

Drought-ravaged SADC grapples with seed shortages

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SADC countries must scale up efforts to procure adequate seed for farmers ahead of the 2016-2017 cropping season to avert another year of food shortages after a drought that ravaged the region in the last season left millions hungry, a senior UN Food and Agriculture Organisation says. Lewis Hove, regional agricultural coordinator of FAO, told the Zimpapers Syndication Services that SADC countries, with the support of international partners, needed to take urgent practical steps to ensure seed availability ahead of the coming farming season.



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"La Niña is both good and bad news. It will bring good rains and problems related to flooding," he said. "SADC countries need to make sure there is seed for smallholder farmers on time. If we do not work on this, the region may face food shortages again next year."

Hove said the seed security position is worse for some SADC countries while it was stable in others. SADC is facing a large cereal deficit of 9,3 million metric tonnes after an El Niño induced drought swept across the entire region leaving up to 23 million people in need of immediate assistance. All SADC countries have large cereal deficits with exception of Zambia and Tanzania.

Humanitarian agencies last month appealed for US\$2,7 billion in aid for the seven drought-hit countries in Southern Africa. Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique are among the hardest hit but the figure has since increased to US\$2,8 billion after Botswana and Africa's biggest economy - South Africa - presented their appeals to SADC.

A food crisis gripping the region may get worse if farmers do not access seed and other critical inputs in the coming planting season. Seed reserves are depleted after 2015-2016 crop failures and some hungry farmers ate the grain they would normally save to plant in the next season. Recurrent droughts in the last few years have caused massive losses of agricultural production and livestock, loss of human lives to hunger, malnutrition and disease, massive displacements of people and shattered economies across the region.

Assessing seed security

Hove said as part of a strategy to address the effects of the recent El Niño and its impact on the agriculture sector, the FAO is undertaking a seed and other agricultural input assessment in Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland,

Zambia and Zimbabwe, with support from international partners. The assessment was being conducted in partnership with the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), SADC Seed Centre, governments, NGOs, private sector actors and other stakeholders.

"In order to assess seed security and farming households' ability to recover in the 2016/17 season following the El Niño-induced drought in Southern Africa, the assessment is being undertaken in two phases: Phase I focuses on establishing national-level agricultural input supply and demand information of the focus countries and Phase II will concentrate on ascertaining the capacity of drought-affected farming households and communities to timely access agricultural inputs," read part of the communiqué issued by the FAO and its partners.

The communiqué was issued after the holding of a stakeholder's workshop recently in Johannesburg on the status of the seed supply and requirements situation in Southern Africa. Seed supply and demand scoping missions were conducted in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

"There are significant gaps in seed availability throughout the focus countries - most notably in Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique," the FAO said.

"Given that seed and input availability, in general, can be a proxy indicator for agricultural production capacity, urgent efforts are needed to support farmers to produce in the coming season. Further, efforts should be made to put in place mechanisms for mainstreaming this information into vulnerability assessments and other early warning systems."

The UN agency was also collecting information from South Africa to determine the potential of seed and other input exports to other countries in the region.

Weak disaster preparedness and gaps in informal seed systems

Poor rainfall has led to an unsatisfactory overall regional seed security situation for the 2016 - 2017 period with an overall cereal (maize, wheat, rice, millet and sorghum) deficit of 9,3 million metric tonnes. Weather and climate-related disasters have caused economic losses running into billions of dollars and deaths of more than 5,500 people between 2005 and 2016 in the entire SADC region exposing the region's weak disaster risk preparedness systems, according to SADC Climate Services Centre.

SADC experts say that funding committed, contributed or pledged for humanitarian events and disasters between 2005 and 2016 amounted to nearly US\$13 billion.

The Zimpapers Syndication Services presents information from the FAO on seed and input availability in the selected SADC countries. The information is only from formal systems. "It is recognised that overall, a significant number of farmers rely on informal seed systems for their production.

"Owing to the difficulty of monitoring informal seed systems, the gaps in seed availability presented indicate gaps in the

formal system, and do not account for the availability of seed in informal systems." FAO said.

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