

Zimbabwe remains under the threat of famine

Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET)

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Based on converging evidence of mounting food insecurity and threats to livelihoods as well as consensus with its network partners, FEWS NET maintains its classification of the current food crisis in Zimbabwe as an Emergency. About 6.7 million people (49 percent of the population) remain extremely food insecure. This group is predominantly rural (88 percent) and includes 489,000 ex-commercial farm workers who are struggling to find new livelihoods. Currently, 2.2 million people rely on food aid from the World Food Program (WFP), which had intended to reach about 3 million people by November and gradually increase the number of beneficiaries over the next 4 months to 6.7 million. WFP has faced complications managing the food aid pipeline. Problematic areas include the milling of genetically modified maize and distribution irregularities for food already in country. About 75 percent of the country is relying on the erratic supply of maize from the Grain Marketing Board (GMB), but these households are still meeting only three-fourths of their total food requirements. The new crop production season offers some hope for improving food availability and access, but uneven access to farm inputs and continuing confusion in the ex-commercial farm sector raise doubts about a rapid recovery.

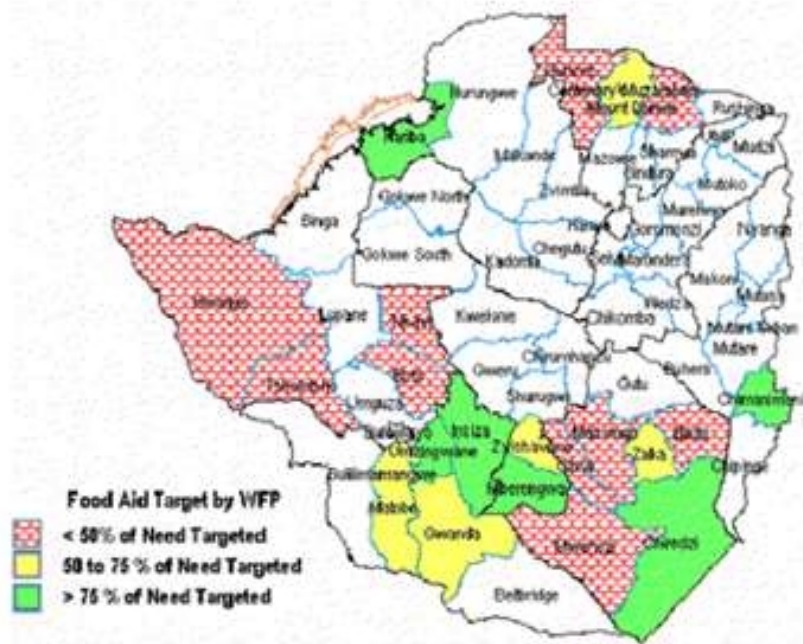
The Nature and Magnitude of the Problem

The SADC-supported National Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) Emergency Food Security Assessment Report issued September 16 estimated that about 6.7 million Zimbabweans require emergency food aid between September 2002 and March 2003. Based on its August survey, 75 percent of households held less than 25 kg of food. In at least 16 of the country's 57 districts, the portion of people in need reaches between 64 and 82 percent of the population. These districts are mostly found in Matabeleland North, Central Midlands, Masvingo Province and the Zambezi valley. All of the districts with the greatest need have suffered from at least two partial failures of agricultural production seasons during the last three years. Among those affected by flooding either in 2000 or 2002 are Tsholosthoand Lower Muzarabani wards in Centenary District, Lower Guruve ward in Guruve, Mwenzi, Zaka and Chimaniamani Districts are , Despite having experienced equally poor harvests, less than 65 percent of the people in other southern districts (such as Chiredzi, Beitbridge and Chipinge) require food aid because of their well developed strategies for coping with perennially adverse conditions and their access to informal food imports from nearby Mozambique and South Africa.

