

Drivers of Acute Food Insecurity in 2020

Summary

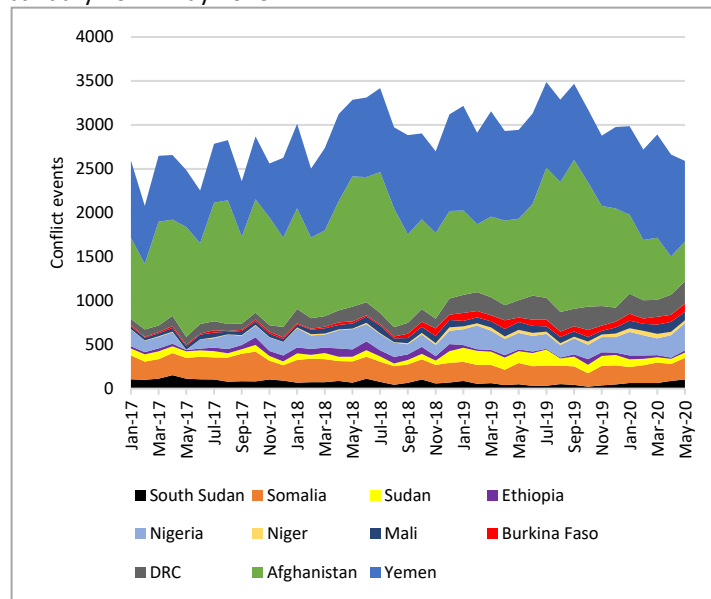
The indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, primarily through reduced income earning, including due to movement restrictions and global economic decline, were felt in earnest across much of the globe starting in April 2020. With the current and anticipated impacts of COVID-19, FEWS NET estimated approximately 113 million people would be in need of humanitarian food assistance across 46 countries, a roughly 25 percent increase in needs relative to anticipated 2020 needs before the pandemic (Annex 1). Although measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 are being eased in many countries, recovery from this shock is expected to be gradual, as the restrictions that do remain in place and the contraction of economies globally continue to limit the demand for the income-generating activities through which many poor households earn income. Furthermore, given the increase in COVID-19 cases, a heightened risk of further lockdown measures remains. At the same time, other drivers of acute food insecurity persist and are anticipated to result in high levels of acute food insecurity in 2020, regardless of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key among these are: conflict, weather shocks, and poor macroeconomic conditions that existed prior the COVID-19 pandemic. A summary of these drivers and their likely impact on acute food insecurity are detailed below.

Conflict

Conflict persists across many countries and regions monitored by FEWS NET, including Yemen; Afghanistan; DRC; Somalia; South Sudan; Nigeria; parts of Sudan, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and CAR; the Lake Chad region, and the Liptako-Gourma region. According to data available from ACLED, the number of conflict events recorded in the first half of 2020 across many conflict-affected countries is similar to that recorded in the first half of 2018 and 2019 (Figure 1). Despite COVID-19 -related movement restrictions in many areas, conflict has not subsided; in some countries, it has even increased.

The impact of conflict on acute food insecurity varies across and within countries, based on the nature and severity of the conflict. Broadly, though, conflict can lead to displacement, driving households away from their assets and typical sources of income: IDMC estimates 8.5 million people were newly displaced in 2019 across 50 countries, as a result of conflict and violence. In rural areas, conflict can impede access to fields for crop production, grazing areas for livestock rearing, and bodies of water for fishing. If able-bodied male household members are brought into armed groups, this can lead to a higher proportion of female-headed households left behind in homesteads, who often lack gender-specific ownership rights to land or livestock. Conflict can also undermine efficient market functioning, leading to erratic food availability and volatile prices for food and non-food items. Conflict also creates conditions that make it difficult for humanitarian assistance to reach populations in need. Based on current trends, a continuation of conflict – and its negative effects on food security – are expected to persist in 2020.

Figure 1. Conflict events in key conflict-affected countries, January 2017-May 2020



