



Jenipher, 24, from Mulanje, Malawi, harvested just four bags of maize which lasted her family three months. Photo: Eldson Chagara/Oxfam

‘THE LONGEST LEAN SEASON’

How urgent action is needed to counter the devastating humanitarian impacts of the El Niño drought in Southern Africa

Although the El Niño weather event has ended, the humanitarian needs resulting from the drought in Southern Africa remain huge, and are still deepening. With the next harvests not due until March/April 2017, governments, donors and humanitarian actors must urgently provide food and other assistance to support people through this long, hard lean season. Farmers desperately need seeds and fertilizers if they are to take advantage of predicted rains and produce better harvests next year; a critical shortage in Malawi could lead to a cereal shortfall of nearly one million tons.¹ In addition, all actors must be ready to respond immediately to the damaging impacts of heavy rains forecast across the region.

1 INTRODUCTION

Southern Africa has been ravaged by the 2015–2016 El Niño, which, coming on the back of a second consecutive poor rainfall season, has triggered the worst drought in the region for 35 years. Harvests and livestock have been decimated, water sources left parched, and livelihoods destroyed. And while other parts of the world that were similarly stricken have begun taking the first steps to recovery, Southern Africa is left teetering on the brink, with a wait of at least four more long, hard months before the next harvests are due.

This year's 'lean season' – which takes hold when many smallholder farmers have depleted their food stocks and increasingly rely on local markets for supplies – started three months early. With a shortfall in production of all major cereals in the region for the second year running, staple food prices are shooting up in many countries, making it increasingly difficult for poor families to access food. An estimated 41 million people will need assistance before the next harvests in March–April 2017, and 28 million of them urgently need help now.³

'I have never witnessed such a poor rainfall pattern since I was born. There have been times in the past when the rains would be problematic, but this year's dry spell is beyond our comprehension.'

Dyna, a farmer in Malawi²

The response to this predicted, slow-onset crisis has yet again been 'too little, too late'. Despite the crisis coming hard on the heels of a poor growing season and an economic downturn, the region's governments were slow to scale up their response, as were humanitarian agencies. Lack of funding has been a significant problem. And a lack of flexibility enabling a shift from long-term, resilience-building programmes to humanitarian assistance, has also hampered the response.

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) launched a regional appeal in July 2016, and has requested \$2.9bn for the response. But faced with a plethora of competing priorities, donors have neglected this crisis. As of September a yawning gap of \$2.5bn remained,⁴ leaving UN agencies and others without the resources needed to respond at the scale required. Only half the funds for emergency food and agricultural assistance have been raised, while many other sectoral responses (including education, protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene) remain underfunded.⁵

The response has also been hampered by a lack of key data, which due to sensitivities are either unavailable or undisclosed. Basic information on malnutrition, food insecurity, disease outbreaks, the status of grain reserves, and which donors have contributed to which appeal, is hard to come by.

Recent forecasts for this growing season give further cause for concern. Above-normal rains are predicted in most parts of the region, which could support harvests and replenish water sources, but are also likely to bring the threat of flooding. Below-normal rainfall in other areas is likely to further impact on households left vulnerable by El Niño.⁶ Across the seven most affected countries in the region there is an estimated maize seed shortfall of almost 30,000 tons. Malawi, for example, has an estimated national requirement of almost 33,000 tons of maize seed, and a massive gap of over 15,800 tons.⁷

Even if the long-awaited harvests are successful, this El Niño is likely to cast its shadow far into the future.⁸ It will reduce governments' ability to meet both SADC regional food security and poverty reduction targets, as well as Sustainable Development Goals targets, and will have clear impacts on poverty and economic growth. For example, a study in Malawi found that extreme droughts cause average GDP losses of 10.4 percent and increase poverty by 17 percent – the equivalent of an additional 2.1 million people falling below the poverty line.⁹

A range of responses are needed to deal effectively with droughts, the risk of which is projected to significantly increase in the region due to climate change. These responses must include longer-term investment in climate change adaptation and resilience measures; efforts to move away from rain-fed agriculture in regions increasingly prone to droughts; and harnessing the power of the private sector. Effective political and economic governance, supported by international partners, is crucial to achieve this. Oxfam has written on these issues elsewhere.¹¹

'Sometimes I spend the whole day waiting in line for my turn to fetch water.'

Prosper, Matobo district, southern Zimbabwe, who says that because many water sources have dried up, there is only one borehole left, which serves up to 2,000 people.¹⁰

Our focus in this paper is the current humanitarian situation in the region, and the responses urgently required in the coming weeks and months. While we pay particular attention to Malawi and Zimbabwe (two of the countries most affected by the crisis, where Oxfam is responding), our core messages are focused on actions desperately needed to support the whole region. Mozambique and Madagascar in particular have been severely impacted by the crisis. In Mozambique, an estimated two million people have been affected; in Madagascar, 1.6 million. Both countries are showing alarming levels of malnutrition.

