GIEWS Country Brief
Zimbabwe

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FOOD SECURITY SNAPSHOT
- Favourable weather forecasts for main cereal producing areas, but economic difficulties could curb 2020 cereal plantings and hinder early crop growth
- Reflecting weather-reduced 2019 harvest, imports of cereals forecast to rise to well above-average level in 2019/20 marketing year
- Prices of cereal staples increased sharply and, as of August 2019, were more than four times higher on yearly basis
- Number of food insecure people projected to rise to 5.5 million in January-March 2020 period

Weather forecasts indicate favourable rains in northern areas but likely reduced rains in south

Planting of the 2020 cereal crops, mainly maize, is expected to start in November and the harvest period is foreseen to begin in April next year. Weather forecasts for the October-December 2019 period indicate a higher probability of average to above-average rainfall in the main cereal producing provinces of the north, auguring well for planting prospects and early crop growth. By contrast, the weather outlook for the same period in the southern provinces point to a higher likelihood of average to below-average precipitation, conditions that could delay plantings. However, a factor that is adversely weighing on the overall crop prospects is the economic difficulties that are pervading the country, including severe shortages of foreign currency reserves to pay for imported agricultural inputs, especially fertilizers, and the significantly high inflation rates. These conditions are constraining farmers’ access to agricultural inputs in 2019 and have increased the general cost of production, factors that are likely to curtail plantings.

Below-average rains resulted in sharply reduced 2019 harvest

The 2019 cereal crops, mostly maize, were harvested by June and the aggregate cereal output is estimated at about 944 000 tonnes, approximately 40 percent below the five-year average. The production decline reflects unfavourable rainfall, with erratic distribution and below-average seasonal amounts, which caused both a decrease in the area harvested and average yields. In addition, the landfall of Cyclone Idai in March triggered heavy rainfall and flash floods in localized areas in eastern provinces,
causing losses of standing crops.

Cereal import requirements forecast at above-average level

Total cereal import requirements are forecast at 958 000 tonnes in the 2019/20 marketing year (April/March), 40 percent above the five-year average. This high volume mainly results from larger needs of maize as the 2019 domestic harvest is estimated to satisfy only 40 percent of the national consumption requirements compared to an average of 80 percent over the previous five years. Imports of rice and wheat, which are produced in small quantities in the country, are forecast at 205 000 tonnes and 150 000 tonnes, respectively, about 10 percent above the five-year average.

Prices of cereal products rose steeply in 2019

Prices of maize meal and wheat flour have followed sustained upward trends since October 2018, with sharper monthly increases taking place between April and August 2019. As of August, prices of maize meal and wheat flour, which is almost entirely imported, were more than four times higher on a yearly basis. Prices of rice have also risen sharply since June 2019. The extreme price increases have been mostly driven by the depreciation of the national currency as well as the reduced domestic supplies of grain, due to the below-average harvest and shortages of foreign currency reserves that have curbed the country’s capacity to import (please see the GIEWS Update for further information).

Significantly high levels of food insecurity

During the January-March 2020 period, the number of food insecure people is projected to increase to about 5.5 million, the highest number on record. The unprecedented levels of food insecurity mostly results from the reduced availability of grains and the very high food prices that are severely constraining access to food. The lower harvests have not only reduced food availability for rural households, but also cut incomes from agricultural-related activities, further compounding negative effects of the inflated food prices.

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