expected to continue limiting its ability to import food.

Confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported in all countries across the region besides Botswana and Malawi, although all governments implemented restrictions to limit the movement of people to prevent the spread of the disease. Current information indicates goods are still moving between and within nations. Additionally, as measures are aimed to limit the spread of the virus and people, its likely to have direct and indirect impacts on livelihoods and markets for both rural and urban households as these restrictions continue for at least the medium-term. Moreover, should governments restrict economic activities along borders due to concerns over the spread of COVID-19, this will likely further restrict the flow of goods, constraining market supply in countries that rely on imports, and sustain high prices across the region. The resulting constraints on purchasing power for many poor households across the region translate into higher levels of food insecurity in the coming months.

One bad rainfall season is, typically, something that many households can cope with. However, the compounded effect of consecutive poor seasons is leading to especially negative outcomes this year. Much of Southern Africa had only one good main rainfall season since 2014, with three or more of the last six seasons registering as poor throughout a good deal of the region (Figure 2). As a result, agriculturally-based casual labor opportunities and livestock productivity have both remained below average since at least 2018, due to the erosion of livelihoods of not only poor households, but also middle and better-off households – the source of labor demand. Meanwhile, in DRC, persistent conflict is limiting income-earning opportunities and agricultural production.

While food security outcomes are expected to improve across some of the region with the April to August harvest, area-level Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are still anticipated in the post-harvest period in southern Mozambique, deficit-producing areas of Zimbabwe, and parts of DRC. Overall, needs are anticipated to remain higher than typical due to the poor performance of the 2019/20 season and the compounded negative effects of multiple poor seasons over the past six years. In DRC and Zimbabwe, atypically high needs are also driven by conflict and extremely unfavorable macroeconomic conditions, respectively. FEWS NET anticipates the lean season will start as early as September or October in worst-affected areas, and some worst-affected households in Zimbabwe will likely be in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) by late 2020. Humanitarian partners and governments should prepare for continued high food assistance needs in many areas of Southern Africa throughout 2020, with the timing of greatest needs during the September 2020 to March 2021 lean season.