High food insecurity in Lubombo and Shiselweni

Key points:

- Over 85 percent households in Shiselweni and Lubombo are engaging in negative coping
- Households headed by women more vulnerable: their coping levels are higher than those of households headed by men
- Over half the respondent households are engaging in livelihood coping strategies
- Prices have risen slightly for wheat flour, rice and beans
- Poor road infrastructure, access to credit and electricity are some of the challenges faced by traders

Situation Update

Access to food has improved over the past six months, mainly thanks to the number of drought response programmes implemented by various stakeholders, coordinated by the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA). A total of 510,248 beneficiaries – 80 percent of the total vulnerable population as projected by the 2016 Swazi Vulnerability Assessment Committee report – have been reached with general food distribution and cash-based transfers (NDMA, 2016).

The outlook for the agricultural season is good as good rains have fallen across Swaziland over the production season. The Swaziland Meteorological Services predict continuing normal to above-normal rainfall over the season. This will continue to greatly improve crop conditions, water availability and pasture conditions for livestock. However, the outbreak of the fall armyworm poses a major threat to crop production, especially for maize crops which have reportedly been hardest hit.
Low food consumption in Shiselweni

The national Food Consumption Score (FCS) was 57.5 in February, but there were regional variations in the proportion of households reporting acceptable food consumption. While 80 percent of respondents from Manzini reported acceptable food consumption, only 62 percent in Shiselweni reported the same (Figure 1). The lowest FCS were in Lubombo (52.5) and Shiselweni (52). In addition, over a quarter of households (27 percent) in Lubombo relied heavily on humanitarian assistance as their main food source in February, compared with 4 percent in Hhohho and 13 percent across Swaziland. Thus, there are indications of high stress levels in Shiselweni and Lubombo.

High use of food-related coping strategies in Lubombo and Shiselweni

The reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) measures the frequency and severity of the behaviours households engage in when faced with shortages of food or a lack of money to buy food. The national median rCSI for February was 14, and 81 percent of households were using at least one coping strategy throughout Swaziland. As seen in Figure 2, households headed by women were more vulnerable and demonstrated higher negative coping levels (rCSI=18) compared to those headed by men (rCSI=13).

The use of food-related coping mechanisms was the highest in Lubombo, followed by Shiselweni. In the week preceding the survey, 87 percent of households in Lubombo and 86 percent in Shiselweni had used at least one coping strategy. All the surveyed strategies (except borrowing food or relying on help) were used by over two thirds of the respondent households in both these regions (Figure 3). In the other regions, each of the strategies was used by close to 50 percent of households – even the most severe ones of restricting adult food consumption so children could eat and borrowing food or relying on help from friends. This signals high food insecurity throughout.
Across Swaziland, a high proportion of households were using livelihood coping strategies in February: 57 percent used their savings to cope with shortages of food (Figure 4). Purchasing food on credit (50 percent) and reducing other expenses such as those for health and education (43 percent) were other widely used strategies.

The material used for the walls of a household’s dwelling is used as a proxy indicator to determine their socio-economic status. Households with cement walls are regarded as better-off, while those with grass or wood are considered to be the worst-off. The better-off households engaged much less in livelihood coping strategies compared to those worst off. Almost two thirds of households with mud blocks reported using their savings to cope with food shortages (Figure 5). Households with grass or wood walls were more engaged in purchasing food on credit (71 percent). While 60 percent of those with stone walls reported reducing health and education expenditures, 10 percent of the same group said they had already exhausted that option, signalling an even greater level of distress. The slightly better-off households with mud block walls reported the highest level (29 percent) of selling household assets such as jewellery, possibly because those worst off did not have such assets at their disposal.

