

Hunger stalks southern Africa as climate crisis deepens

February 12 2020, by Ish Mafundikwa In Zimbabwe and Beatrice Debut In Zambia and South Africa



Climate extremes: A year ago, Josephine Ganye was hit by a devastating cyclone—now she is struggling with a crippling drought

Just under a year ago, Alice Posha fled her home in the middle of the

night and then watched as it was swept away by floods.

The torrential rain came from Cyclone Idai, one of the worst storms ever to hit Africa and the fiercest on record to strike Buhera, a district in the usually arid province of Manicaland in eastern Zimbabwe.

Today, the scene in Buhera is entirely different. But the misery remains.

The 60-year-old, who was rehoused in October, is going through the motions of weeding a field of maize that has been withered by the worst drought in 35 years.

A little rain for her corn would be more than welcome.

"Seeing how the maize is wilting, we may have a very bad harvest," she said.

It is a scene that is being played out across southern Africa, where chronic lack of rain is threatening mass hunger and ruin.

Climate is being fingered as the big culprit.

In the space of 10 months, Buhera and many districts like it have been hammered by extremes that scientists say are consistent with forecasts about climate change.

In March 2019, the arrival of Idai unleashed devastation on eastern Zimbabwe and its neighbours Mozambique and Malawi.



Flashback to March 2019: Floods devastate Ngunu township in eastern Zimbabwe after the area is hit by Cyclone Idai

Over a thousand people died and the lives of millions of others were badly affected.

"Our chickens and turkeys were swept away," said Posha's sister-in-law, Josephine Ganye, who now depends on food aid.

She is among the 45 million people in southern Africa that the UN has said are threatened by famine.

Its World Food Programme (WFP) sent out a stark warning last month.

"This hunger crisis is on a scale we've not seen before and the evidence shows it's going to get worse," said Lola Castro, WFP's regional director in southern Africa.

For the past five years, the entire southern tip of the African continent, where average temperatures are rising twice as fast as the global mean, has suffered from a significant lack of rain.

Every farmer, big or small, has been affected as well as breeders, hoteliers and teachers.

Prayers for rain

In Zimbabwe, the drought has added to a long list of crises, from stratospheric inflation to shortages of cash, petrol, medicines, water and electricity.



Workers at the game farm dispose of a carcass of a dead animal

For many, daily life has become a nightmare.

"Almost everybody in my area is food insecure," said 68-year-old Janson Neshava, who is a headman, or senior leader, in Buhera.

"We still do the traditional rain ceremonies, but to no avail. Even the wetlands are now dry and streams that used to flow throughout the year are all dry."

The WFP says that 60 percent of Zimbabwe's 15 million people are currently food insecure.

According to Patience Dhinda, a local official, this figure hits 80 percent in Buhera where the grain depot, which should house the state [food aid](#), stands empty.

A year ago, the crops in Buhera had already suffered from drought before being washed away by Idai. This year they risk being burned to a crisp by the relentless sun.

One meal a day

Around 800 kilometres (500 miles) further west, across the border in Zambia, first impressions suggest that the contrast is startling.

The grass is tall, the roads muddy and the fields of maize are a vibrant, healthy green.



Waterbucks run through the Thuru Lodge game reserve. Thousands of animals have been killed by the drought

In the village of Simumbwe, an hour and a half's drive south on a dusty road from Kalomo in the southwest of the country, the rains arrived in late December.

But in the shade of the majestic trees, seated on the red earth, perched in the branches or on oxcarts, hundreds of people wait patiently for food to be distributed by an NGO, World Vision, and the WFP.

Last year, the harvest was catastrophic for the second year running with up to 70 percent of the crops lost to the drought.

"Last year, I harvested 18 kilos (39.6 pounds) of food. In other words, nothing," said Loveness Haneumba, mother of five and a "happy" beneficiary of aid in Simumbwe.

"It is common that we eat once a day. The children ask me: 'what are we going to eat?' I answer: 'Just wait. Let me look around'."

It is a question of buying time.

For several years, the rainy season has been getting later and shorter, upsetting the traditional farming cycle. It used to be from October to May; now it is barely from December to April.

Most vulnerable

"The food we have here is not enough to cater for everyone," said Derick Mulilo, the World Vision food monitor in the yard of the school in Simumbwe. "We are focussing on the most vulnerable."