2 THE IMPACT OF DROUGHT IN MALAWI AND ZIMBABWE

In **Malawi**, an estimated 6.5 million people need assistance as a result of the drought. This represents a staggering 39 percent of the country's population, with more than half of those in need living in rural areas. There are growing concerns that the results of a vulnerability assessment due at the time of writing will find even higher levels of need, as many families have exhausted their food stocks several months early. This represents a real crisis for millions of people whose situation will only deteriorate in the coming months.

The Government of Malawi declared a national drought emergency in April 2016, and has requested \$380m for a multi-sectoral response. Of this, the government itself provided \$50m to the National Food Reserve Agency to procure grain. The Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) is leading the response, but is severely limited by a lack of funds. DoDMA has no budget of its own, but relies on other ministries and agencies for resources.

A lack of supply has sent maize prices soaring in Malawi. In July 2016, prices were 192 percent higher than the five-year average,¹³ and are expected to reach record highs towards the end of the year. The cost of alternatives such as rice and cassava are following a similar trend,¹⁴ making it increasingly difficult for vulnerable families to access food, and threatening the effectiveness of cash transfer programmes.

The delay by the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) to engage effectively with the drought response has exacerbated the situation. ADMARC finally opened its markets at the end of October, but is selling maize at unsubsidized market prices that are 127% higher than they were during the previous marketing season.¹⁵ This is restricting food access for vulnerable households, particularly for those that are not receiving any assistance. Furthermore, ADMARC's continued lack of transparency on what purchases are being made and when food will arrive, has the potential to make the humanitarian response inefficient. This is particularly so in rural and hard-to-reach areas, where the need is greatest and ADMARC is the sole market available to households.

'The person from whom I borrowed the money comes here often asking for the money, but I have nowhere to get it. I do not care what happens now, because even if I find that money, the priority will not be to pay back the debt, but to buy food.'

Elenata Chikaonda, Eneya Village, Balaka, Malawi, who had to borrow money to buy 5kg of maize.¹²

With few opportunities to earn income remaining, households are turning to negative coping mechanisms: skipping meals, selling assets and cutting down trees to make charcoal, while some women are resorting to transactional sex. A protection response in Malawi remains underfunded, as do water, sanitation and hygiene activities, despite worsening water shortages that have seen people desperately trying to dig their wells deeper.¹⁷

The maize seed gap (currently standing at half of Malawi's national requirement) threatens to make a bad situation much worse, with the country now widely expected to experience another severe national maize deficit. During the 2015/16 marketing year, the national cereal supply gap was about 300,000–400,000 tons. This marketing year, the projected deficit is estimated to be 953,000 tons.¹⁸ FEWS NET reports that among the topmost fears of households this year is the lack of resources for accessing seeds and fertilizers for the upcoming season.¹⁹ Through its farmer input support programme, the government is the main buyer of agricultural inputs in Malawi and it has not done enough to avert the prospect of another failed harvest. To compound matters, the government is reported to be planning to support only 900,000 households with fertilizer and seed in the 2016/17 season, a reduction on the 1.5 million households supported last year.²⁰

'Pupils are very frank: they tell us that there is no food in their homes, and if you insist that they should not abscond from lessons, some ask teachers to adopt them if we have food, so that they can continue learning.'

Vasco Nyirenda, headteacher of Malepera Primary School in Kasungu, Malawi.¹⁶

'Last year the harvest was very low. I got just four bags of maize and we used that up in three months. I also had pigeon peas which I sold to buy maize but that is also finished now. So now, I have no food.'

'It would be disastrous if no help comes to improve my situation. I may lose one of the orphans due to lack of food. If there is no help, it means I will not grow any crops because I cannot grow anything without seeds and fertilizers.'

'Please, please, I am desperately in need of urgent assistance in terms of seeds and fertilizer. I know that there are so many other people in need of help. But I am pleading with you so that we get the farm inputs and we can plant in time. We do not want to always have to rely on food aid. But surely, if we are assisted in good time, we can become self-reliant and harvest enough food.'

Jenipher Nkotima, 24, the smallholder farmer on the cover of this report, lives in Nkanda village in Malawi's Mulanje district. She told Oxfam she used to be able to grow enough maize to feed her family of four, but the recent drought, exacerbated by climate change, means there hasn't been enough food to go around.

