ZAMBIA | MAJOR FOOD CRISIS IN 2019

FACTORS DRIVING ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY

Weather extremes

In 2019, southern parts of Zambia experienced the poorest rainfall season since 1981, which sharply reduced cereal crop production. Estimated at 2.3 million tonnes, the 2019 cereal output was about 1 million tonnes lower than the five-year average, leading to an increase in food import requirements (FAO-GIEWS, September 2019). The largest shortfalls in cereal production were in southern, western, some part of Lusaka and central provinces, which also had some of the highest rates of acute food insecurity. These areas also experienced poor harvests in 2018, which meant that households had already faced food availability constraints since late 2018 (IPC, August 2019), a situation that compounded the impact of shocks in 2019.

The crop failures in 2019 resulted in regional food deficits across southern Africa and led to a decrease in food availability at the household and market levels (IAPRI, 2019). As a consequence, many households resorted to employing negative coping strategies, including cutting the number of meals per day.

A secondary impact of the lower harvests was that income-earning opportunities for rural households were curbed, on account of reduced crop surpluses for sale and limited seasonal labour needs (FAO-GIEWS, September 2019). In parallel with the downturn in cereal production, body conditions of livestock deteriorated, reflecting the inadequate pasture and water availability. An increase in disease outbreaks among animals led to movement restrictions (IAPRI, 2019). Both these factors further curbed food availability and lowered potential earnings (IAPRI, 2019).

Economic shocks

In the last decade, Zambia had become a key maize exporter in the region, but the decrease in maize production in 2019 led to the implementation of an export ban, as the country sought to stabilize domestic supplies and ease pressure on prices from export-driven demand (FEWS NET, September 2019).

The lower food stocks from own production also made rural households more reliant on markets to meet their consumption needs. As a result of these supply shortages and increased demand, prices of the main food staples increased sharply. The retail price of maize products rose by 50–70 percent between 2018 and 2019 (FAO-GIEWS, January 2020 and WFP, 2019).

To prevent further rises and ease access to food, the government, in agreement with millers, retailers and grain traders, introduced a ceiling on maize grain prices in August 2019 (FAO-GIEWS, September 2019). The depreciation of the national currency and higher import costs exerted further upward pressure on food prices (WB, October 2019).