

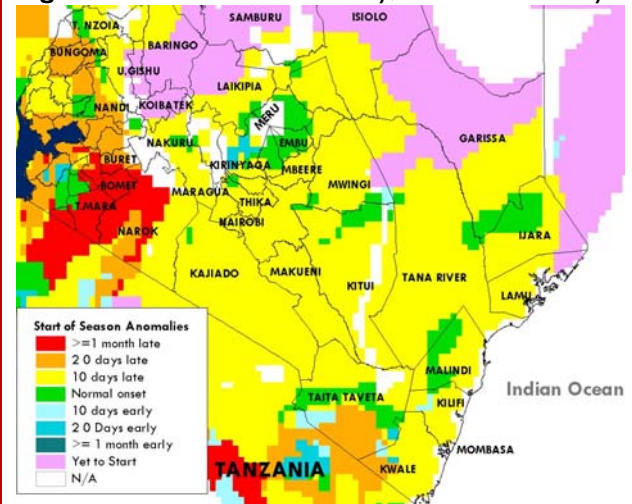
Kenya Food Security Alert

April 9, 2009

Delay in the onset of the long rains in the southeast raises concerns

Following a drier than normal January-March period in Kenya's southeastern marginal agricultural lowlands, the onset of the much-anticipated 2009 long rains is already one decade late (Figure 1). In this area, the long-rains tend to be unreliable and production during this period accounts for only 30 percent of annual cereal production. However, this production is an important buffer against food insecurity for households during the July-September period. Good performance of the long-rains season is particularly important this year because households in this region are already facing a critical decline in food security following a failure of the 2008/09 short rains. Nearly 1 million persons – 32 percent of the population – are currently estimated to be highly food insecure in the marginal agricultural districts of Kitui, Machakos, Makueni, Mbeere, Mwingi, and Tharaka. The worst affected areas are Mwingi and Kitui Districts, where an estimated 56 and 44 percent of the population, respectively, are classified as highly food insecure. The next major harvest is not expected until March 2010 and food security could deteriorate to emergency levels, with a subsequent rise in the size of the population in need of assistance, should the long rains perform poorly and if recommended interventions are not implemented quickly.

Figure 1. Start of season anomaly, southeastern Kenya



Source: USGS

Current food insecurity follows a succession of poor or mediocre seasons since March 2007 that have resulted in a series of below-average harvests, culminating in a near-total crop failure during the recently concluded 2008/09 short-rains season. This failure has been compounded by a precipitous rise in food and non-food prices that began in January 2008 and has continued into 2009. In addition, tightened food supplies across the country, due to reduced domestic production and a decline in cross-border maize imports, has reduced food availability in local markets. The Arid Lands and Resource Management Project has reported that food prices across the region are 80-120 percent of normal, while livestock prices are 25 percent lower than the five-year average. Therefore, cattle/maize terms of trade, a key indicator of food access in this area, have severely eroded. Finally, water scarcity and the increase in its price, from Ksh. 20/liter to Ksh. 60/liter, have led to a reduction in use, and in the last week, cholera cases have been reported in 16 districts.

In response to the current situation, the frequency and intensity of the adverse coping strategies implemented by very poor farming households in the southeast has risen, likely compromising future food security. For example, households have reduced the size, quality, and frequency of meals. Meanwhile, charcoal production is increasingly relied on as a major livelihood strategy, rather than as a short-term coping strategy, leading to an increase in the volume of charcoal trade and a 50 percent decline in charcoal prices. The surge in charcoal production is also damaging the environment, reducing prospects for favorable food production in the future. Other coping strategies being employed include children dropping out of school in order to search for food and distress livestock sales, which contribute to the decline in livestock prices.

While a number of interventions have been instituted to mitigate the current crisis, their coverage and monitoring is inadequate. For example, only 60,000 persons in Kitui and Mwingi are included in the current emergency operation, while the remainder of the food insecure population in the southeastern marginal agricultural districts awaits a proposed expansion in assistance. Given the length of time until the next major harvest (11 months), several initiatives have been proposed to further mitigate current food insecurity and to prevent further deterioration should the long rains perform poorly. These include increased general food distribution, supplementary feeding for children less than five years of age, and livestock off-take. Close monitoring of seasonal progress is also imperative.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues alerts to prompt decision-maker action to prevent or mitigate potential or actual food insecurity. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the view of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.