Source: ACLED data

Weather shocks

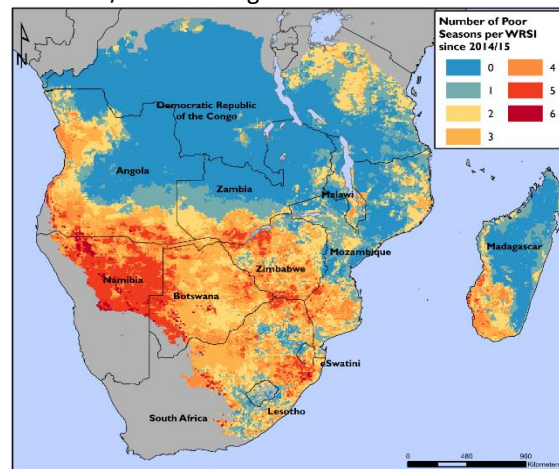
Extreme weather events undermine household food security in the short term, but also the medium- and long-term, as it is often difficult for poor rural households to recover quickly from weather-related shocks. In agricultural areas, an extreme weather shock may force poor households to take out loans or sell important livelihood assets, and in pastoral areas it can take several seasons to fully recover livestock lost through distress sales and/or death. The compounded effects of multiple bad years are especially damaging. Forecast weather shocks in 2020, combined with the continued effects of past weather shocks, are expected to contribute to high levels of acute food insecurity in 2020.

In some instances flooding can drive food insecurity through displacing households, killing livestock, destroying infrastructure and crops, and blocking trade flows.

The impacts of drought on acute food insecurity are typically more extreme and longer lasting than flooding, though. In the absence of intervention, drought can lead to the widespread loss of livestock and crops, driving up staple food prices while at the same time lowering households' income-earning opportunities through reduced agricultural labor activities and less profitable livestock sales. Sparse vegetation also lowers livestock productivity, reducing the production of milk, one of the most important sources of nutrients for children in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas. Limited access to clean water for human consumption is also detrimental to human health, which increases the risk of disease, limits a person's capacity to utilize food consumed, and increases the overall risk of malnutrition.

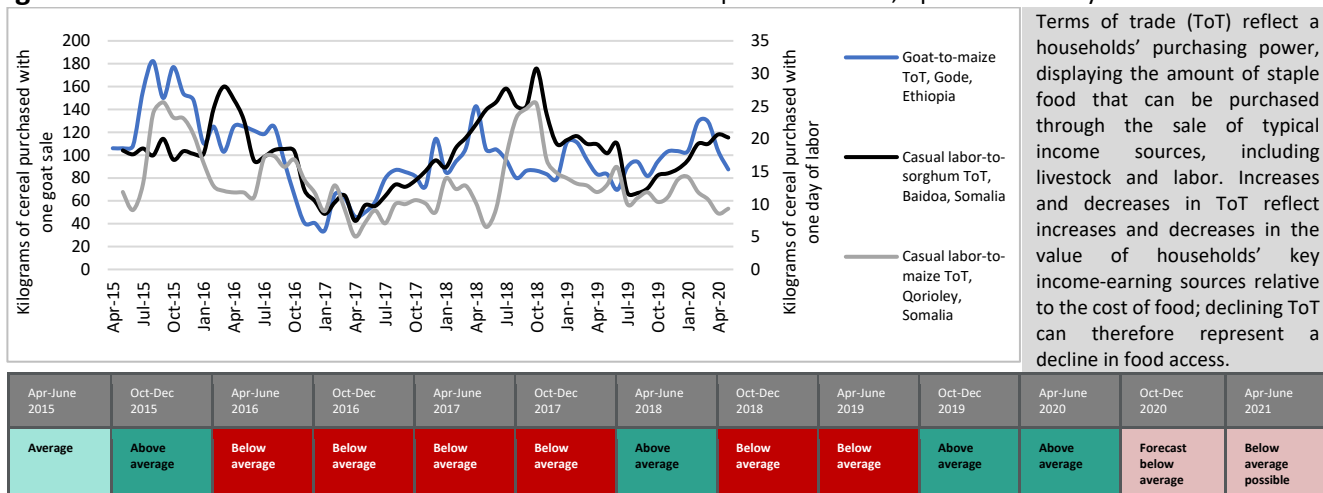
Looking ahead in 2020, the impacts of consecutive droughts in Southern Africa (Figure 2) will continue to drive higher than normal needs in the region. Furthermore, the forecast for a below-average October to December *deyr*/short rains season over the Horn of Africa is anticipated to drive increased food assistance needs in late 2020/early 2021. Although uncertainty remains, given the long lead time of the forecast, preliminary climatological research suggests a below-average March to May 2021 *gu*/long rains season is possible as well. Past trends indicate that food security can sharply deteriorate in the Horn of Africa in the event of consecutive below-average seasons, as evidenced by declines in household purchasing power in 2016/17 and – to a lesser degree – in 2018/19 (Figure 3). Terms of trade in 2017 may have fallen even lower had it not been for large-scale humanitarian assistance that likely helped stabilize food prices.

