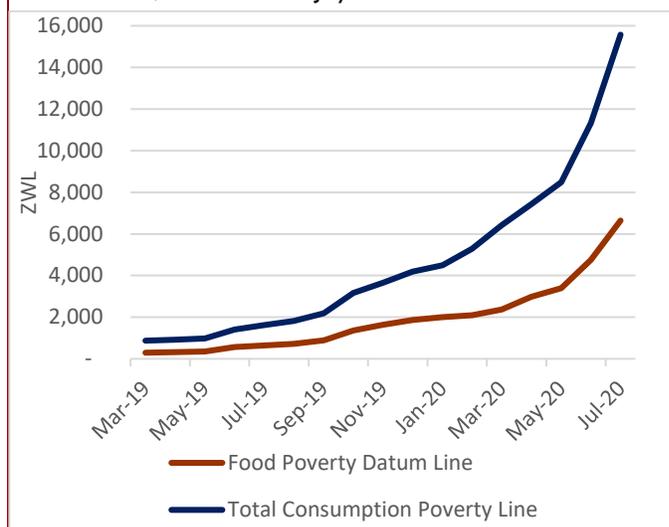


*COVID-19 added to consecutive droughts and economic shocks in Zimbabwe drives high assistance needs*

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian food assistance needs in Zimbabwe in 2020 were already significantly higher than usual due to consecutive years of drought and poor and deteriorating macroeconomic conditions. COVID-19 and measures to prevent the spread of the disease have further reduced urban and rural poor households' already limited income-earning potential. Depressed income, coupled with extremely high food prices, is restricting poor households' capacity to obtain access to sufficient food, most notably among market-dependent poor households in deficit-producing agricultural areas and urban centers. FEWS NET anticipates the population in need of humanitarian food assistance through the January to March 2021 peak of the lean season will be notably higher than typical and similar to that of the January to March 2020 peak of the lean season. The government of Zimbabwe and humanitarian partners should prepare for sustained heightened assistance needs through at least early 2021; though above-average assistance needs are still likely after the harvest starting in April, due to continued poor economic conditions.

**Figure 1.** Average food and total consumption poverty lines<sup>1</sup> for a household of 5, March 2019 to July 2020



Source: ZIMSTAT

In early 2020, before the pandemic, Zimbabwe was already facing concurrent shocks of [consecutive droughts](#) and a deteriorating macroeconomy. Due primarily to persistent foreign currency shortages, the ZWL continues to depreciate. For nearly a year, Zimbabwe has had the second-highest annual inflation rate globally, at 838 percent in July 2020. These economic pressures, alongside poor maize production, estimated at nearly [40 percent below average in 2019](#) and [30 percent below average in 2020](#), and the subsequent higher than normal import requirement for maize, are exerting consistent upward pressure on staple food prices. Transactions are increasingly occurring in USD, which means that households that earn income in ZWL, including most poor households, find it increasingly unaffordable to buy food. Overall, the cost of a minimum food basket and non-food expenditures, as depicted by the food poverty datum line and total consumption poverty line (Figure 1), continues to rise, while available information indicates poor household's income is failing to keep pace.

After the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Zimbabwe in late March, a nationwide lockdown was imposed. Measures enacted included border closures, restrictions to non-essential businesses, and general limitations on population movements. While some measures were eased in late-May and June, a spike in confirmed cases led the government to re-institute restrictions in mid-July. Despite these efforts, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases continues to increase, reaching 6,251 cases as of August 27. Given the low testing rate, with [less than 1 percent of the population](#) tested by late August, the true spread of the virus is likely greater than that recorded. At the same time, access to health services has reportedly decreased due to labor shortages, as some doctors and nurses are on strike, and shortages of medical equipment. Drought-induced water shortages in most urban and southern areas also pose a heightened risk of further COVID-19 transmission by limiting access to the sanitation measures necessary to slow its spread.

During a time when poor macroeconomic conditions are already constraining economic activity, the COVID-19 restrictions are further limiting poor households' income-generating opportunities. International borders remain closed, and while essential

<sup>1</sup> As calculated by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, the Food Poverty Datum Line (FPL), is the cost of consuming a minimum food basket representing 2,100 kilocalories per day per person for a family of 5. The Total Consumption Poverty Line (TCPL) is the FPL plus the cost of typical non-food expenditure for poor households; the non-food expenditure was derived from data from the Zimbabwe 2017 Poverty, Income, Consumption, and Expenditure Survey (PICES).

food imports, including maize, continue, the movement of non-essential goods and labor remains restricted. Border closures are affecting access to income among poor households in particular, especially in southern regions, where these households typically depend on casual labor opportunities in South Africa, cross border trade, and remittances from family members in neighboring countries. Internal movement restrictions have led to a sharp decline in income-earning activities for those operating in the informal sector, which constitutes roughly three-quarters of Zimbabwe's population. While most poor households affected are those engaged in petty trade and other forms of informal activity in urban areas, rural households are also affected, including farmers who face difficulty selling produce due to transportation and market operation restrictions. Additionally, some formal businesses have laid off staff, and as better-off households earn less income, they in turn offer fewer casual labor opportunities to poor households.

Across much of Zimbabwe, the deteriorating economy and consecutive droughts were already driving high food assistance needs; the COVID-19 pandemic and measures implemented to prevent the virus' spread are further exacerbating an already deteriorating food security situation. Humanitarian assistance needs during the January to March 2021 peak of the lean season are expected to be above normal, with widespread areas in Crisis (IPC Phase 3). Some worst-affected households, mainly in southern areas of the country, where there was little to no harvest and which typically rely on now-restricted movement between Zimbabwe and South Africa to earn income and purchase goods, are likely to be in Emergency (IPC Phase 4). With a forecast average 2020/21 rainy season and the potential for a near-average harvest, food security is expected to improve starting in April/May 2021. However, macroeconomic challenges are expected to persist, continuing to constrain income-earning activities and, ultimately, food access. Humanitarian actors should prepare for high assistance needs through at least early 2021; although above-average assistance needs are likely due to continued poor macroeconomic conditions.