

Dry weather hits southern Africa's farmers, putting key maize supplies at risk: How to blunt the impact

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[South Africa](#), [Zambia](#) and [Zimbabwe](#) have recently published reports indicating a potential decline in grain harvest because of intense El Niño-induced dryness. These developments could put the entire Southern Africa maize supply chain at risk, with Zambia and South Africa hard hit by heatwaves and dryness. The neighbouring small producers such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia are also struggling with dryness.



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Given that South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe [are among the largest maize producers](#) within the Southern Africa region, a potential decline in the harvest in these countries suggests there could be an increase in the risk of food insecurity. This would necessitate imports to meet the shortfall in the region's maize supplies.

The dryness in an El Niño event is not unexpected in the [Southern Africa region as this weather phenomenon is typically accompanied by dryness](#). The year started favourably, with excellent rains. But the dryness intensified from the end of January. Major damage has been [caused](#) to crops since then. The unusual pattern may be part of the broader climate change challenges.

Based on research into [grains markets](#) in the region, and recent observations from our field work across the summer crop growing regions of South Africa, it is clear that the region faces a difficult time ahead.

While the extent of the impact of the heatwave and dryness on crops changes daily, the pattern thus far is clear that the whole Southern Africa region has taken strain and will see a significant reduction in the volume of the crop produced.

Although the domestic hunger challenges may rise in some countries, as we already see in the forecasts in [Zimbabwe](#) and [Zambia](#), the governments in the region must be careful about the response policies and programmes. For example, they should avoid export restrictions and maize price caps. And they should make sure that any government support should be at the household level.

South Africa

In South Africa, [a recent farmers' survey](#) by [Grain South Africa](#), a lobby group for the sector, found that extreme heat and dry conditions had caused the grain and oil-seeds harvest to deteriorate much faster than initially expected.

These challenges have probably worsened since the survey was completed towards the end of February.

The Crop Estimates Committee in South Africa – a grouping of scientists, economists and statisticians from the government, private sector, academia and independent research organisations – also fears the possible decline in the summer grains and oilseed harvest. In its [first production estimate for the 2023/24 season](#), the Committee placed the summer grains and oilseed harvest at 17.4 million tonnes, down 13% on 2023.

This is primarily a function of lower expected yields rather than a reduction in the acreage planted, thus reflecting a negative impact of the drier weather conditions and heatwave. This is an overall production figure, and the decline varies crop by crop. Still, a positive aspect of South Africa is that the expected harvest will still be enough to meet the country's domestic consumption, leaving some volume for exports, albeit significantly down from the previous seasons.

There has not been a lot of talk about other value chains outside summer grains and oilseed, primarily because of higher dam levels from the past few years and earlier rains in the season. With all of South Africa's commercial fruit and vegetable production under irrigation, the improved water levels in the dams assist farmers in coping with the current heatwave. The livestock industry is still in a relatively better place as the grazing veld has generally improved, and there were large maize and soybean supplies from the 2022/23 season.

The field crops are [primarily rainfed](#), leaving a large percentage at the mercy of the natural rains, which have been scarce since the start of February.

Zambia under drought stress

In late February Zambia's President, Mr Hakainde Hichilema, [declared Zambia's severe drought a national disaster and emergency](#). There is crop damage in the majority of the summer crop-producing regions of the country because of the El Niño-induced drought.

Worryingly, the government reported that the drought [has destroyed nearly 1 million hectares of maize](#). Given that the overall commercial maize area planting in the country is about 1.9 million hectares, this would mean half of the production has been destroyed. [It could have significant negative consequences on food production](#).

Zambia is one of southern Africa's main producers and exporters of maize. This means if the maize harvest is down notably in the country, there will be no volume for exports to neighbouring countries that also need supplies. This happens at a time when South Africa, although potentially with sufficient supplies for domestic consumption, would have a massive decline in the volume of maize available for exports.

Zimbabwe's grain production also strained

At the start of this year, there were reports of roughly [2.7 million Zimbabweans potentially at risk of hunger](#) because of the drought impact in their summer grain fields. Moreover, Reuters [reported](#) that “Zimbabwe plans to import 1.1 million metric tons of maize over the next year”.

It is unclear how much of this volume has thus far already been imported into the country. The volume speaks to the pressures of maize supplies in Southern Africa. Typically, when Zimbabwe needs such large maize imports, South Africa and Zambia are the primary suppliers. With Zambia potentially out of the export market this year, the pressure is now on South Africa to supply Zimbabwe.

Still, suppose all the required maize is of the white varietal, South Africa may not be in a position to provide Zimbabwe with the total required volume, particularly if we consider that the likes of Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Madagascar, and even Zambia will also require maize imports to supplement their domestic annual needs.

Policy considerations

There are several key points that policy makers should consider. These include:

- Avoiding export restrictions and maize price caps. While restricting exports seems a good approach for cushioning households in the near term, such an intervention disincentivises production for the next year as the farm-level prices would be artificially depressed. This is particularly important as farmers are not protected from higher input costs and pay world prices for all the imported inputs such as fertilisers, agrochemicals and some seeds.
- Ensure interventions are at the household level through various support packages with fiscal space used to implement such programmes.
- The regional governments should also engage with the World Food Programme to prepare to assist the least well-off countries with maize imports from the world market.
- The governments should also engage, collectively with the private sector, the likes of Mexico that produce white maize, to assess if they would have space to export to the Southern Africa region if the need arises.

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