High prevalence of negative coping strategies in Midlands

Key points:

- Almost all households in northern Midlands are resorting to negative food-related coping strategies.
- Households led by women are engaging in more negative coping than those led by men, indicating higher levels of stress.
- Over three quarters of respondent households are reducing the number of meals they eat in a day.
- Small grains are unavailable in most markets in Mwenezi district.

Situation Update

The cereal harvest for the 2016-17 consumption year was concluded in June and total cereal production is estimated at 636,000 mt. This is 27 percent less than the drought-reduced 2015 harvest and approximately half of the five-year average production (FAO GIEWS). Although the national average maize grain price for August 2016 was 17 percent above the five-year average, prices have stabilized as humanitarian assistance coverage has increased (FEWS NET).

Food insecurity in the 2016-17 consumption year is 40 percent higher than for the 2015-16 consumption year, with some districts surpassing the international emergency thresholds for malnutrition.
Very high use of coping strategies in Midlands North

Across Zimbabwe, 94.3 percent of respondent households were using at least one negative coping strategy in August. In the Midlands North aggregation, the prevalence of negative coping (99.25 percent of households) was significantly higher than in all other district aggregations (Figure 1).

August data also show that the frequency and severity of coping strategies was higher in households headed by women than in those headed by men (Figure 2).

Toilet types are used as a proxy indicator to establish a household’s socio-economic status. The worst-off households (those without a toilet) showed significantly higher stress compared to better-off households (those with latrines or flush toilets) (Figure 3).
Over half of all households resorting to most severe coping strategies

The most common strategies used to access food were eating less-preferred foods; eating cheaper, poorer quality foods; and eating fewer meals a day (Figure 4). In addition, almost two thirds of all respondent households were resorting to the most severe coping strategies of restricting adult consumption to allow children to eat and borrowing food or relying on help from friends.

Food prices in Mwenezi district

In August, a 10 kg bag of unrefined maize meal cost an average US$5.67 and a 10 kg bag of refined maize meal cost US$6.20 (Figure 5). These prices were higher than a 17.5 kg bucket of maize grain (a 20 litre tin,) at US$5.63. Maize grain is generally the most preferred form, while unrefined maize is the second choice for most consumers.

Refined maize meal was only available in 2 out of the 31 outlets. Small grains (sorghum, finger millet and pearl millet) were not readily in markets in Mwenezi district. Only 3 traders were stocking finger millet and sorghum, and just 4 of the 31 traders were selling pearl millet.
Daily rates for manual labour remain low in the dry season

The average daily rate for agricultural manual labour across Zimbabwe was US$3.1 in August. Casual labour opportunities remain extremely limited during the hot dry season, putting downward pressure on the daily rates until the onset of the rains – around November in a typical year.

However, some variation was observed in the daily rate across district aggregations. In the Masvingo Rural aggregation, which includes Mwenezi district, the purchasing power – measured by the amount of maize grain that can be bought using a day’s wages – was 14 kg. The manual labour rate of US$4 was higher than other district aggregations where the daily agricultural casual labour rate ranged between US$2.7 and US$3.

Food shortages and lack of income opportunities

Respondents across the country reported food shortages and unavailability. In some provinces – such as Harare and Masvingo – people said food was available but that they lacked the income to buy it. Many respondents mentioned that it was common in their communities to find people eating smaller portion sizes and/or fewer meals (Figure 6).
Methodology

The purpose of mVAM remote monitoring in Zimbabwe is to track the impacts of the drought caused by El Niño on household food security nationwide. The project also tracks the prices of major cereals in Mwenezi, one of the districts most affected by El Niño.

Household survey

Starting in August 2016, household interviews were conducted nationwide using the short message service (SMS) system. Since previously data was collected using interactive voice response (IVR) systems, the current and future rounds of SMS data will not be comparable to the IVR data. In August, 2,450 respondents were interviewed, randomly selected from a national database of mobile subscribers. The country has been divided into 16 district aggregations derived from ZimVAC 2016 food and nutrition prevalence rates for the household survey (Map 1). The SMS survey asked questions on socio-demographics, coping behaviour and manual labour wages, as well as an open-ended question on food security. To increase completion rates, an airtime credit incentive of US$0.50 was given to respondents who successfully completed the survey.

Market survey

A total of 31 traders were interviewed in 10 markets in Mwenezi district using live calls by staff from the Food and Nutrition Council and the World Food Programme. The survey drew responses from 23 general dealers, 1 grinding mill, 1 hardware store, 2 open markets, 1 supermarket, 1 shop, 1 tuck-shop and 1 bottle store.