Figure 2. Number of poor seasons between 2014/15 and 2019/20 according to WRSI



Source: FEWS NET/USGS

Figure 3. Livestock and labor to cereal ToT in select areas of Ethiopia and Somalia, April 2015 to May 2020



Source: FEWS NET/FSNAU (Somalia); Somali Region DPPCO (Ethiopia)

Macroeconomic shocks that existed prior to COVID-19

Poor macroeconomic conditions existed in several countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely in Yemen, Zimbabwe, Sudan, South Sudan, and to a lesser degree Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Haiti. In these countries, low foreign currency reserves were already driving local currency depreciation (Figure 4), pushing up the prices of imported staple foods and local substitutes. While COVID-19 related measures have slowed regional and local trade activities, impacts on price trends have generally been limited in terms of duration and magnitude. Though COVID-19 impacts led to a sharper increase in prices in Zimbabwe and drove prices above average in Nigeria, high and volatile food prices in most of these countries can be attributed in large part to pre-existing poor macroeconomic conditions. As of May, the retail prices of staple cereals are roughly 50-100 percent above the five-year average in Ethiopia, Yemen, and Haiti; 100-400 percent above the five-year average in South Sudan; over 400 percent above the five-year average in Sudan; and over 4,000 percent above the five-year average in Zimbabwe (Figure 5).

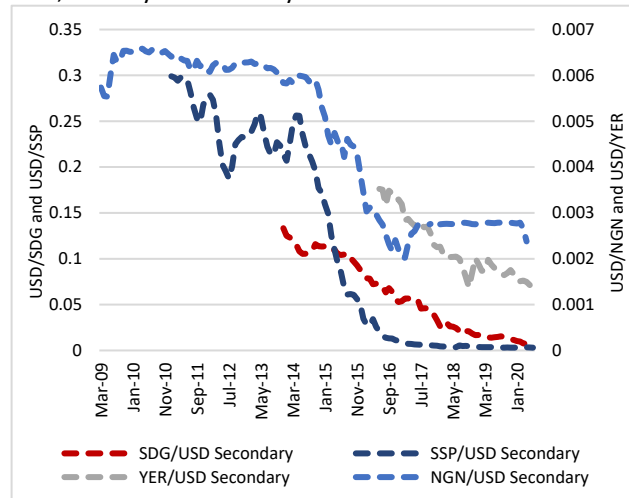
The COVID-19 pandemic has furthered economic deterioration through higher unemployment, lower demand for many goods and services, and lower remittance flows. Due to the reduced global demand for commodities like oil, industrial metals, textiles, and some high-valued agricultural crops, many countries that FEWS NET monitors are expected to face a decline in critical export earnings. In some cases, this is anticipated to further drive local currency depreciation and lead to continued upward pressure on the prices of imported foods and local substitutes. The combination of lower income sources and higher staple food prices will result in reduced access to food for many poor households in 2020.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has played a role in increasing the magnitude and breadth of macroeconomic decline globally, in many countries preexisting drivers had already set the stage for poor economic functioning. These drivers are anticipated to remain in place even as countries gradually recover from the COVID-19 related economic impacts.

Other shocks of note: Pests

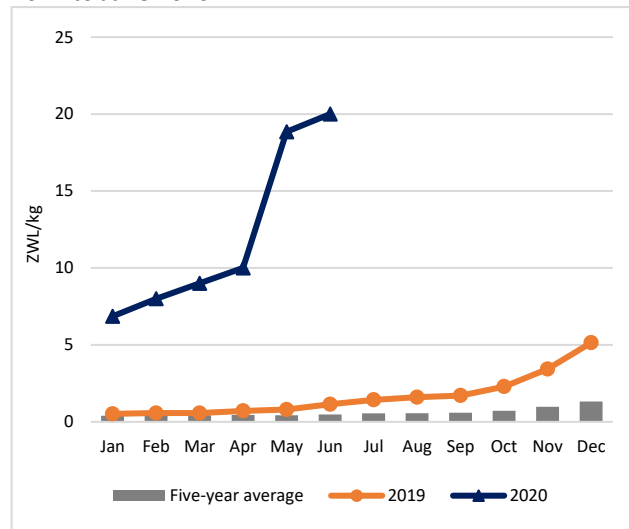
In addition to the above-mentioned shocks, which are anticipated to be the most significant drivers of humanitarian assistance needs globally, pests are also expected to contribute to acute food insecurity in isolated areas in 2020. **Desert locusts** are expected to drive some crop and pasture losses in the Horn of Africa. The recent spread of locusts to Central America and the potential for spread to West Africa also risks at least isolated impacts in other regions of the globe in 2020. Other pests, including **Fall armyworm** and **crickets**, are likely to cause isolated crop damage in some countries as well.