Worried: Farmer Johan Steenkamp

He meant people like Loveness Haneumba and her stunted children. Her six-year-old daughter looked four and her four-year-old had the appearance of a two-year-old toddler.

Lizzy Kayoba, another mother of a large family, also featured on the list of beneficiaries. She had walked five hours during the night, her

youngest on her back, to arrive at dawn for the food handout.

She left with 25 kilos of maize and 7.6 kilos of beans.

"It will last me one or two weeks," she said.

The next distribution at the school is a month away.

A teacher, Teddy Siafweba, said about 15 children in his class were absent that day because of hunger. In the classroom next door, about 30 were missing—nearly half of the rollcall of 70.

And those who came often have an empty stomach. Some nod off in class, said another teacher, Tryness Kayuni.

The 33-year-old watched the handout with a heavy heart. She was not one of the 862 beneficiaries.

A single mother, Kayuni was not considered a priority as she had a job.



Celia Munhangu scoops through sand in search of water on the dried-up bed of the Mavhaire river in Buhera

And yet she had not been paid since September.

Since then she had been holding out on one meal a day.

"How do I survive?" she said. "I ask my colleagues if they can help me with some food."

Adapt to survive

Funding is desperately needed to meet the needs of the 2.3 million

people in Zambia who sorely need food. The WFP has received only a third of the \$36 million required.

Desperate times are prompting desperate—and corrupt—measures.

Thieves steal food supplies and unscrupulous men promise to put women's names on the food list in exchange for unprotected sex.

That is not something that worried single mother Imelda Hicoombolwa, 49, who for the last three years has been one of a number of small farmers who gambled on agricultural diversification, opting for nutritious vegetables and using techniques adapted to climate change.

"Food is not a problem. I have it," she beamed.



Almost everybody in Buhera is food insecure, said Janson Neshava, a local leader

Before 2017, Hicoombolwa cultivated almost only maize. Today, she harvests cowpeas, which need very little water, as well as peanuts, pumpkins and sunflowers.

"I can make 18,000 kwacha (1,100 euros, \$1,222) a year. Before, I was making 8,000 kwacha a year," she said.

"Before, the children were missing school because I could not always pay the tuition fees. Not any more."

One big change is that Hicoombolwa no longer rushes to sow from the first rains. The farmers have learned to wait. In the recent past it was a different story, according to Allan Mulando of WFP.

"Once they see a drop they plant instead of waiting for the moisture to be good enough," he said. "At the end of the day, they lose everything."

Rain gauges have helped to change that attitude.

As part of a joint programme launched in 2015 by the UN agency and the Zambian government, 165 rain gauges were distributed to farmers in the Zambian districts most affected by the drought.

They have enabled the villagers to read the conditions and plant at the most propitious moment.



Aid: Volunteers help distribute bags of maize meal in Simumbwe. Around 2.3 million people in Zambia are food-insecure

Rain man

Mulando says the rule of thumb is not to plant anything below 20 to 25 millimetres (0.8 to one inch) of rain and to choose seeds that fit the weather forecast.

If a short rainy season is expected, for instance, choose seeds that will germinate quickly.

"If I had had access to this knowledge earlier, I would be relatively rich," said Godfrey Hapaka, a farmer.

"I would have a decent car and my kids would not have missed school."

Next to his modest house surrounded by flourishing maize fields, a rain gauge was planted in an enclosure, its value underlined by a brand new screen put in place to protect it.

As soon as it rains, Hapaka, 58, checks the gauge and passes on the rainfall level to his neighbours.

Sadly, the message is often ignored. Hapaka said some of them are "reluctant" to use the information.

"They follow their parents and grandparents," he said. "They are stuck in the past."



The lucky ones: A volunteer reads a list of people who will receive food aid

Farmers are not the only ones to follow the rainfall closely.

From the Kariba dam on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, Geoffrey Chambisha, director of the power station on the Zambian side, watched the water level of the lake. He was worried.

In the 14 years he had been working at the dam, he had never seen it so low.

In early 2020, the water level was 476.61 metres (1,563.68 feet) above sea level. Its lowest level, set in 1996, was 475.93m (1,561.45 feet).

In the absence of sufficient rain, the dam, the main source of electricity in Zambia and Zimbabwe, is expected to operate at only 25 percent of its capacity in 2020.

Inevitably the two countries are enduring long power cuts, up to 20 hours a day, which is having a knock-on effect on the two economies.

