FACTORS DRIVING ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY

Weather extremes

Well below-average cereal production in 2018 principally as a result of unfavourable rains in the central and southern regions (maize production fell by 20 percent compared with 2017), and consequently low household-level food stocks, increased households’ reliance on markets to meet consumption needs until the harvest in the second quarter of 2019 (FAO-GIEWS, December 2018).

In early March 2019, cyclone Idai caused severe flooding, crop losses, damage and destruction of homes in 15 districts in southern Malawi, affecting more than 922 000 people, with 59 dead and 677 injured (OCHA, February 2019). Widespread losses of food supplies, damage to standing crops and reduced access to markets aggravated acute food insecurity (IFPRI, March 2019).

From mid-2019, food security improved due to increased cereal production in central and northern districts thanks to beneficial seasonal rains. Improved household food supplies and income-generating opportunities from crop sales lessened the need for humanitarian food assistance. In the southern region prolonged periods of dry weather and the impact of Cyclone Idai caused shortfalls in cereal production that sustained high levels of acute food insecurity.

Economic shocks

Prices of maize, the country’s key food staple, increased throughout 2019, only punctured by a brief seasonal decline between March and May, before reaching record highs near the end of the year. The early 2019 rise was mostly driven by domestic supply pressure, and while the larger harvest helped to alleviate this pressure in the immediate period following the April–June harvest, it was subsequently offset by heightened demand from importing countries across the sub-region (Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia) leading to further price gains.

Institutional purchases, as the country sought to shore up the national strategic reserves, an upward revision to the farm gate price and a rise in petrol prices, combined to push up maize prices further at the end of the year (FAO-GIEWS, December 2019).

Purchasing power is also constrained by lack of income. Over 60 percent of all older youth and adults work in agriculture, but over a third of the working-age population is economically inactive, primarily youth aged 15–24, women and urban dwellers (IFPRI, May 2019).

Most of Malawi’s 45 000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Rwanda live in the heavily congested Dzaleka Refugee Camp near the capital Lilongwe, which was set up in 1994 for 10 000 people. While many of these refugees have been in the country for...