



MEDIA RELEASE

SADC MEMBER STATES URGED TO STRENGTHEN MECHANISMS TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF COVID-19, AS 45 MILLION PEOPLE ACROSS THE REGION FACE INCREASING FOOD INSECURITY

28 July 2020, Gaborone, Botswana – A new report, released today by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), has revealed that close to 44.8 million people in urban and rural areas across 13 Members States of Southern Africa are food insecure.

The 2020 Synthesis Report on the State of Food and Nutrition Security and Vulnerability in Southern Africa also reveals that the number of food insecure people, lacking reliable access to sufficient quantity of nutritious food, has increased by almost 10% in 2020, compared with the data provided at the same time last year.

As a result of the findings, SADC is recommending measures to address these challenges and help those impacted by increased food insecurity. These include a combination of short-term measures such as social protection programmes to support those immediately affected, as well as more medium-long term strategies focused around areas including the maintenance of domestic and international supply chains and incentives for the diversification of agricultural production.

NUMBER OF FOOD INSECURE RISES BY 10% IN THE PAST YEAR

Common climate-induced shocks (droughts and floods), economic challenges and poverty have been further exacerbated by the devastating impact of COVID-19 on communities, which has caused severe socio-economic impacts due to loss of livelihoods and employment opportunities, remittances, as a result of lockdowns, and other movement restrictions. This has been particularly evident in the urban poor, who rely heavily on livelihoods from the informal sector and local markets, which were forced to close temporarily as a result of lockdown measures.

However, the region was on course for an increase in food insecurity even before the pandemic because of the recurrent and severe climate-induced shocks and macro-economic challenges. It is likely that the projected number of the food insecure will rise further in light of the fact that the full impact of COVID-19 on the urban poor is yet to fully materialize alongside the approaching lean season between November 2020 and January 2021.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXACERBATING THE PROBLEM OF ACUTE MALNUTRITION

The SADC region is impacted by the triple burden of malnutrition, characterised by undernutrition (stunting and acute malnutrition); over-nutrition (overweight/obesity); and micronutrient deficiencies.

Children under the age of 5 are predominantly fed a poor diet and nine out of the 16 SADC Member States have reported stunting rates above 30%, while micronutrient deficiencies are widespread. Reduction in stunting is occurring at too slow a pace to meet the World Health Assembly (WHA) 2025 or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 targets.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the risk of malnutrition due to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown measures taken by various Member States to contain the spread of the virus, resulting in reduced access to food. As more restrictions have been put in place by Member States, food diversity has been constrained, inaccessible and unaffordable to the most vulnerable households. There is a risk that households will be forced to adopt negative eating practices, including reducing frequency, quantity and quality of foods, to adapt to the lockdown and other impacts of other measures.

While the effects of COVID-19 on malnutrition are not yet to be fully known, it is projected that the multi-dimensional impacts of COVID-19 could increase acute malnutrition across the region increase by 25% or more over the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. With these considerations, some 8.4 million children are likely to suffer from acute malnutrition across the region in 2020, and of these some 2.3 million children will require life-saving treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

The food and nutrition security of school-aged children has been particularly affected during the pandemic. The disruption and closure of schools and school meal programmes in the region due to COVID-19 will have a negative impact on the adequacy of food and nutrition services to children. According to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) Global Monitoring Report on School Meals, it is estimated that 20.5 million SADC school children will not have access to regular school health and nutrition services due to the school closures.

To support Member States with COVID-19 response, the region has mobilised resources to support the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic, and mitigation of its socio-economic impact on the SADC region. The regional resource mobilisation initiative was based on gaps identified by individual Member States to respond to the COVID-19 short to long-term needs. Immediate needs, include, resources to support SADC Member States in the acquiring of essential medicines, medical supplies and medical equipment, especially testing kits, Personal Protective Equipment and ventilators. So far the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Federal Republic of Germany through the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) have provided funding for this purpose.

CLIMATE CHANGE CAUSING DECLINE IN HARVESTS ACROSS THE REGION

Designated as a climate “hotspot” by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Southern Africa is prone to recurrent extreme climatic shocks and has experienced normal rainfall in only one of the last five cropping seasons.

In 2020, crop production was impacted by the late onset of rains, prolonged dry spells, sporadic heavy rainfall, as well as pest outbreaks. Despite these factors, the region's year-on-year maize harvests rose by 8%. This is due to improved harvest in Zambia that increased by 69% increase, and South Africa expecting a 38% increase. This is the second largest harvest for South Africa on record, which has produced more than 30% of the region's annual staple cereal crop over the past 10 years.

Internationally, record high production of maize, wheat and rice are expected, meaning grain-deficit countries are likely to benefit from depressed world grain prices, if there is no malfunction in global grain supply chain due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, poor rainfall and economic challenges saw maize production in Zimbabwe drop by 57%, while dry conditions also affected production in Eswatini, Lesotho, south-eastern Angola, southern Madagascar and Mozambique.