In **Zimbabwe**, 4.1 million people are expected to be food-insecure at the peak hunger period (January to March 2017). The drought has evolved in the context of political volatility and an increasingly severe economic crisis. The water situation for people and livestock is critical in the south,²¹ and malnutrition rates are already at their highest for 15 years;²² this will only get worse in coming months, and is a matter of extreme concern.

The Government of Zimbabwe declared a national drought emergency in February 2016, but has allocated insufficient funds to the response, and donor support has been lacking. As of September 2016, the government had given \$1.3m and donors \$47.2m of the \$1.04bn required for the multi-sectoral response.²³ Some vulnerable households in all affected districts receive maize

grain through a government aid programme, but an official investigation found evidence of political bias in the selection of beneficiaries.²⁴

A cash crisis since April 2016 has seen restrictions placed on the amount of money that can be withdrawn from banks. Humanitarian agencies have been forced to adjust their response away from cash; Oxfam has since moved to mobile money transfers. Concerns are now growing about the potential impact of the government's planned introduction of 'bond notes', which could restrict the ability of small-scale traders who supply vulnerable communities to import food, and lead to an increase in inflation. This, combined with the regional food deficit, could send food prices rocketing in coming months.

These challenges come alongside a reduced range of coping mechanisms. Remittances have long been a lifeline in Zimbabwe, accounting for nearly half of all foreign inflows.²⁶ But the regional nature of the crisis and, among other factors, a region-wide economic downturn, mean there are fewer jobs in South Africa for migrating Zimbabweans. And the economic and liquidity crisis means fewer jobs within Zimbabwe.

To cope with declining supplies of maize, households are resorting to the distress-sale of assets and small livestock, and small-scale informal mining.²⁷ The drought in Zimbabwe has had a disproportionate impact on girls and women, particularly female-headed households. Food shortages have intensified unequal gender relations and left young women and girls vulnerable to early marriage, teenage pregnancies, transactional sex and prostitution. Women and children in polygamous communities are even worse off, as scarce cash and food is being divided between two or three extended families.²⁸

'... Young girls [are] dating older men, "sugar daddies" ... If you observe closely you will notice girls in droves lingering around local shops and beer halls near bus stations, after they get dropped off from school. They then come home carrying food items.'

A respondent in a focus group in Zimbabwe describes the increasing prevalence of transactional and intergenerational sex due to the drought.²⁵

3 PREPARING FOR THE COMING RAINS

Following months of uncertainty, a weak La Niña event (which typically brings normal to above-normal rains in Southern Africa) has been confirmed and is expected to last into the early months of 2017.²⁹ Climate forecasts issued for Southern Africa are a cause for concern. Predicted erratic rains are likely to have further impact on communities already reeling from El Niño as well as the poor harvests of the last two years.

From October to March 2017, normal to above-normal rainfall is expected across most of the region. The coming rains could improve water availability by December, offering the potential for good harvests if the serious shortfall in seed supply is overcome and farmers have timely access to appropriate seeds and fertilizers. However, sustained rains could also destroy crops and lead to flooding and outbreaks of water- and vector-borne diseases such as cholera and malaria, wreaking further misery on the region. In addition, there are warnings that Southern Africa faces the risk of being hit with migratory crop-eating pests in the 2016–17 season.³⁰

Outbreaks of crop pests and diseases tend to increase under conditions of high rainfall, with pests such as armyworm, for example, favouring rainy seasons that follow periods of prolonged drought.³¹ This could decimate crops and severely impact harvests. In Zimbabwe, for instance, more than 800 hectares of cereal grain crops and 300 hectares of pasture were destroyed by outbreaks of armyworm in 2014.³²

Within the prediction of normal to above-normal rains for the region, pockets of drier weather are expected. Southern Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique have a drier outlook for January to March, for example. These areas are already severely affected by drought, and ongoing dry periods early in the new year could deepen food insecurity at a critical time for harvests.³³

The success of the next harvests is critical for millions of vulnerable families in Southern Africa. A lack of urgency in providing the required funds and capacity for coordination, coupled with weak data management and monitoring systems, mean that governments, donors and humanitarian actors have already lost crucial time for preparedness. They must now move swiftly to support livelihood recovery activities and put in place urgent, 'no regrets' measures to support communities in the event of flooding, disease and other possible impacts of the expected heavy rains.

All actors must act immediately, or risk condemning families across the region to even greater hardship in 2017.

'I am abusing my children by asking them to work ... It's a painful state to be in – I am sacrificing my children's future.'

