Drought-Ravaged Malawi Faces Largest Humanitarian Emergency in its History

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With 6.5 million people in need of humanitarian aid, this year’s El Nino–induced drought constitutes the largest humanitarian emergency that Malawi has ever confronted. It also brings the second consecutive harvest failure to this small, landlocked country, which has yet to recover from last year’s severe flooding. Inadequate governance has amplified the negative impacts of both, compounding natural disasters with political and economic malfeasance.

As a result of the worst drought in 35 years, southern Africa is grappling with a cereals deficit of between 6 and 10 million metric tons, and over 40 million people, 23 percent of the region’s rural population, face severe food insecurity. In past droughts, South Africa’s robust grain surpluses have insulated its neighbors from stark shortages, but this year it, too, faces a substantial deficit. Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe have declared states of emergency, while Mozambique has announced a similar “code red” classification. Eight of South Africa’s nine provinces have been declared drought disasters. While the peak of the crisis is expected to hit between October and March, 23 million people are in urgent need of food aid right now.

Last Tuesday, July 26, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched an appeal for $2.4 billion to respond to the crisis. As of July 27, the World Food Programme (WFP) faced a budgetary shortfall of nearly 80 percent of the resources needed to reach 11.9 million people by the peak of the lean season in January 2017. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has contributed far more than any other donor, committing $300 million in the region to date, including over $100 million for Malawi alone. Still, funding gaps remain overwhelming. The executive director of WFP, Ertharin Cousin, and the second lady of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden, visited Malawi in mid-July to highlight the particular exigencies of its situation. Eighty-five percent of Malawians live in rural areas, and nearly all rural households are involved in rain-fed subsistence agriculture. During the 2015–2016 season, rainfall levels were between 30 and 40 percent of the required volume in the hardest-hit central and southern regions, while excessive rain caused flooding in the north. Nearly 2.5 million farmers are expected to have either very little harvest or none at all.

With collapsed demand for agricultural labor and very limited income diversification opportunities, it is increasingly difficult for rural households to earn the money they need to purchase the food they weren’t able to grow, even if prices were stable, which they are not. To cope, people are likely to sell limited assets, including livestock, tools, and seed reserves for the next planting season. Early marriage and transactional sex become survival strategies.

White maize, used to prepare a thick paste called nsima, is the country’s staple cereal. But maize output this year has fallen 42 percent from production levels two years ago and is even 12 percent lower than last year’s failed harvest. The price of maize, creeping upward for months, increased by about 18 percent between May and June, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network. It reached nearly three times the five-year average at a time of year that should coincide with the harvest and lower prices. Malawi faces a maize deficit of 790,000 metric tons. The strategic grain reserve has recently fallen to as low as 6,000 metric tons, according to some estimates; it is nearly empty.

Children in Malawi are particularly vulnerable to food shortages, given widespread malnutrition even in times of relative plenty—the most recent Demographic and Health Survey in 2010 found that 47 percent of children under five years of age were stunted. By this past May, rates of global acute malnutrition in Chikwawa and Nsanje Districts, the two hardest hit, had already climbed to 6.6 percent, over double last year’s levels more than six months before the anticipated peak of the crisis. In these districts, over 90 percent of the rural population will require
humanitarian assistance for up to nine months. Between this past June and next March, over 400,000 children and pregnant and lactating women are projected to experience moderate or severe acute malnutrition, leading to irreversible physical and cognitive deficits, which will impact their health and economic prospects for decades to come.

When crops have failed in the past, food aid distributions have begun several months after the compromised harvest, around October, but this year rations were already critical in July, given the lack of household reserves. A market assessment that informed the government of Malawi’s recently launched 2016/2017 Food Insecurity Response Plan concluded that 74 percent of emergency program beneficiaries, 4.8 million people, should receive in-kind food aid, given the deficit of maize and other staples in local markets. The balance, 1.7 million people, live in areas where cash transfers are the preferred aid modality to prop up feeble market flows. Local prices will need to be closely monitored to ensure that the value of cash transfers remains sufficient to purchase enough calories in an inflationary environment, and in some areas a transition from cash to food aid support may be prudent as the crisis escalates.

The challenge is that El Nino has decimated production across the entire region, undermining the ability of SADC member states to cross-insure against the risk of production failures. Zambia is the only country in the region to eke out a surplus this year, producing 2.8 million metric tons of maize against domestic consumption levels of about 1.5 million, but the government has also decided to increase the maize threshold of the Food Reserve Agency from 600,000 to 1 million tons, reducing the volume available for regional trade. The minister of agriculture recently reported that production still exceeds local demand by 25 percent, but exports have been suspended until September, after elections on August 11.