Maize meal prices remain stable

Maize meal retailed at SZL12.08/kg in February, an increase of only 0.5 percent from January 2017. Prices continued to be below those observed in February 2016; however, they remain above the five-year average (2012–2016) (WFP VAM). Retail prices are 27 percent higher than wholesale prices (Figure 6). Hhohho region had the highest prices (SZL12.53/kg) followed by Shiselweni (SZL12.17/kg) (Figure 9). Lubombo had the cheapest maize meal at SZL10.11/kg.
Wheat flour, rice and sugar bean prices increase slightly

Wheat flour prices were higher in February (SZL13.10/kg) than in January (Figure 7). Retail prices were 11 percent higher than the five-year average and 1.3 percent higher than the same period in 2016. Retail prices were 14 percent higher than wholesale prices in February; they were just 6 percent higher than wholesale prices in January. Hhohho region continued to have the most expensive rice and sugar beans (Figure 10), although wheat flour prices were the lowest of all regions.

At SZL26.93/kg, the retail price of beans remained high, with a 6.4 percent increase from January. The current price is also 7.6 percent higher than in February 2016, and 16 percent higher than the five-year average (Figure 8). Hhohho continued to report the highest prices of all four regions, due to its lack of large-scale traders.

As presented in Figure 9, there was a 7.1 percent increase in retail prices for rice from January. Prices continued to be higher than the five-year average (2012–2016) but lower than than in February 2016.
Prices for cooking oil (SZL18.75/750ml), sugar (SZL7.84/500g), salt (SZL3.84/500g) and brown bread (SZL9.17/loaf) remained stable over the reporting month, although there were slight increases in retail prices when compared to January. A number of traders have reported that they offer period sales for customers, thus the prices remained stable. This is more common with large-scale operators, i.e. chain supermarkets and wholesalers.

Rising food prices was the one challenge faced by traders in all regions. Access was good in a number of markets; however, 60 percent of traders from Hhohho said that poor road infrastructure was hampering their businesses (Figure 12). In February, the time taken for traders to receive new stock increased. In January, the majority of traders across all regions reported receiving deliveries in a day; in February, over half said deliveries took 5 to 14 days. This could be due to the heavy rains over the reporting month, which rendered some areas inaccessible. Over half the interviewed traders in Manzini reported a lack of electricity as their key challenge. Access to credit was the major constraint in Shiselweni, according to over 57 percent of traders there.

**Poor road infrastructure is a major challenge in Hhohho**

Figure 10: Prices of basic foods by region

Figure 11: Challenges to trade by region
In the words of the traders

“There is no food because this region is very dry and there is no rain. There is no transport to carry farming goods even if it rains.” – Retailer, Siteki market

“The situation is okay however maize meal price is very high.” – Retailer, Matsapha market

“People are struggling to survive. Due to drought people cannot grow food, they have to buy in shops. Those who are not employed cannot afford to buy.” – Supermarket owner, Ekuphakameni market

“Food security situation not good because of the drought. Prices of food commodities keep going up.” – Wholesaler, Matsapha market

“Compared to last year when there was no drought people are buying quite a lot of maize meal.” – Retailer, Sixty market

Methodology

WFP Swaziland started conducting household food security monitoring in February 2017 through mVAM using live telephone interviews. The data presented here were collected through an external call centre from a sample of 1600 respondents from all four regions. Participants were randomly selected from a national database of mobile subscribers. An airtime credit incentive of US$0.50 (SZL7.00) was provided to respondents who successfully completed the survey. The questionnaire collected data on demographics, household food consumption, coping strategies, food prices and the availability of food in the market. A final open-ended question gave respondents the chance to share additional information on the food situation in their communities. Telephone interviews were also conducted with key informants (traders) to collect monthly information on the prices of foods including maize meal, rice, wheat flour, bread, beans, cooking oil, sugar and salt, along with information on general food availability and market accessibility. These surveys were carried out with a sample of 54 traders covering rural and urban areas. There were 16 traders from Hhohho, 8 from Lubombo, 20 from Manzini and 10 from Shiselweni. Of these, around 14 percent were wholesalers and the rest were retailers in small shops and supermarkets. Phone surveys contain inherent response biases; therefore, the bulletin reports patterns and trends rather than precise estimates.