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**FAO EMERGENCY OPERATIONS AND REHABILITATION DIVISION**

UN REGIONAL INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION AND SUPPORT OFFICE (RIACSO)

Update on Current Agricultural Season

: Southern Africa

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1. **Overall View of the 2006/07 Agricultural Season**

The 2006/07 season was highly variable, with overall rainfall amounts close to normal in most countries but very poorly distributed. Heavy downpours were often followed by dry spells of three weeks or more, which caused crop failure if planting dates were mis-timed.

In general, early planted crops were better placed to withstand the hot, dry conditions of February and March in most countries and crops planted under Conservation Agriculture (CA) were better able to withstand the extreme heat than conventionally planted crops. This is because under CA, soil organic matter levels are higher and this greatly increases water holding capacity, while soil temperatures are much reduced by having mulch or ground cover. Trials in Mozambique comparing soil temperatures at 1400 hours at 2cm depth showed 43 degrees C. for bare soil and 30 degrees C. for mulched soil.[[1]](#footnote-1) This underlines the need to expand the use of Conservation Agriculture throughout the region.

Malawi has had a very good season, with an estimated surplus approaching 1million tonnes of maize, while Southern Mozambique, Eastern and Southern Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Lesotho have had a very poor one. Zambia’s Western and Eastern Provinces were adversely affected by flooding, while Southern Province was affected by periodic droughts and poorly distributed rains. Overall however, Zambia’s national maize production should be about average.

Apart from weather conditions, the main cause of poor yields and resulting food insecurity is lack of working capital to buy improved seed, fertilizer and draught power. Large seed and fertilizer input subsidy schemes were implemented by the Governments of Malawi and Zambia and to a lesser extent, Lesotho. Where inputs were delivered on time, the result was highly positive for crop yields and production. However, the effect was much reduced when inputs were delivered too late for the planting season or where dry spells had negated the advantage. In principle, the input subsidy schemes are put in place when it is recognized that farmers have no working capital and no collateral, in terms of land titles to obtain it from commercial banks.

As a result of the low prices now being quoted for the anticipated bumper maize harvest in Malawi, in many cases, the farmers will find it difficult to recover the cost of production, meaning that their financial position will not improve and they will need subsidies on inputs again next year, despite the good harvest there this year. This need to finance working capital for farmers will put a heavy and continuing strain on the respective national exchequers.

1. **Country by Country Update**
	1. **Angola**

The overall food security outlook for Angola is quite positive, with good and reasonably well distributed rains over most of the country and a wide diversity of crops being grown over three planting seasons. Virus disease outbreaks on cassava (known locally as Cassava Cholera) in Uige and heavy rains in Moxico, Huambo, Lunda Sul, Benguela, Bengo, Huila and Zaire have caused damage to up to 80 000 ha of farmland. Bean production in Huambo was affected by heavy flooding.

 According to FEWS, there was improved access to seed and fertilizer and an increase in the area under crops. Animal traction is being supported by government and NGO distribution schemes and there is also increased access to tractors.

Poor rainfall since January in Cunene and Cuando Cubango may reduce crop production there and this is exacerbated by a poor harvest the previous year. Livestock production is more important than crop production in these districts.

* 1. **Lesotho**

Dry conditions have persisted since early January and crops show severe water stress.

Estimated planted area for maize is down from 161 559 ha last year to 140 145 this year, a decrease of 13.3 percent. Sorghum planted area is also down, from 36 104 ha to 30 224 ha, a decrease of 16.3 percent. Wheat area is also down by 16.4 percent to 8 785 ha. The government is distributing fertilizer and seed in the lowlands for winter cropping, at a 40 percent subsidy, to farmers requiring inputs.

Bean crops in the northern lowlands which survived earlier hail damage are now being harvested. Crops in the mountains fared better than those in the southern districts of Mohale’s Hoek, Quthing and Mafeteng, which in many cases have failed completely. An FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission will visit Lesotho from 23rd April to 5th May.

Livestock are reported to be in good condition, with adequate forage. A joint FAO/Government of Lesotho acaricide treatment campaign against sheep scab was reported to have reached only 59 percent of sheep and goats. Goats do not suffer from sheep scab, but act as carriers of the mites, which then go on to infest sheep which come in contact with the goats. A charge of R1 per sheep/goat was levied and this may have acted as a disincentive to farmers to present their animals for treatment.

