

A GROWING CRISIS: food insecurity and poverty surging in Southern Africa



Southern Africa faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, driven by one of the worst droughts in over a century, leaving millions facing acute hunger and deepening poverty across the region. As climate change tightens its grip, the region's vulnerability has become starkly evident, calling for urgent interventions to address not only immediate needs but also long-term resilience.

Worst drought in a century

According to a recent [report by Al Jazeera](#), southern Africa is grappling with its most severe drought in 100 years. This prolonged dry spell has devastated agriculture, depleted water resources, and crippled food systems. Countries such as Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique have been hit hardest, with millions unable to access basic necessities, prompting desperate appeals for international assistance.

In Zimbabwe, maize production—the staple food—has dramatically decreased, pushing nearly half of its rural population into severe food insecurity. Similarly, Malawi has declared a national disaster after its harvests failed, exacerbating already dire socio-economic conditions. The regional impacts of this drought highlight the interconnected nature of food security and poverty, where agricultural failures directly translate into human suffering.

Alarming numbers and a regional emergency

Reuters [reports](#) that nearly 68 million people in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region are suffering due to drought conditions. As food prices soar due to limited supply, vulnerable populations are increasingly unable to afford basic commodities. Water scarcity compounds these difficulties, leading to increased health risks, including malnutrition and water-borne diseases. These intertwined crises are not only humanitarian issues but also pose substantial risks to regional stability and development.

Deepening poverty and vulnerability

The latest [Afrobarometer report](#) highlights a troubling rise in poverty across the African continent, with southern Africa being no exception. The report reveals a significant surge in severe lived poverty—defined as frequently lacking sufficient food, clean water, healthcare and cooking fuel—in multiple southern African countries over the past decade. Countries like Malawi, Mozambique



and Zimbabwe have seen marked increases, indicating deep-rooted systemic issues.

This increase is directly linked to climate vulnerability and economic instability. Communities heavily reliant on agriculture for their livelihoods are disproportionately affected by environmental shocks such as droughts. The findings illustrate a cycle where poverty and vulnerability feed into each other, amplifying the humanitarian impacts during crises like the current drought.

Foreign aid crisis

In addition to the challenges posed by the unprecedented drought and rising poverty levels, southern Africa's food security has been further compromised by the withdrawal of international aid. The United States, historically a significant contributor to humanitarian assistance in the region, has under-re-elected president Donald Trump recently frozen USAID funding, leading to severe repercussions. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), the decision could push 5.7 million more Africans into extreme poverty next year. *The Guardian* reports that in Malawi, one of the world's most aid-dependent nations, this freeze affects over \$350 million in annual aid, constituting more than 13% of the national budget. This sudden shortfall has led to immediate crises, including halted supplies of lifesaving medications and the cessation of educational support for students on US bursaries. The economic ramifications are profound, with increased unemployment and diminished public services exacerbating the already dire situation. This development underscores the vulnerability of southern African nations to external economic shifts and highlights the urgent need for sustainable, internally driven solutions to ensure food security and economic stability.

The immediate priority for governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international bodies remains emergency relief, including food aid, access to clean water and health services. Yet, experts stress that short-term relief alone is insufficient. Strengthening resilience to climate change through sustainable agricultural practices, better water management, and infrastructure development is crucial.

Investing in drought-resistant crops, improving irrigation systems, and developing regional cooperation mechanisms for disaster preparedness can help mitigate future risks. Governments and international bodies must prioritise funding and resources towards climate adaptation projects to avoid repeated humanitarian emergencies.

Beyond statistics and policy discussions, it is important to remember the human cost of the crisis. Families across southern Africa are facing daily struggles for survival. Children are disproportionately affected, suffering from chronic malnutrition, disrupted education and increased vulnerability to disease.

An urgent call for action

The food security crisis in southern Africa is not merely a consequence of environmental conditions but a reflection of deeper socio-economic vulnerabilities. Immediate humanitarian aid must be paired with robust, long-term strategies addressing poverty alleviation, climate adaptation and regional cooperation. Millions of lives depend on swift, collective action to forge a resilient future.

Article compiled from the various cited sources by the Editor, Fanie van Rooyen, with the aid of ChatGPT 4.5 as an experiment. Let us know what you think (quest-editor@assaf.org.za).