Elizabeth, a single mother of five, who lives in a rural community in Gutu Masvingo Province, southern Zimbabwe. Her oldest son has dropped out of secondary school, and her younger children sometimes miss school to collect firewood or do the teacher's laundry, to try to earn some desperately needed income.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

To support Southern Africa through this lean season:

- **Governments in Southern Africa should ensure that the urgent requirement for seeds and related inputs is met** among small-scale farmers through inputs packages, and that these are delivered before the planting season ends – at the end of December for planting cereals in Malawi and Zimbabwe.
- **Donors should immediately plug the \$2.5bn funding gap (as of September) for the response**, under the SADC regional humanitarian appeal.³⁴ With the response to date heavily focused on food security, more funding must be found to ensure access to safe water and sanitation, health, protection and education, including for people living with HIV.
- **All actors should strengthen protection and HIV prevention.**
 - Gender and protection concerns including gender-based violence, transactional sex, loss of livelihoods, school drop-out and inadequate water and sanitation, must be better understood and addressed in all aspects of the response, to prevent existing gender inequalities deepening.
 - HIV infection rates in endemic rural areas increase by around 11 percent with every drought.³⁵ Prevention strategies must be strengthened, and food security and nutrition activities must be prioritized for those living with HIV, to support adherence to treatment regimes.
- **Governments and humanitarian actors should support livestock activities**, for example, through supplementary feeding during the livestock lean season and the restocking of sheep and goats once grazing areas have recovered from the expected rains.
- **Governments and SADC should work with the relevant UN agencies and other services to closely monitor migratory crop-eating pest activity**, particularly locust outbreaks, and integrate possible scenarios into contingency planning at country and regional levels.
- **Governments should introduce transparent and rules-based grains marketing systems** that would allow private traders, both large and small, to cooperate and engage effectively with the humanitarian response. Greater transparency and regular communication of information on strategic grain reserves, stock levels and procurement planning is needed, along with clear and consistent trade policies, to enable the private sector to play a bigger role.
- **Governments and humanitarian actors should prioritize the repair and rehabilitation of water points and local-level irrigation schemes**, and provide support for water harvesting at the household level. Support in this regard must protect against the possible degradation of water sources should flooding occur, and ensure availability of sufficient, safe water for communities.

- **Governments must endeavour to repair key infrastructure** that is critical to ensuring vast quantities of grains can be transported to where they are desperately needed. **Stocks of food and other essential items, including medicines and cholera kits, should be pre-positioned** as soon as possible, before heavy rains render poor roads impassable, cutting off remote areas.
- **Governments and humanitarian actors** should provide community health education and outreach on basic hygiene behaviours, and ensure provision of clean and safe water, effective sanitation and proper waste management **to prevent outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and diarrhoea**. During the rainy season, flood-related degradation of water sources and sanitation infrastructure often result in outbreaks of these diseases.
- **Governments should strengthen their food, nutrition and health data collection and monitoring systems** and adopt, whenever possible, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) to allow for cross-country comparability and joint regional context analysis. **SADC** should continue to support regular updating of assessment data and projections of humanitarian needs, including country-level IPC analysis.
- **SADC must urgently meet the commitments set out in its July 2016 appeal and enhance coordinated transport logistics**, to facilitate the supply and distribution of humanitarian supplies. It should also **finalize a Response Monitoring Framework** to track achievements against agreed targets for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations.
- Specifically in **Malawi**:
 - The government parastatal (**ADMARC**) should replenish its grain stocks quickly in order to keep pace with demand. Given that ADMARC is selling at market prices, **private sector actors** should now enter the market and make maize available in order to increase supply and stabilize soaring prices, as the purchasing power of vulnerable people is being sharply eroded.
 - **ADMARC** should also commit to total transparency around the quantities of grain it has procured, and when and where it will be made available. Priority must be given to areas where cash-transfer programmes are in operation, to ensure these programmes can effectively support vulnerable families.
- Specifically in **Zimbabwe**:
 - The **government should support effective implementation at community level**. This includes fast-tracking Memoranda of Understanding to enable NGOs to work with vulnerable communities, desisting from the politicization of aid, and committing to upholding humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. It should also empower community structures such as Drought Relief Committees to ensure food assistance reaches everyone who needs it in a fair manner.
 - As a result of the cash crisis, mobile cash transfer programmes are playing a vital role in the humanitarian response to this crisis. **The government and mobile companies must reduce transaction costs on mobile money transfers** to ensure these programmes are as effective as possible.

- The **government should reduce taxes on selected goods and services** in order to cut the cost of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers. It should also reduce the levies which see smallholders who sell their livestock pay a substantial proportion of the sale price to the government.
- In light of the fundamental economic challenges that have led to the planned introduction of bond notes, the **government must put mitigation measures in place to protect the poorest**. This includes a commitment to the continued use of a multi-currency system to enable effective trade, and the establishment of an independent committee to monitor the impact of bond notes on the most vulnerable communities.

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