**2.3 Malawi**

Malawi is one of the few countries in the region with an increased harvest this year. The first round of crop estimates a maize harvest of 3.15 million tonnes, an increase of 27.3 percent above last year’s bumper crop of 2.47 million tonnes. Rice crops are also good and a harvest of 107 797 tonnes is expected, compared to 92 449 tonnes last year. Rainfall has been slightly above normal and generally well distributed, in constrast to neighbouring countries in the region.

As a result of the large supply of maize ( a surplus of 1 million tonnes is expected) still on the market from last season and this year’s big harvest, prices of maize have fallen sharply in most areas of the country. FEWS reports a drop in the price of maize in March 2007 of over 50 percent in most market centres compared to March, 2006, however prices during March 2006 were the highest due to extreme scarcity of maize in the country. Prices as low as 11.22 Kwacha per kilogram (approximately US$125.67 per tonne) were reported from Mwansambo. This compares to a price of K30.00 per kilogram(US$212.77 per tonne, approx.) at ADMARC markets. It was reported that Malawi has agreed to sell 400 000 tonnes of maize to Zimbabwe. Lack of appropriate storage structures for the record crop is a problem. The Government’s fertilizer subsidy scheme under which up to 150 000 tonnes of basal and top dressing fertilizer were distributed has been extended to the coming season, with prices of a 50 kg bag reduced from K950 ($6.74) to K900 ($6.38) per bag or US$127.60 per tonne.

Cattle numbers are estimated at 833 569, an increase of 4.3 percent. Malawi is in a state of alert for incidence of Rift Valley Fever, a disease now occurring in neighbouring Tanzania.

No major outbreaks of cattle, small stock or poultry diseases were reported.

* 1. **Mozambique**

The overall food security outlook for Mozambique is relatively good except in the areas affected by the heavy flooding in the Zambezi river and the three southern provinces of Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane which suffered from prolonged dry spells during the season. Flooding in Tete, Manica, Sofala and Zambezia Provinces is estimated to have affected 285 000 people. By contrast, good crops are expected in higher land areas of the Zambezi Valley. Second season cropping is expected to be productive in lower ground after the floods have receded. Good rains in Manica and Tete Provinces facilitated planting or replanting in January and rainfall since has been adequate. Army Worm infestation affected 200 ha in Manica Province. Cabo Delgado was also affected by rain deficits during the season especially in Palma District where rainfall was up to 55 percent below normal in January.

In Southern Mozambique, the high temperatures and dry conditions have resulted in crop failure, especially of the maize crop. Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane Province were particularly badly hit, with January rainfall up to 70 percent below normal. Cyclone Favio caused severe crop damage, affecting about 160 000 people in Inhambane, Manica and Sofala provinces. A large programme of Input Trade Fairs has been implemented by FAO in these provinces aimed at providing farmers with inputs needed for second season crops.

**2.4. Namibia**

The lowland areas of Caprivi Region have been flooded and crops there have been destroyed. On higher land in Caprivi and Kavango, rainfall has been poorly distributed and the rains that have been falling in March, which were average at 85.6mm, came too late to save many crops. March rains in North Central Region (Oshikoto, Oshana, Omusati and Ohangwena) have improved pasture conditions and assisted crops of millet planted in December and January. February planted crops may not benefit unless the rains are continued. March rainfall in the “Maize Triangle” around Grootfontein was only 50.5mm compared to an average of 117.6mm.

The Namibia Early Warning and Food Information Unit has provisionally forecast that the overall cereal harvest in 2006/07 will be 119 300 tonnes, which is near past five year average but shows a decrease of 52 percent compared to the previous year’s revised output estimate.

