



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES  
CHANGING LIVES

## CLIMATE CHANGE: AN ASSAULT ON THE HUNGRY POOR IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

In the middle of the night on January 23, 2021 families in Beira, Mozambique awakened to the sound of merciless wind and rain, as trees toppled and roofs were torn from their houses. Less than two years after Cyclone Idai left 1.7 million Mozambicans in desperate need, Cyclone Eloise made landfall in the same place. More than 440,000 people were affected. Sara Luis, a mother of two who spent almost a year rebuilding her home after Cyclone Idai, lost everything once more. The last time she saw her house, it was completely submerged. "It was not much, but it was my house". Sara and her family were among the families fortunate to get food through WFP. Thousands of others were not so lucky.



Ironically, it is the creators of climate change in the developed world who talk most about "climate justice". It's doubtful families like Sara Luis' spend much time discussing it. While climate change is hitting them hard, their carbon footprints are barely visible - they have no cars, no air conditioners, and often no electricity. They have done little to provoke the climate crisis now engulfing them.

Southern Africa contributes barely 1 percent to global carbon emissions but their temperatures are climbing at double the global rate and punishing cyclonic storms and prolonged droughts are giving them a taste of what is to come. Experts predict unprecedented climate shocks will hit the region one to two decades earlier than the global average. In 2019, Mozambique and Zimbabwe were the two countries most affected by extreme weather events. Angola illustrates what climate change has in store. After the worst drought in 40 years, nearly 7 million people have little food and thousands have become migrants fleeing into Namibia in search of food.

Cyclone Kenneth decimated 80 percent of farmland in the Comoros in 2019, while a drastic drop in rivers and water tables from prolonged drought has led rural people to flee to cities in Madagascar. In southern part of the island a new phenomenon has emerged - sandstorms that suffocate fields and degrade the soil. Hundreds of thousands of lives are now at risk in Madagascar, the only place in the world today where "famine-like conditions" have been driven by climate not conflict. More than 1.14 million need emergency food and nutrition assistance.

Consecutive years of drought have repeatedly decimated harvests in Madagascar. Extreme drought has now affected nearly 70 percent of the Grand Sud and rains are expected to fail again in October 2021. Many of the Malagasy people now struggle to live on half rations from WFP. COVID-19 has further darkened the outlook for them, delaying critical food imports and curbing access for humanitarian personnel. An almost total disappearance of traditional foods in markets has pushed large numbers of Malagasy to resort to desperate survival measures - eating locusts, raw red cactus fruits or wild leaves.

Throughout Southern Africa, years of economic progress in many rural communities are being wiped out by the weather extremes - sometimes over years in worsening droughts, sometimes in a matter of hours in massive storms. Millions of families now find themselves in a poverty trap they cannot escape.

### ONGOING THREATS TO FOOD SECURITY

Climate change is just one of many forces now endangering economies and food security in Southern Africa. But it is an "amplifier" - intensifying the impact of nearly every existing threat. Even before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, hunger was growing at an explosive rate in southern Africa, rising sharply to 51.3 million in early 2021. About 8.4 million children face acute malnutrition - roughly the population of New York or London - and 2.3 million will need lifesaving treatment.

One person in four in most countries does not have enough food. In Madagascar, Zambia and Zimbabwe it is one in two.

Women and young children suffer most. How did we get to this crisis stage? Explosive population growth, not enough support for farmers (half of whom are women), shrinking harvests, a growing reliance on food imports, a lack of robust safety nets and a sharp rise in the consumption of processed foods have all undermined the food security and nutrition of Southern Africa's families.

Mothers have, on average, 3.8 children and the resulting population explosion has put severe strains on agricultural systems that are 90 percent smallholders in areas with limited mechanisation, transport and marketing facilities.

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Due to lack of income sources as a result of recurrent climate shocks, youth migrate to urban centers to earn a wage and support their families back in the villages. Rural farming is left largely to women with meagre resources and little economic support.

Southern Africa is now the most urbanised region in Africa - the continent with the fastest urbanisation rate in the world. As its cities expand, governments ramp up supplies of cheaper food imports and processed foods. Despite decades of UN and NGO efforts to strengthen food output by rural smallholders, the percentage of homegrown foods consumed continues a steady decline.

SADC is still the global epicentre of the HIV epidemic with 38 percent of the world's new infections in 2017. The long-term impact of HIV/AIDS and now COVID-19 on communities with little or no health infrastructure makes it harder for the poor to cope and adapt. They live in a nightmarish cycle of crisis and recovery, with most donor aid still targeted on high profile emergencies, rather than building resilience.

Chronic political instability and social conflict take a further toll. Southern Africa has over 1.25 million refugees and 5.7 million internally displaced people more prone to food insecurity and chronic malnutrition (OCHA, 2020). Despite COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, southern Africa saw climate-induced displacement for almost half a million people. Finally, the worst income inequality in the world has left half of Southern Africa living on less than a \$1 a day.



## What Can Be Done?

Can we reverse what climate change is doing to food security in southern Africa? The honest answer is no. It is too late. Slow global progress in reducing CO2 emissions and other steps to control global warming makes mitigation and containment the best possible outcome.

What WFP, its donors, and partner NGOs can do is help build resilience at the community and national levels and lessen the impact of impending climate shocks on food systems. And they can do it now.