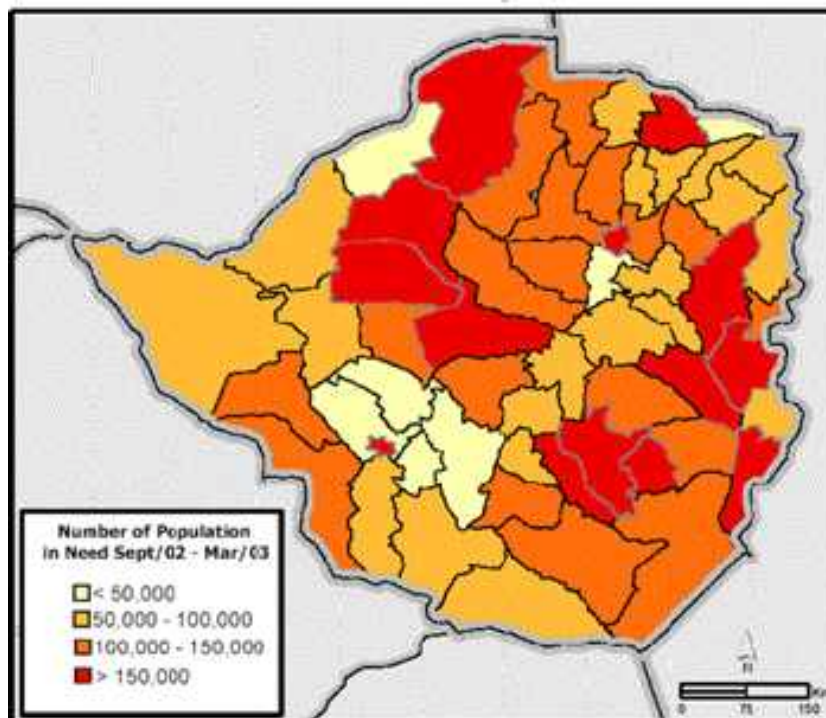
Several factors contribute to the current crisis. Domestic production of grain in the 2001/02 (April-March) production year fell to only 37 percent of the 1990s average due to a severe dry spell during the second half of the season, resulting in widespread crop failures; a land reform and resettlement program that dismantled large-scale commercial farming and caused widespread planting delays for resettled farmers; late delivery of Government provided farm inputs; the high cost of farm inputs; and shortages of tractors and draft animals for plowing and harvesting. The Government's controversial land reform program has undermined commercial farming and crop production for both domestic consumption and foreign exchange earnings and rendered many rural households homeless and without access to livelihoods. Price controls on basic foodstuffs limit available supplies in the official market and send parallel market prices soaring. Import restrictions have limited private sector maize imports to only 4 percent of total maize imports. Finally, the national rate HIV/AIDS infection has reached 35 percent in both rural and urban areas, seriously compromising both farm productivity, as able-bodied workers are bed-ridden, and food security, as household food expenditures are diverted to medical care.

The Government's commercial grain distribution through the GMB is not adequate. On average, 75 percent of rural households depend in part or entirely on subsidized maize from the GMB, but due to the GMB's erratic supply, these households are meeting only 73 percent of their monthly food requirements. In some districts, the GMB actively discriminates among would be consumers for their alleged support of opposition groups. Food aid distribution from WFP and its NGO partners reaches the villages about once every three months, and households receive a 20 kg bag, which lasts about a week for an average family of six. Grain is scarce on the parallel market and moreover, many households cannot afford its higher prices.

Food Aid by WFP towards the needy 20 February to 5 October 2002 *Source: WFP*



Maximum Number of Total Population in Need of Food Aid Sept '02 thru Mar '03



Source: Zimbabwe National Vulnerability Assessment Committee Emergency Food Security Assessment Report, September 16, 2002

Actions Underway and the Adequacy of these Actions

By the end of November, WFP, NGOs, the private sector and the Government had imported a total of 788,389 MT of maize, reducing the maize gap from 1.65 million MT at the start of the consumption year on April 1, 2002 to 829,447 MT. The Government accounts for 82 percent of all food imports to date, and the combined humanitarian effort of 108,389 MT represents almost 14 percent of the total contribution. If all goes according to plan, an additional 592,127 MT will be imported by the end of March 2003. This consignment will be comprised of 335,619 MT of commercial maize and 256,508 MT of food aid maize, further reducing the maize gap to 237,320 MT, excluding the maize required to fill the strategic grain

reserve. While the national picture suggests an improved situation since the start of the current marketing year, the flow of these imports has been slow. The outstanding maize imports need to be expedited, and efforts to procure the shortfall must be intensified in order to avoid further deterioration of the food situation in the country. By February, transportation to remote areas is expected to be difficult, as the rainy season reaches its peak. The increasingly limited availability of fuel may also slow distribution.

Food aid distributions carried out by WFP and NGOs continue to expand, now reaching 36 of the 57 districts in the country and 2.2 million of the 3 million targeted people. WFP had planned to be able to reach 3 million by November, and still intends to expand its food distribution to 5.5 million people in January 2003 and 5.8 million people in February. The difficulty in successfully increasing the number of food aid recipients is attributed to slowdowns in the pipeline as some of the food delivered by the United States has not been promptly cleared by Government. If all goes according to plan, 86 percent of the population identified as food insecure in the August NVAC assessment will be reached by the end of February and all of the target population by March 2003, the final month of the current WFP Emergency Operation (EMOP). However, this complete coverage will only be possible if both WFP and the NGOs receive outstanding grain imports of 216,000 MT before January. By mid-November, WFP had only received 50 percent of its required funding for the 7 month EMOP and was still waiting to access 98,000 MT of needed cereals, currently awaiting customs clearance. The current food aid stocks in Zimbabwe can only feed 3.3 million people (less than half the needy population) at the full ration.

