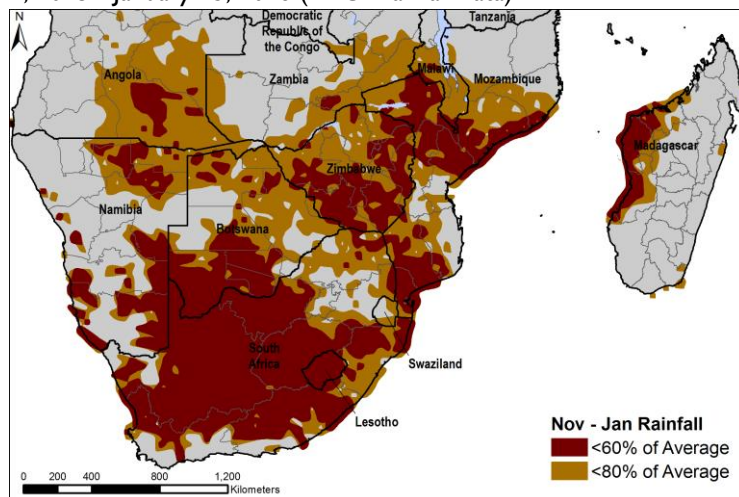


Severe drought in Southern Africa expected to drive large food assistance needs in 2016/17

The ongoing El Niño has resulted in a severe drought across Southern Africa. Rains, which typically begin in October/November, have been 10 to more than 50 days late and significantly below average (Figure 1). This poor rainfall, in combination with above-average temperatures, has limited crop development, pasture regrowth, and water availability. If rainfall remains below average, as forecasts suggest, the current growing season is likely to be one of the driest on record. Already, regional food supplies are limited, staple food prices are higher than average, and acute food insecurity is more prevalent than usual due to poor crop harvests in early 2015. An estimated 2.5 million people are classified as in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) for the January to March 2016 lean season in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Lesotho. If the abnormally hot and dry conditions persist, a regional food security crisis, including a substantial increase in the size of the acutely food insecure population, is considered likely in the latter half of 2016 and early 2017.

Figure 1. Areas affected by drought in Southern Africa, November 1, 2015 - January 13, 2016 (ARC2 rainfall data)



Source: FEWS NET/NOAA

The first half of the 2015/16 agricultural season has been extremely poor across the Southern Africa region, largely due to the ongoing El Niño, one of the strongest on record. In maize surplus-producing Free State and North West provinces of South Africa, the start of seasonal rains was more than 50 days past the average onset. Parts of southern Mozambique and northern Namibia experienced a delay in the start of season of up to 40 days; rains also arrived 10-30 days late in parts of central and southern Malawi. In many areas where rains began on time, subsequent periods of prolonged dryness led to failed starts. As a result of the delayed start of season, October to December 2015 was the driest on record for parts of central South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, central Mozambique, and central Zambia. Temperatures have also been above-average and an analysis of satellite-derived imagery indicates that vegetation conditions across large parts of the region are at their lowest levels in the past 15 years.

Drought emergencies have been declared in several provinces in South Africa and Lesotho. Water authorities in Botswana, Swaziland, South Africa, and Namibia are advising residents to limit water usage because of low dam levels. Low water levels at the Kariba dam are affecting power generation for Zimbabwe and Zambia, and the subsequent disruptions to electrical power have affected industry in Zambia, and therefore household incomes. The poor start of season has also exacerbated lean season food insecurity, in part through a reduction in agricultural labor opportunities. Food insecurity was already atypically high due to poor crop production and flooding in 2015. An estimated 2.5 million people are currently in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and in need of urgent humanitarian response in Malawi (~900,000), Zimbabwe (~600,000), Mozambique (~600,000), Madagascar (~400,000), and Lesotho (~40,000).

The current El Niño is expected to persist for an additional 4-6 months and forecasts for the remainder of the season from the [U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](http://www.noaa.gov), the [International Research Institute at Columbia University \(IRI\)](http://iri.columbia.edu), and the [European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts \(ECMWF\)](http://www.ecmwf.int) all suggest that continued below-average rainfall is likely across substantial parts of the region. High temperatures are also forecast to continue, further exacerbating the impacts of reduced rainfall. A continuation of hot, dry conditions is likely to reduce yields in both chronically food deficit areas and key surplus-producing parts of the region, including northern South Africa, northern Zimbabwe and possibly southern Zambia.

Current food insecurity is already worse than usual in Southern Africa and will likely deteriorate further over the coming two to three months. While April/May harvests will improve food access in the short term, food security is likely to begin deteriorating by July, reaching its peak between December 2016 and March 2017. In addition to reduced staple and cash crop production at the household level, the major driver of acute food insecurity over the coming year is likely to be further increases in staple food prices. Food prices are already above average in many areas, as reported in [FEWS NET's December 2015 Regional Price Bulletin](#), and regional maize supplies are below-average. Therefore, even with increased imports to the region, significantly reduced production in 2016 would put additional upward pressure on retail grain prices. The current drought is also expected to delay 2016 harvests, extending the current lean season.

While it is too early to provide detailed estimates of the population likely to be food insecure in 2016/17, FEWS NET expects that this population will be at least two times higher than current levels. In the short term, close monitoring of the season is required and additional assistance will be needed to help food insecure households manage an extended 2016 lean season. In the medium term, humanitarian partners should begin contingency planning given that, over the coming year, the severity of food insecurity and the size of the food insecure population in Southern Africa may reach their highest levels since the 2002/03 food crisis.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

FEWS NET issues alerts as needed to describe a sudden food security emergency or a potential crisis. They are intended to catalyze action to prevent or mitigate acute food insecurity. The latest alerts are available on the home page of www.fews.net.