WFP has long been a leader in and advocate for early warning and risk transfer systems. Climate risk insurance developed and supported by WFP has already provided a safety net to over 2 million farmers in 13 countries worldwide and farmers are keen to see more efforts.

WFP's promotion of fortified crops; climate proofing storage facilities; identifying alternative or more effective fuel/energy sources; small-scale irrigation and water harvesting; and shifting from monoculture of staples to include higher nutrient and more drought-resistant crops can all help vulnerable families adapt. WFP also promotes and supports governments in national food fortification strategies and to procure fortified staples and oil for food distributions to improve nutrition.

Making food a priority in social protection can strengthen social stability and reduce climate-induced migration. A wide range of WFP social protection-related activities include transfers that build the resilience of households to shocks; school feeding programmes, and public works/asset creation projects that focus on environmental conservation and rehabilitation, soil and water management, and disaster proofing physical infrastructure.

## Paying the Price of Climate Change

Against this backdrop, climate shocks have arrived – a cruel mix of historic droughts, intensifying cyclonic activity, and frequent flooding have devastated crops and livestock, intensified insect infestations, and periodically cut off roads and bridges to markets.

The UN estimates that temperatures will rise between 2°–5°C over the coming decades, accompanied by more intense and frequent extreme weather events. Climate impacts are already costing most African economies between 3 and 5 per cent of GDP annually, with some incurring losses of up to 10 per cent of GDP.

Changes in temperatures and rainfall patterns have already led to water scarcity, rising soil salinity and heat stress for crops, pest infestations, and losses of valuable top soil. Thirty percent of southern Africa's food production by smallholders is now at risk and the region has had normal rainfall in only two of the last nine cropping seasons. Higher carbon dioxide levels are cutting the nutritional quality of food, with the iron, zinc and protein content in maize, wheat, rice, peas and soy dropping 3-17 percent.

Rising food prices due to climate change have left many families less able to afford diverse diets. According to the WFP Fill the Nutrient Gap Analysis, over 50 percent of households in DRC, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia cannot afford a nutritious diet, with the figure rising to over 80 percent in some districts. Price spikes after disasters rapidly spread malnutrition among the region's vulnerable children.



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## Why Turn to WFP to Cope with Climate Change?

The operative word here is fast. WFP moves quickly. Each day it has up to 5,600 trucks, 30 ships and 100 planes on the move delivering food and other assistance. Ongoing WFP food assistance can deliver help now that promotes adaptation, mitigation and resilience in farm communities. That assistance can often arrive in a matter of weeks, not months or years, through existing projects and emergency operations that already target the most vulnerable. The simple reality is that many climate projects take years to formulate and begin operations. The poor in Southern Africa have run out of time. They need more help now.



Climate experts and WFP's partners often say that it is the poorest - principally women and children - who suffer most from climate change. Yet, truthfully, just how much climate change funding is really reaching them? Well intentioned rhetoric changes little.

WFP has worked with the poorest African farmers -- most often women -- for more than a half a century through food for assets and other development projects to conserve soil and water, plant trees, reduce food losses, and promote irrigation. Worldwide we are seeing a sudden surge in tree planting to soak up carbon emissions. WFP has decades of experience in tree planting to reverse land degradation and promote ecosystem restoration. These activities support the environment, livelihoods and have an impact on carbon sequestration

If you want to reach children, nothing works better than WFP homegrown school feeding which keeps kids in school, provides basic nutrition so they can learn better and buys food locally to stimulate farm production. All told, WFP is already feeding 10 million school children across Southern Africa.

The fact that African agriculture remains based on millions of poor smallholders makes the promotion and adoption of climate friendly agricultural practices far more challenging than in developed countries. Agricultural extension workers have to cover vast areas with poor roads and an enormous number of remote small farms. Again, WFP has decades of experience working in these vulnerable and hard to reach areas.

In Malawi, for instance, WFP uses an integrated livelihoods approach to reduce harmful consumption that degrades the environment. About 150,000 households were given new, locally built and fuel efficient stoves that reduce pollution and cut firewood use by half in a country with a serious deforestation problem.

A longstanding and close working relationship with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and SADC has helped WFP sharpen vulnerability assessments to target the neediest and promote resilience in farm communities. In Madagascar, for example, WFP delivered irrigation systems and vegetable seeds to help small farmers recover from climate shocks. Through the Rural Resilience Initiative, a micro-insurance scheme, WFP is reaching hundreds of thousands in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Under the African Risk Capacity Initiative, WFP has built up social protection measures in the wake of catastrophic drought in Zimbabwe. In Malawi, WFP supplies farmers with climate information and advice through cell phones, radio programs, and agricultural extension services. Farmers can then plan ahead and reduce crop losses from changes in rainfall.

If you want to reach the poorest communities faster, WFP is your best option. There is no other humanitarian agency that has undertaken assistance operations on the same scale - and done so quickly. WFP is the frontline agency that oversees logistics and telecommunications in emergencies for the entire UN system and its NGO partners. Well established ties to governments and reliable local NGOs give WFP a huge advantage in ensuring results in the battle against climate change.

Photos: Sara Luis and her two children (c) WFP/Yuri Andrade  
Drought in Southern Madagascar (c) WFP/Tsiory Andriantsoarana  
David uses WFP's COVID-19 cash assistance to buy the essentials from the market (c) WFP/Andy Higgins  
Daniel receives guidance from WFP Zambia hydroponics expert on growing hydroponic plants (c) WFP/Andy Higgins