



United Nations



Urgent call to action to address historic El Niño drought in Southern Africa

Pretoria, 5 June 2024 - More than 30 million people across Southern Africa have been affected by a severe drought. Millions could be pushed into acute hunger unless support is urgently mobilized to scale before the next lean season, warn the United Nations (UN) and partners.

The joint call was made today by the UN, NGOs, regional and national authorities, humanitarian and development partners during a briefing on the emergency in Southern Africa, held in Pretoria, South Africa, to highlight the severe impacts of El Niño and the climate-driven crisis. This joint call follows the recent extraordinary summit by The Southern African Development Community (SADC) that saw the launch of [a regional appeal](#) in May seeking \$5.5 billion to provide urgent lifesaving assistance, to help with recovery and long-term climate resilience.

“Rural communities we have met on the ground tell us they have never seen anything like this. They are extremely worried about their future,” said Reena Ghelani, the UN Climate Crisis Coordinator for the El Niño / La Niña Response. She added that *“urgent support is needed now, and at scale, to protect lives and livelihoods.”*

The unfolding impact of this El Niño phenomenon, which started globally in July 2023, has led to a severe rainfall deficit across the Southern African region, with temperatures five degrees above average. The region experienced its driest February in 100 years, receiving 20 percent of the usual rainfall expected for this period.

“We thought we had finally rebuilt our lives after the devastation of Cyclone Freddy, but then the floods brought on by El Niño swept away everything we had worked so hard for,” said Roben, husband and father to four from a World Vision operation area in Malawi. *“When the maize yields plummet, it's like a punch to the gut. It feels like we're constantly being pushed down, and it's becoming harder and harder to find the strength to get back up. I can only manage to provide one meal a day. By June, we will completely run out of food.”*

The emergency is adding another layer of suffering to existing vulnerabilities. Even before the drought, the levels of food insecurity and humanitarian need were high, driven by socio-economic challenges, high food prices, and the compounding impacts of the climate crisis.

“The climate crisis is a crisis for children in the region. As volatile climate patterns lead to drought and floods, climate change is a real and daily threat. With loss of livelihoods and additional burdens on families, children are at risk of abuse, displacement, hunger, and diseases such as cholera. Drought and floods also have a ripple effect on access to education, leaving children vulnerable to child labor and child marriage. Alongside immediate life-saving aid, sustained and flexible support from donors, including joint investments and innovative financing in climate prevention and preparedness will be vital in saving lives and strengthening the resilience of children repeatedly hit by climate emergencies,” said UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, Etleva Kadilli.

Rain shortfalls have taken place at a crucial time for crop growth. Widespread harvest failure and livestock death are already being felt across the region, where 70 per cent of people depend on rainfed agriculture to survive.

"El Niño might be ending, but its impacts are far from over," said Adeyinka Badejo, Deputy Regional Director for the World Food Programme in Southern Africa. "Farmers in the hardest-hit countries have lost, on average, at least half their crops due to this drought, with the next harvest not expected until April 2025. We must act urgently to address the immediate food needs of the worst-affected communities and equip farming households to prepare for the next planting season. Swift action is essential to mitigate the ongoing crisis and build resilience for the future."

Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are all grappling with the impact of the drought, while Namibia, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe have declared states of emergency. The UN and partners are supporting national and regional response efforts.

"Assessments are underway to gauge the impact of the drought on agricultural production, and anticipatory actions have been triggered to provide immediate assistance to vulnerable communities. However, the magnitude of the challenge calls for additional resources to effectively respond to the crisis and safeguard lives and livelihoods. Support should focus on building the climate resilience of communities, otherwise unless resilience and early recovery support is ensured, communities will not recover and farmers will not be able to plant during the next season, perpetuating humanitarian needs," emphasized Patrice Talla, the Subregional Coordinator in Southern Africa for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO).

With a predicted shortfall in agriculture production, especially maize, farm incomes will drop. In addition, food price increases will leave farmers with less to invest in seed, fertilizers, and equipment, all crucial for maintaining and enhancing future production levels.

"The Southern African drought is yet more evidence of the growing impact of climate disasters on the lives of the most vulnerable. This crisis demands that our response is inclusive, impactful and at scale. Importantly, we have a responsibility to support African governments to continue to strengthen their preparedness to respond to such catastrophes, which, as science confirms, will increase in frequency and intensity," said Ibrahima Cheikh Diong, UN Assistant Secretary General and African Risk Capacity Group Director General.

The window of opportunity to avert a large-scale humanitarian crisis is rapidly closing, as communities face imminent harvest failures. It is urgent to provide humanitarian assistance and support communities to recover and build resilience for the future.

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