The rains in March have helped the supply of grazing for cattle and goats in the communal areas, but livestock numbers are higher than the carrying capacity of the veld. This means that grass is over-grazed, leaving the sandy soils open to erosion. Uncontrolled fires also reduce the amount of organic matter returning to the soil, reducing its water holding capacity and ability to store nutrients. This situation is unsustainable and will lead to soil erosion and reduce carrying capacity for livestock and reduce fertility for crop production. Shortage of rainfall was also reported from Central Zone,(Windhoek and Otjozondjupa) causing deterioration of pastures, but here, unlike in the communal land areas, the numbers of livestock are closely controlled to match carrying capacity of the farms concerned and overgrazing is minimised. Southern (Hardap and Karas) and Western (Erongo and Kunene) Regions also reported poor rainfall this season. Keetmanshoop had 11.4 mm in March compared to an average of 36.9mm.[[2]](#footnote-2)

* 1. **Swaziland**

Dry conditions and high temperatures in February and March combined to reduce maize production and this season is being compared with the disastrous 1992 drought season, where crops in the middleveld and lowveld were destroyed, while highveld crops survived. This year, some highveld crops were also affected by the erratic rainfall and high temperatures. However, sorghum and some legume crops did produce some harvest. Soya bean prices are reported to have risen from E1650 to E2550 per tonne. An FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission is currently in Swaziland and the report is being awaited with interest. Maize prices have almost doubled from E1 250 to E2 300 per tonne, so that farmers in the highveld who planted early will benefit even with reduced yields per hectare.

The hot dry conditions have facilitated the spread of downy mildew on maize crops, while some aphid damage was reported on sorghum and cowpea crops.

Livestock are reported to be in average condition, but the high temperatures and dry conditions have adversely affected the growth of forage and this may result in scarcity of grazing later in the season. Water shortages were reported at dip tanks, especially in Shiselweni in the lowveld, preventing normal preventive measures against tick-borne diseases. Shortages of drinking water for cattle were also reported.

* 1. **Zambia**

The districts of Livingstone, Kalomo, Kazungula, Sinazongwe, Siavonga and Mazabuka experienced prolonged dry spells in March, limiting crop production, especially of those farmers who had planted late. Poorly distributed rainfall had already affected crops in other districts of Southern Province, an important maize growing area.

A total of 21 districts of the 72 districts in Zambia are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the floods which began in late January, 2006. The worst affected districts are Chavuma and Zambezi in NorthWestern Province, Kalabo in Western Province, Luangwa in Lusaka Province and Mambwe in Eastern Province. Less affected districts included Mwinilunga in North Western Province, Lukulu, Mongu and Senanga in Western Province, Itezhi-Tezhi in Southern Province, Mkushi in Central Province, Samfya in Luapula Province, Mpulungu in Northern Province and Chama and Lundazi in Eastern Province.

The northern half of the country had average or above average rainfall with good crops expected, though late planting, leaching of fertilizers, late application of basal fertilizers and strong weed growth will reduce yields below their normal potential.

A test and slaughter policy for Contagious Bovine Pleuropneumonia in cattle is in operation in Kazungula, with sero-surveillance being intensified in the neighbouring districts of Kalomo and surrounding areas. The overall condition of livestock is good, thanks to plentiful grass growth in most of the country.

* 1. **Zimbabwe**

The Government of Zimbabwe has officially declared the 2006/07 as a ‘drought year’. Cereal production prospects for Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South and parts of Midlands and Masvingo are a cause of serious concern. These areas received below normal rainfall and also very erratic rainfall, with numerous and prolonged dry spells, made worse by high temperatures. Rainfall was better in Mashonaland West, East and Central and crops there are better, though affected by lack of fertilizers and their non-affordability. An FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission will visit Zimbabwe from 25th April to 18th May.

Good availability of maize seed at national level for the 2006/07 season (43 000 MT) was offset by shortages of fertilizer and draught power and by lack of capital to pay for such inputs. Large quantities of fertilizer were imported from China but did not arrive in Zimbabwe in time for use this season. The total planned donation is 200 000 tonnes[[3]](#footnote-3). This means that there are supplies of fertilizer for winter cropping and for next season. About 40 000 MT of maize seed will be available sufficient for the 2007/08 main season planting.

Forage for livestock is still sufficient but shortages are expected by June, especially in Matabeleland South. Cases of Lumpy Skin Disease were reported in Masvingo, Matabeleland South and the Mashonalands. The Department of Veterinary Services vaccinating against anthrax disease in Masvingo. The Dept. has constraints in the acquisition of vaccines due to shortage of forex.

