Household food consumption deteriorates as the lean season reaches its peak

Key points:

- Households are increasingly resorting to negative coping strategies
- A larger share of households have inadequate food consumption across the country
- Food retail prices are generally stable, with sugar beans cheaper than in February
- Traders continue to report that poor roads are limiting their businesses

Situation Update

Agricultural performance and outlook continue to be better than last season. Preliminary findings from the 2017 Pre-harvest Agricultural Survey point to a 37 percent increase in cultivated land compared with last year. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, maize cultivation is much more extensive this year: maize production is estimated at 79,540 mt, 138 percent more than last season. Although there have been prolonged dry spells in some areas, the crop condition is good and higher yields are likely.

Preliminary results from the 2017 Health and Nutrition Survey indicate improvements in the nutritional status of children under 5 compared with the findings of the 2016 SMART nutrition survey. The global acute malnutrition (GAM) rate is 2.5 percent, which is 6 percent lower than in 2016. Severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rates are 1.8 percent lower. However, malnutrition prevalence is still higher than the 2014 MICS rates when GAM was 2 percent and SAM 0.4 percent. Food security, health and WASH indicators are also better than during the same period in 2016 (a drought year). The annual vulnerability assessment planned for next April will provide more valuable information on food security in Swaziland.

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health, 2017
Across Swaziland, the use of food-related negative coping strategies increased in March. The reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) rose from 14 in February to 16 in March. There was a particularly sharp increase among households living in Lubombo (Figure 1), where rCSI reached levels only seen in Shiselweni – the region with the highest median rCSI.

In March, 83 percent of households reported using at least one coping strategy (Figure 2). This share increased significantly in Shiselweni (Figure 2), indicating high levels of food insecurity at the peak of the lean season.

The most commonly used strategy was limiting portion sizes (70 percent of households), followed by eating less expensive food (64 percent) and eating fewer meals a day (63 percent) (Figure 3).

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 worse-off. The better-off households engaged much less in livelihood coping strategies than those worse off. The selling of assets was more prevalent among households with walls of mud and grass (18 percent) and stones (24 percent). In March, a smaller proportion of households with cement walls (49 percent) used their savings to cope with food shortages compared with February (56 percent). In comparison, the proportion of households with stone walls purchasing food on credit, selling assets such as jewellery and selling productive assets increased in March compared to February (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Median rCSI by region

Figure 2: Percentage of households using at least one negative coping strategy by region

Figure 3: Food-related negative coping strategies by region

Figure 4: Livelihood coping strategy by wall type
March data show deteriorating food consumption as the national mean Food Consumption Score (FCS) fell from 51.9 in February to 47.3 in March. The proportion of households with poor and borderline food consumption rose from 33.1 percent to 44.8 percent.

Although the highest increase in the share of households with poor or borderline food consumption was in Hhohho, Shiselweni remains the region with the highest proportion of households with inadequate consumption (Figure 7).

Food consumption levels deteriorate as lean season peaks

Maize meal prices remain stable

The price of maize meal was stable at SZL12.11/kg, which is lower than in March 2016 but slightly above the five-year average (Figure 7). At the regional level, maize meal is most expensive in Hhohho (SZL 12.25/kg) followed by Shiselweni (SZL 12.25/kg) (Figure 8). The only significant price change in March was in Lubombo, where maize meal was 9 percent cheaper than in February.
Sugar bean prices dropped significantly in March compared with February; they were 1 percent lower than in March 2016 (SZL25.10/kg) (Figure 9) but 8 percent higher than the five-year average (SZL23.15/kg). At the regional level, prices were highest in Lubombo and lowest in Manzini. The biggest price drop was in Manzini (11 percent), followed by Hhohho (8 percent).

In March, traders reported access problems and a lack of transport to ferry goods to markets (Figure 11). Around 23 percent of traders in Hhohho and 22 percent in Lubombo said that difficult road conditions were the main challenge facing their businesses. Compared with February, a smaller proportion of traders reported poor roads as a challenge, and fewer different types of challenge were reported. The time taken to replenish food stocks also improved in March (Figure 12) when compared to February (Figure 13). More than 60 percent of traders said that stock took one day to arrive more than the 50% observed in February. The dry conditions over the month might have improved road accessibility, thus cutting delivery times for traders.

The prices for other foods remained stable across the country (Figure 10). Wheat flour was retailing at SZL12.87/kg – a slight fall from January (SZL13.05/kg) and February (SZL13.10/kg). Cooking oil, sugar, salt and bread prices were stable compared with the two previous months. Rice prices also remained unchanged in March.

**Bean prices fall in March**

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**Prices stable for other foods across the country**

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**Poor roads are hindering businesses in Hhohho**

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**Figure 9: Sugar bean retail and wholesale prices (per kg), March 2017**

**Figure 10: Retail prices of selected foods, March 2017**

**Figure 11: Trader challenges by region, March 2017**

**Figure 12: Number of days for stock to be delivered, March 2017**

**Figure 13: Number of days for stock to be delivered, February 2017**
"It is hard to get food and have medical expense as they live in disadvantaged areas” – Household headed by woman, Manzini

"Lots of sicknesses and unemployment. Many people get sick that they use the little money they have to buy medication” – Household headed by man, Shiselweni

"Most people unemployed and don’t have land where they can grow their crops because they live in an urban areas” – Household headed by man, Hhohho

"Drought is a problem in community so their crops do not grow” – Household headed by woman, Lubombo

"Lack of money Unemployment leads to lack of money where people are not able to plant crops because planting materials are too expensive so people end up not having food.” – Household headed by man, Shiselweni

Methodology

WFP Swaziland started conducting household food security monitoring in February 2017 through mVAM using live telephone interviews. The data presented here were collected in March 2017 through an external call centre from a sample of 1,600 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 food availability 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 traders to collect monthly information on the prices of food including maize meal, rice, wheat flour, bread, beans, cooking oil, sugar and salt, along with information on general food availability and market accessibility. The surveys were carried out with a sample of 56 traders covering rural and urban areas. There were 13 traders from Hhohho, 9 from Lubombo, 11 from Manzini and 16 from Shiselweni. Of these, 7 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.

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