Rural food insecurity is expected to peak between November 2020 and January 2021, by which time smallholder farming households would have depleted their own food stocks, with the next harvest not expected until April 2021. This lean season is expected to come earlier than usual in parts of the region that were severely affected by the drought such as most of Zimbabwe, southern Madagascar and southern Mozambique.

HOUSEHOLDS RESORTING TO DESPERATE MEASURES TO FIGHT POVERTY

Although assessments were delayed in several Member States due to lockdowns, data from those who were able to undertake assessments shows that households are already engaging in food coping strategies; borrowing money; selling household and livelihood assets to access food. Urban populations have suffered from significant income shocks, as a result of rising unemployment caused by lockdowns and other restrictions on movement. Furthermore, the effect on food supply chains has led in many cases to food price increases, negatively impacting household incomes.

As of June 2020, Southern African economies were facing a precipitous decline in growth, which could undo the development gains of recent years. 2019 growth had already been sluggish in the region's leading economy - South Africa - with unstable commodity prices, regional droughts and climate shocks, and increasing public debt, leading to a weak economic environment. The arrival of COVID-19 exacerbated these difficulties further.

SADC MAKES RECOMMENDATIONS IN WAKE OF REPORT FINDINGS

In light of the findings from the report, SADC is putting forward wide-ranging recommendations to support those Member States suffering from increased food insecurity.

Short-term measures:

- Urgently assist food and nutrition insecure populations, ensuring harmonization with national shock-responsive social protection programmes.

- Strengthen Member State mechanisms that mitigate the impact of COVID-19 from disrupting the food supply chains and associated livelihoods, by minimizing disruption to farming operations, enabling access to production inputs, critical emergency veterinary drugs as well as produce markets by farming households.
- Expand school meal coverage as a safety net for school aged-children and adolescents. This will provide an indirect income transfer to households and communities to buffer the negative economic and food security consequences of COVID-19. Where on-site distribution of school meals is not feasible, consider providing or larger take-home rations or cash-based transfers.
- In response to COVID-19, develop and implement a regional strategy on hygiene and hand washing with soap. This should not only focus on risk communication and community engagement but also include support for provision of hand washing infrastructure and products up to household level including stimulation of supply chains, deployment of fiscal mechanisms such as value-added tax (VAT) and other social protection mechanisms.
- Domestic violence disrupts the cooperation and proper functioning of families disrupting their income (including food) generation and abilities to access, prepare and share food in the home. Childcare and feeding practices can be seriously compromised. Member States to pay special attention to the rising cases of domestic violence and gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic by, among others, ensuring that women and girls are protected from all forms of abuse. Shelters, places of safety and helplines for victims of abuse must be considered an essential service and remain open for use and must be afforded the necessary financial and other support. Further, Member States to incorporate gender perspectives in all responses to COVID-19 to ensure that actions during, and after the COVID-19 crisis aim to build more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies.

Medium-Long Term Measures:

- Encourage crop diversity through the promotion of diversified diets, including indigenous foods. This includes species diversification in livestock production, especially small ruminants that are adapted to harsh weather conditions.
- Address market-related challenges for small scale farmers by such measures as improving and developing the road infrastructure the improve farmers' access to both inputs and outputs markets as well as providing incentives for input suppliers and other services providers to move closer to the farmers.
- Promote community irrigation schemes and rainwater harvesting and construct dams to ensure year-round agricultural production.
- Develop resilience-building initiatives, including employment creation in rural areas, incorporating climate-smart technologies in subsidies and conservation agriculture.

The Report was compiled by the SADC Regional Vulnerability Assessment and Analysis (RVAA) Programme from available secondary information and the 2020 assessments and analysis conducted by National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs) of SADC Member States.

To find out more and view the full report, please visit: <https://www.sadc.int/documents-publications/show/7815>

Methodology

The “Synthesis Report on the State of Food and Nutrition Security and Vulnerability” is released annually by the SADC Secretariat and provides estimates of the number and proportion of food and nutrition insecure and vulnerable people in the region. It clarifies the main factors driving food and nutrition insecurity and vulnerability in each country and provides short, medium, and long-term recommendations.

The SADC Regional Vulnerability Assessment and Analysis (RVAA) Programme coordinates and supports the Members States to undertake annual vulnerability assessments and analysis and synthesizes the results to provide a regional outlook on food and nutrition insecurity and vulnerability. The 2017 – 2021 phase of the RVAA Programme is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented with technical support from the WFP Regional Bureau for Southern Africa and Landell Mills.

About SADC

SADC is an organization of 16 Member States established in 1980. The Mission of SADC is to promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socio-economic development through efficient, productive systems, deeper cooperation, and integration, good governance, and durable peace and security; so that the region emerges as a competitive and effective player in international relations and the world economy.

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