Outbreaks of Newcastle disease in poultry were contained through ring vaccination in Mutare district and Shurugwi. Calving in tailing off. Calving percentage is likely to be low (<50%), because of a combination of tick infestation, poor nutrition and poor animal care (dipping) in the last year. The supply of dipping chemicals has improved noticeably. This has lead to a decline in tick infestation countrywide.

FAO supported Foot and Mouth Disease vaccination has been completed and the vaccines left over will be used for 3rd round in Beitbridge and for an extension of the project in Chiredzi.

* 1. **South Africa.**

Crops of maize in Free State and Mpumulanga will have much reduced yields due to drought in February and March. According to the Crop Estimates Committee estimates published in March, 2007, the area of land planted to white maize is 1 624 800 ha and the second estimate of production is 4 063 400 tonnes, at a yield of 2.5 tonnes/ha. The area planted in the 2005/06 season was 1 033 000 ha and the harvest was 4 187 400 tonnes, at a yield of 4.05 tonnes/ha.

For yellow maize, the area planted this year is 922 000 ha, an increase of 62.6 percent over the previous year’s planted area of 567 200 ha. Production of yellow maize is estimated at 2 844 050 tonnes, i.e. at an estimated yield of 3.08 tonnes/ha. Total maize area this year is 2 546 800 ha and the second estimate of the harvest is put at 6 907 450 tonnes, compared to 6 618 000 tonnes in 2005/06. Overall maize yields this year are estimated at 2.71 tonnes/ha, compared to 4.14 t/ha last year. Maize prices have begun to ease, but are still high compared to last year and were R1731/t during the week to 13th April week, 6 percent lower than the previous week.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Other crops, including sorghum, groundnuts, dry beans, soya beans and sunflower are also expected to have lower yields and production than last year. Sunflower area is 316 350 ha with an expected production of 276 780 tonnes at a yield of 0.87 t/ha. This compares to 472 480 ha in 2005/06 season, with a final production estimate of 520 000 tonnes, at a yield of 1.1 t/ha.

Production of white and yellow maize by subsistence farmers is estimated at 213 738 tonnes from 345 266 ha, a yield of 0.62 t/ha. Area planted by subsistence farmers has decreased from 432 246 ha in 2005/06, or by 20.1 percent.

**3. The Effect of Bio-Fuels on Food Prices.**

“The Economist” of March 10th, 2007 reported that the price of maize in the United States of America rose by 70 percent between September, 2006 and January, 2007. It also reported that the energy balance (the ratio of energy produced by a given amount of ethanol and the energy needed to produce it) for maize is 1.3. This means that the ethanol from maize yields 30 percent more energy than the energy needed to produce it, i.e. it is not a very energy efficient operation. Nevertheless, there is huge investment going into ethanol plants using maize as a feedstock in the Great Plains and in Texas. This will provide an alternative market for maize and put a floor under its price. This may mean higher food prices world wide and possibly the effect on availability of grain for food aid will probably be negative, although current high maize prices have prompted higher plantings and with the prospect of good harvest are already moving prices down. Reportedly South Africa is planning 7 plants with a capacity of 400 000 tonnes/plant/year .

This means that the rest of southern Africa will have to produce more of its own food and improve the efficiency of food production through better farming.

1. **The Need for Conservation Agriculture**

The improvements in soil fertility and crop yields accruing from the introduction of Conservation Agriculture are no longer a matter of dispute. A major effort is now needed to introduce Conservation Agriculture and complementary technologies such as agro-forestry on a wide scale. Further information on Conservation Agriculture and a Summary of Discussions at the FAO Workshop on Conservation Agriculture, held at Rivonia, Johannesburg on 2-3rd April, 2006 can be obtained from james.breen@fao.org. Telephone 011 517 1507.

1. Josef Kienzle, Presentation on Conservation Agriculture at FAO Conservation Agriculture Workshop, Rivonia, Johannesburg, 2-3rd April, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Republic of Namibia. Ministry of Works, Transport and Communication, Meteorological Services Division. Namibia Rainfall Summary, March 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The People’s Daily, 15th November, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Farmer’s Weekly, 20th April, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)