The town of Livingstone, where tourists from all over the world flock to admire the Victoria Falls, has been particularly hit.

"This year has been horrendously bad," said Andrew Murrin, a Briton who runs a six-bedroom hotel.

With temperatures climbing to nearly 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit), customers have naturally been demanding air conditioning.



Climate resilience: Small farmer and single mother Imelda Hicoombolwa sows cowpeas and other crops that are less thirsty than corn—they have a better chance of surviving in the relentless drought

Murrin had been running at full speed on his generator for some months and the cost was mounting.

"In the past three months, the generator has cost me about 30,000 kwacha (\$2,000, 1,800 euros) for the diesel and the maintenance," he said.

Victoria Falls

Beyond the problems of electricity and air-conditioning, the tourist industry is suffering from recent publicity which it would rather have avoided.

A video filmed in September by a visitor purporting to show the Victoria Falls reduced to a trickle made a massive buzz on social media even though it only reflected part of the reality.

The video showed a dry portion of the 1.7-km-long falls and, much to the indignation of angry tourism professionals, ignored the rest of the free-flowing Mosi-oa-Tunya—the local name which translates as "The Smoke That Thunders."

Zambian President Edgar Lungu exacerbated the panic by leaping for Twitter.

"These pictures of the Victoria Falls are a stark reminder of what climate change is doing to our environment and our livelihood," he tweeted.

At Livingstone, the locals were incensed.



The water level at the Kariba dam has shrunk to a near-record low

Every year the Zambian part of the Victoria Falls, which is shared with Zimbabwe, is dry.

"It is a natural phenomenon, it is seasonal," said John Zulu, who runs the Zambian site.

Too late. The damage was done. Thousands of visitors cancelled their trips; tourism plummeted 25 percent in 2019.

This month, the falls are again flowing along their entire length but the lack of tourists has bitten hard. Murrin has had to lay off four of his

eight employees and the hotel next door to him has closed down.

Stench of death

Tourists have also become a rarity 1,500 km away in western South Africa.

In Northern Cape province, at the gateway of the Kalahari desert, the wild animals are used to extreme temperatures but even they are succumbing to the conditions.

According to Wildlife Ranching South Africa, two-thirds of the [wild animals](#) in the Northern Cape have died in the last three years because of the drought.

In two years, half of the 4,500 buffaloes, hippopotamuses and kudus at the Thuru Lodge game farm near Groblershoop have disappeared.



The Victoria Falls, pictured on January 23. A viral video last year that appeared to show that the falls had shrunk to a trickle was a distortion of the truth say locals—they have been badly hit by a slump in tourist numbers

The average rainfall here is 250 millimetres a year.

"But 250 millimetres, that's what we have had in five years," says its manager, Burger Schoeman.

At the top of a hill that overlooked the 22,000-hectare (54,000-acre) private reserve, two huge holes served as mass graves.

Paul Ludick is usually responsible for locating animal tracks for tourists. He now spends his time picking up the carcasses and feeding the animals

that are still alive but struggling to survive.

"I stink" of death, he said.

Abandoned sheep

The drought represents a financial black hole for the lodge, which spends 200,000 rand (12,000 euros) per month to feed the animals while cancelling the reservations of tourists on the lookout for "trophies."

"We need to offer a fair hunt. Hunters can't shoot weak animals," said Schoeman.

The South African government, which has declared a state of natural disaster in the Northern Cape, will release 300 million rand (18 million euros) in aid. A drop in the desert.



Lethal drought: The bones of an animal lie on the ground of the Thuru Lodge game farm near Groblershoop, South Africa

"I have never seen anything like this," said Johan Steenkamp, a 52-year-old farmer with a spread of 6,000 hectares.

"It is just not raining anywhere. We lost many animals. I have 30 to 40 percent left."

Over a hundred died because of the drought, with another 200 going prematurely to the slaughterhouse.

It is becoming a familiar tale. According to the agricultural cooperative KLK, many farmers in the region have lost between 30 and 70 percent

of their livestock in the space of two years.

Sheep still give birth, but they abandon their newborn lambs.

"They have no milk," Steenkamp said. "They leave them there."

Steenkamp's two older sons chose careers away from the family farm and the drought is painting a bleak future for his youngest son as well.

"There is no future for him here," said Steenkamp.

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