Figure 4. Parallel exchange rates of local currencies (Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Yemen) against the USD, January 2009 to May 2020



Source: FEWS NET (Sudan, South Sudan); WFP (Yemen); Central Bank of Nigeria (Nigeria)

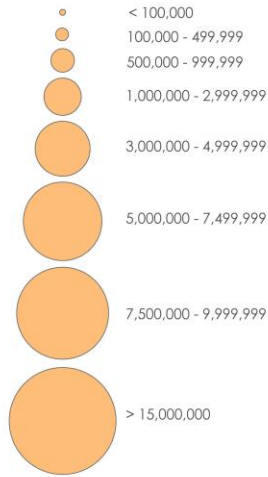
Figure 5. Retail price of white maize grain, Harare, January 2017 to June 2020





Source: FEWS NET

GLOBAL NEEDS INCREASE SHARPLY AS INDIRECT IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC THREATEN FOOD ACCESS

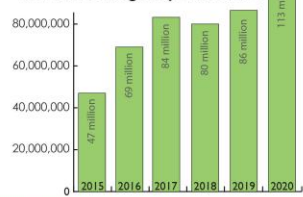
Peak population in need of emergency food assistance in 2020*



 Countries that face a risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5)

 Countries likely to have areas in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) in 2020

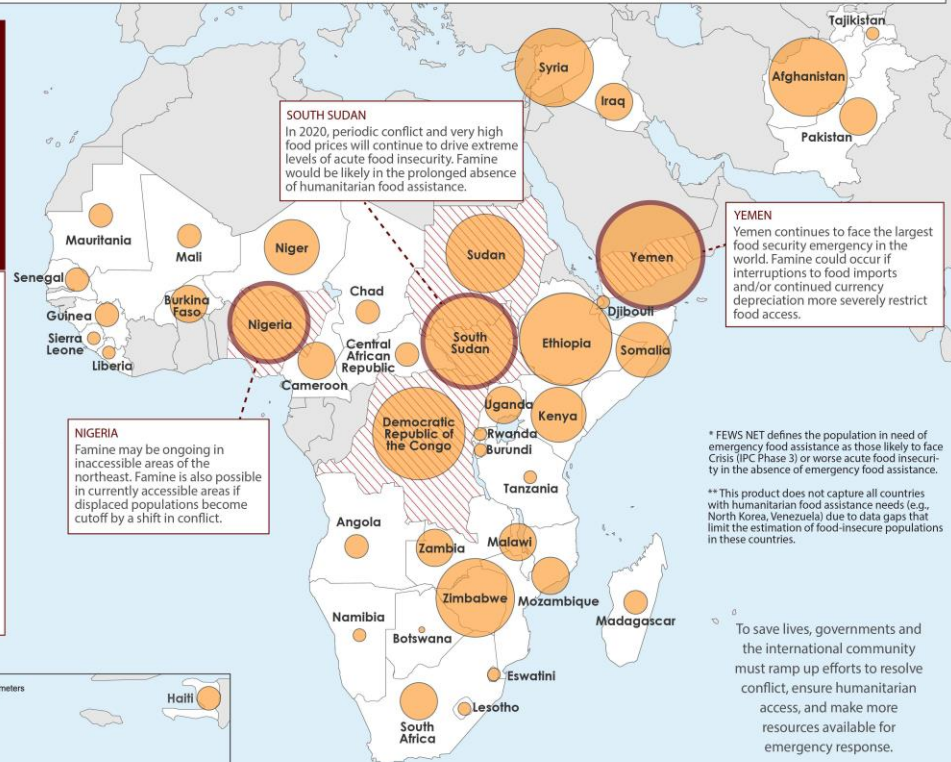
Estimated peak population in need of emergency assistance



Data sources: FEWS NET, OCHA, Southern Africa RVAC

Drought, economic shocks, continued conflict, and the indirect impacts of COVID-19 drive high assistance needs. A risk of Famine persists in South Sudan, Yemen, and northeast Nigeria.

Across 46 countries, **113 million** people require emergency food assistance in 2020, **25% more** than peak needs prior to the anticipated impacts of COVID-19.



* FEWS NET defines the population in need of emergency food assistance as those likely to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity in the absence of emergency food assistance.

** This product does not capture all countries with humanitarian food assistance needs (e.g., North Korea, Venezuela) due to data gaps that limit the estimation of food-insecure populations in these countries.

To save lives, governments and the international community must ramp up efforts to resolve conflict, ensure humanitarian access, and make more resources available for emergency response.



Estimates reflect the peak food insecure population expected between January and December 2020. Detailed reports can be found at www.fews.net.

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