Mixed production prospects for 2021 “long-rains” main season crops

In uni-modal rainfall major growing areas of Central, Rift Valley and Western provinces, planting of the 2021 “long-rains” main season crops, for harvest from September, normally starts in March. An early onset of seasonal rains in February was followed by below-average precipitation in March, which disrupted sowing operations and delayed them by two to three weeks. Subsequently, above-average rains in April and May benefited planting and germination of crops, and current vegetation conditions are above average. According to the latest weather forecasts by the IGAD Climate Predictions and Application Centre (ICPAC), above-average precipitation is expected in these areas between June and September, with a likely positive impact on yields.

In bi-modal rainfall southeastern and coastal marginal agriculture areas, crops are expected to be harvested from July and they have been affected by poor rains, with cumulative amounts between March and mid-May estimated at 30-75 percent below average. Germination failures have been reported in several areas and widespread replanting occurred in April. Currently, vegetation conditions are generally poor and between 10 and 55 percent of the crop land is affected by drought conditions (Agricultural Stress Index map). With seasonal rains usually subsiding in early June in these areas, late planted and replanted crops are unlikely to reach maturity and cereal production is expected at below-average levels.

In late 2019, the country suffered the worst outbreak of desert locusts in 70 years. The infestations have been successfully contained by large scale control operations carried out by the
Government with the support of FAO, which averted widespread crop and pasture losses in 2020, with localized damages recorded mostly in northern pastoral areas. Poor October-December 2020 “short-rains” and March-May 2021 “long-rains” have severely constrained insect reproduction and current infestation levels are significantly lower compared to one year ago. The last swarm was treated on 23 April and, since then, no further swarms have been reported. Limited breeding could occur in northern areas that received improved rains in May and monitoring and control operations must be maintained.

Above-average 2020 cereal production due to favourable “long-rains” in key producing areas

In bi-modal southeastern and coastal marginal agricultural areas, harvesting of the secondary 2020/21 “short-rains” season crops was concluded in mid-March. The area planted with maize is officially estimated at about 260 000 hectares, 16 percent below the average of the previous five years, with farmers limiting plantings due to unfavourable weather forecasts and to constrained access to inputs, including certified seeds and fertilizers caused by COVID-19-related restrictions. The October-December 2020 rains were characterized by below-average amounts and erratic distribution, with a negative impact on yields, which were further reduced by localized losses due to desert locusts. Overall, maize output is estimated at 127 000 tonnes, about 25 percent below average, with the sharpest output contractions recorded in coastal areas, where rainfall deficits were more severe.

Earlier in the year, the main “long-rains” crops, accounting for the bulk of the national cereal production, benefited from abundant seasonal rains over the key producing areas and maize production is officially estimated at 3.78 million tonnes, 10-15 percent above average.

The 2020 aggregate cereal production is estimated at 4.8 million tonnes, similar to the previous year and about 10 percent above the average of the previous five years.

Poor rangeland conditions affecting pastoral livelihoods

Grazing resources in most pastoral and agro-pastoral areas across the country have been severely affected by two consecutive poor rainy seasons (October-December 2020 “short-rains” and March-May 2021 “long-rains”). According to the government’s National Drought Management Authority, as of April, out of the 14 counties located in these livelihood zones, seven were declared to be in “drought alert phase” and three in “drought alarm phase”. The counties in “drought alarm phase” are Turkana and Marsabit in the northwest and Mandera County in the northeast. The substantial rainfall deficits and localized pasture losses due to locusts resulted in the deterioration of rangeland conditions to poor levels (Vegetation Health Index map). Due to significant forage and water deficits, livestock trekking distances to watering points from grazing fields have increased in recent months in most counties and, in April, they were between 30 and 100 percent longer than average, with record distances reported in Turkana and Isiolo counties. Livestock body conditions are generally below average and some animal deaths due to starvation have been reported in Turkana and Baringo counties. Milk production has declined to low levels and, in April, it was between 25 and 75 percent below average.
Heavy showers received in May had some localized positive impacts on rangeland conditions, but improvements are likely to be short-lived as seasonal rains usually subside in early June.

Prices of maize at low levels in key producing areas and in main urban centres

In key producing areas and in main urban centres, including in the capital, Nairobi, prices of maize in May were generally at low levels, 10-20 percent lower than a year earlier, due to adequate domestic availabilities following the above-average 2020 maize output.

In northern and eastern pastoral areas, prices of livestock declined between October 2020 and April 2021 as the poor performance of the last two rainy seasons had a negative impact on livestock body conditions and, in April, they were below their year-earlier levels. In Turkana, Marsabit, Wajir and Garissa counties, prices of goats in April 2021 were 20-40 percent lower than one year earlier.

With cereal prices 5-10 percent above their year-earlier levels, mainly due to the poor performance of the “short-rains” harvest, the terms of trade for pastoralists deteriorated in northern and eastern areas over the last 12 months and, in April, they were 10-45 percent lower than one year earlier. For example, in Wajir County, the equivalent in maize of a medium-sized goat declined from 70 kg in October 2020 to 51 kg in March 2021.

Food security situation deteriorating in 2021 due to multiple shocks

In the 23 counties classified as rural Arid and Semi-Arid Lands, covering about 80 percent of the country’s landmass, about 2 million people were estimated to be severely food insecure (IPC Phase 3: “Crisis” and Phase 4: “Emergency”) in the March-May 2021 period. This figure, which includes 1.77 million people in IPC Phase 3: “Crisis” and 239 000 people in IPC Phase 4: “Emergency”, is about 40 percent higher than the estimate of 1.4 million in February 2021 and more than twice the estimate of 985 000 individuals in mid-2020. The substantial deterioration of the food security situation is mainly due to the negative impact on crop and livestock production and on-farm income earning opportunities of the poor March-May “long-rains” in northern pastoral, southeastern and coastal marginal agricultural areas, to the measures implemented to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected off-farm income earning opportunities, including petty trade, charcoal and firewood sales, and to localized but significant locust-induced pasture losses.

The food security situation is of significant concern also in urban areas. Here, the restrictive measures introduced in early 2020 to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic have severely affected poor households, which mainly rely on daily wages earned through casual labour, petty trading, food vending, construction activities and domestic work. Despite the phasing out of some measures since June 2020, about 1 million people were estimated to be food insecure in urban informal settlements between October and December 2020, due to a substantial decline in income coupled with increasing food prices.

In late 2020, in response to an increase of COVID-19 cases, some measures were reintroduced and, in March, additional...
restrictions were implemented in Nairobi, Kiambu, Machakos, Kajiado and Nakuru counties, which have exacerbated food insecurity.

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