Although food aid and commercial imports to date are reportedly sufficient to meet at least 72 percent of the country's requirements, the prevailing shortages throughout the country do not seem to reflect this reality, and food availability is declining at the sub-national level. This contradiction is either a result of inefficient food distribution at the national level or inflated maize import figures from the Government. Among the 6.7 million people in need of food aid are farm workers displaced by the Government's land resettlement program and others displaced owing to their political affiliation. They will remain in need of food assistance as long as their access to livelihoods is denied. According to the November National NGO Food Security Network (FOSENET) report, the highest concentrations of internally displaced people (IDPs) are in Bulilimangwe, Matobo and Gwanda Districts in Matebebeland South Province; and Guruve, Mazowe, Bindura, Centenary, and Mount Darwin Districts in Mashonaland Central. The current NVAC assessment will need to incorporate the estimated number of displaced people, as the Government will need to pay more attention to the growing problem.

Problems Facing the Current Planting Period

With the planting period already underway, farmers have been finding it difficult to obtain seed and fertilizer. Following two consecutive years of poor harvests, seed retention is low. Seventy percent of the farmers now rely on the market, even for seeds normally retained from the previous harvest, such as groundnuts, millet, sorghum, and pulses. There are 47,814 MT of maize seed in country, just shy of the 50,000 MT needed to plant the 1.6 million ha that are expected to be cultivated this season (14 percent more than the area normally planted), according to Government projections. The problem is access seed is not available in all areas, nor is it necessarily affordable when it is available. The Government, meanwhile, has purchased 50 percent of all available maize seed, which it intends to distribute to beneficiaries of input schemes and the controversial land resettlement program. Seed distribution is expected to be delayed and politically influenced.

Of the estimated Z\$160 million that the Government requires to finance its agricultural support programs in the 2002-03 production year, only 20 percent has been secured. Fertilizers are also in short supply. A total of 600,000 MT of NPK fertilizer and 420,000 MT of Ammonium Nitrate is required for the 2002-03 crop production season, but only about 262,000 MT of NPK and 140,000 MT of AN can be produced by the end of the production season, leaving a deficit of 338,000 MT of NPK and 280,000 of AN. The Government is considering importing some fertilizer, but details are not clear yet.

Another factor that does not augur well for the current planting period is the general weakening of the labor force due to food shortages and a 35 percent rate of HIV/AIDS infection varying among 15-49 year old women from 17.7 percent in Manicaland to 42.7 percent in Masvingo and 46.2 percent in Midlands, according to Ministry of Health statistics from 2000. Because of loss of labor, affected households are likely to shift to the cultivation of less labor-intensive crops such as tubers, with less nutritional content than cereals. Not only are the sick unable to engage in most farming activities, the healthy must also set aside time to care for them. Poor nutrition, resulting from widespread food shortages, renders HIV positive people more susceptible to illness and fatal disease. The extent of mortality caused by AIDS will have a long-term destabilizing effect on food production and the rural economy in general.

Recommendations for Further Action

FEWS Net Recommends that:

- the Government, currently holding about 50 percent of farm inputs, quickly distribute the inputs before end of December 2002 and avoid the sort of delays in the past two seasons. This will help alleviate the pressure on normal input market channels and ensure that farmers can plant their crops before the effective planting season comes to an end.
- the Government address the supply constraints for foreign currency that is needed to import Ammonium Nitrate and NPK to meet the NPK deficit of 338,000 MT (toward the required 600,000 MT) and 280,000 MT of Ammonium Nitrate (toward the required 420,000 MT) for the 2002-03 production season. Though generally too expensive for smaller farmers, these inputs are vital to the enhancement of productivity on the remaining large-scale commercial farms.
- the Government, WFP, and the NGO community secure the 667,000 MT of committed imports to avoid imminent starvation faced by some households, and distribute them before the rainy season peaks in February, causing some roads to become impassable.
- there should be no political interference in the independent food aid programs of NGOs or their food aid distribution on behalf of WFP.
- the Government expedite the customs clearance processes that are currently delaying WFP's distribution of about 100,000 MT of grain.

Key Indicators to Monitor

- FEWS Net will continue to monitor the progress of WFP food aid arrivals and distribution to target populations _ and the food security consequences of distributions not made.
- As the continuation of the food security crisis after March 2003 is contingent, in part, on the progress of the 2002-03 production year, FEWS Net will continue to monitor the conditions affecting current production, including weather conditions and input availability.
- Real price increases and limited availability of food staples seriously jeopardize food access. FEWS Net will continue to monitor the availability and prices of grain on official and parallel markets.
- Malnutrition indicators will continue to be monitored to understand the depth of the food security crisis.
- Population displacements and political interference in food distribution have severely affected food security. These issues will continue to receive FEWS Net's attention.
- FEWS NET intends to remain an advocate for prompt, meaningful action through these alert statements.