To complicate matters further, Malawi seeks a million tons of white maize, while most of the world’s largest producers, including the United States, grow yellow varieties conventionally used for animal feed in southern Africa. Historically, Malawi, like many countries in the region, has also been opposed to growing or importing genetically modified (GM) crops, but the drought has reinvigorated a debate on this position. A Zimbabwean biotechnology student recently articulated a compelling perspective in the Wall Street Journal. GM crop trials are currently underway in Malawi, and milled forms of GM maize have been approved for this year’s humanitarian response.

But even if yellow, GM maize is acceptable, it is an extraordinary effort to move a million tons to rural areas of this landlocked country before the rainy season makes many roads impassable in November. Nearly 70 percent of Malawi’s drought-affected population lives in southern areas with poor infrastructure and will be difficult to reach between November and March, the period of most acute need. When commodities are donated from the United States, they can take months to reach their destination. Since 2000, Congress has authorized the prepositioning of commodities in both domestic and overseas warehouses to reduce response times, resulting in them generally reaching their destinations about a month sooner, but associated costs can be significant. Commodities need to be in place by October, and time is short.

The Mozambican ports of Nacala and Beira are the most logical points of entry for Malawi-bound food aid, but port capacity is limited and transit corridors can be insecure. A resurgence of violence in central and northern Mozambique associated with the Renamo opposition group has significantly hampered the movement of goods into Malawi, while also driving community displacement over the border.

The Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee has specified a monthly household ration distribution of 50 kilograms (kg) of cereal, 10 kg of pulses, and 1.84 kg of vegetable oil. Pregnant and lactating women and children under five will also receive 6 kg of fortified “Super Cereal” to boost nutrition. Such complementary commodities can be even more difficult to source, regionally or globally, and add to mounting costs. Food distributions have already begun in the hardest-hit areas, but vegetable oil and one type of “Super Cereal” have not yet been included due to procurement and logistical challenges.

USAID has been a key donor to ensure that vulnerable Malawians maintain access to a diversified diet. Pulses such
as yellow split peas and lentils make up over a third of the 60,000 metric tons of U.S. food aid donated to date. American-sourced vegetable oil and “Super Cereal” contributions are critical to protect against acute malnutrition. Since last August, over 37,000 metric tons of U.S. commodities have reached Malawi, with prepositioning warehouses in Durban and Djibouti helping to ensure a swift response. USAID’s Office of Food for Peace has donated a further $16 million for the local procurement of food commodities, mostly maize, but total U.S. contributions will cover only a quarter of the targeted population’s food needs through January.

Over the past five years, an annual average of 1.5 million Malawians has been in need of humanitarian support. In January 2015, the country was hit by some of the most devastating flooding in its history. The government declared a state of disaster, and a subsequent assessment estimated damages at $335 million and recovery and reconstruction needs at $494 million. **Crisis has become a way of life in Malawi, and a very expensive one.**

When a CSIS team visited Lilongwe in June, a seasoned USAID official described these erratic weather-induced crises as “man-made disasters,” a sentiment echoed by other officials, donors, UN representatives, and program implementers. A poor agricultural governance and enabling environment and de facto export bans have undermined market development for years. Ministry of Agriculture officials blamed “lazy” farmers for selling heavily subsidized fertilizer transfers instead of using them, while pointing fingers at health colleagues for failing to mount a successful family planning program to reduce population pressure.

Though population growth is a valid concern for Malawi, a conversation about its balance of agricultural production is also overdue. Despite its prominence, maize is not a native crop and is **highly susceptible to changing weather and climate patterns.** Across the continent, some estimates suggest that maize output could decline by between 12 and 40 percent this century in the absence of climate change adaptation. Sorghum, millet, and cassava, in contrast, can be much more drought tolerant.

The devastating drought in southern Africa is a sobering reminder that many low-income countries will continue to endure the consequences of a changing climate they had little hand in causing. Nevertheless, national governments have a responsibility to better anticipate and prepare for such recurrent shocks, availing themselves of the best solutions that science, policy, and risk management strategies have to offer **before** crises hit. The lack of sufficient attention to any of the three in Malawi makes this a man-made crisis indeed, and one with a heavy toll on both lives today and livelihoods for years to come. The Malawian people deserve far greater accountability from their elected officials.

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