
THE EL NINO-INDUCED DROUGHT IS HITTING HOME, AND ALL ENTITLEMENTS ARE FAILING!

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I perceived climate change as a distant phenomenon, far from getting to me and my small village. Everything that I got to know about climate change was through reading other people's experiences. It had not dawned on me that I might be living in the era projected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) where Africa would be warming faster than the global average. My damascene moment came recently when I visited Buhera, my rural home in the Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. It was a short stint, but one can easily feel the horrors and nightmares the region is enduring. The famine is dismantling the fundamental socio-economic structures left, right, and center. Food security is the hardest hit given the region's dependence on rain-fed agriculture. This is happening despite taking climate-proofing measures, such as growing drought-resistant crops. The El Nino-induced drought characterized by prolonged delayed rainy seasons and dry spells hit home. With people remaining accustomed to the yesteryear seasons, inputs were wasted as most planted crops wilted and consequently written off. Crop failure at an early stage disheartened many farmers who had sacrificed their hard-earned cash to pay for ground tillage given that few households still owned cattle that could draw the moldboard plow.

The El Nino-induced thus pushed households out of their traditional way of producing food. It took away the production-based entitlement that has for ages sustained the majority of rural households. The World Food Programme has cautioned that 5.3 million people are at risk of food insecurity because of the El Nino-induced drought. WFP country director, Francesca Erdelmann equated Zimbabwe's food insecurity situation to that of the war-torn states of Ukraine, Gaza, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria. WFP's damning statement builds on the

findings of the 2023 Zimbabwe Livelihood Assessment Committee survey which showed that 26% of the nation's population is vulnerable to food insecurity during the lean season between January and March 2024 requiring 100 482 tons of maize during this period (Herald, 2014). The history of food handouts has not been kind to vulnerable groups such as children as they usually lack the exact nutrient content required for healthy child development to fight stunted growth.

The negative impacts of climate change on food security have left me reminiscing about glorious days when our parents would be in long queues at the Grain Marketing Board depots selling their surplus grains. The drought has left the community with little food or grain reserves to hold on to. No amount of magic is going to alter this new reality this season. A UNDP Report revealed that maize constitutes 80-90% of production. However, it stressed the precarious position of maize given its vulnerability and sensitivity to changes in climate (UNDP, 2017). The erratic rains and scorching heat have negatively affected crop health, especially maize in the fields. Important to note is that even the traditionally promoted crop diversification that privileges small grains with the ability to resist and counter climate change shocks on maize has not been immune despite their promotion. This means that those who used to counter the impacts of climate change on maize by growing small grains such as sorghum and millet have also suffered. Their traditional defense mechanism has been breached leaving them vulnerable to hunger and starvation.

My experience in Buhera, Zimbabwe resonates with the forecasts that under warming of 2°C, crop yields across sub-Saharan Africa will decrease by 10 percent or that warming beyond 2°C will cause crop yields to fall by up to 20 percent are currently manifesting in many parts of Southern Africa (Carleton, 2023). Under the scenario that global warming is allowed to hit the 3°C mark, all present-day cropping areas for maize, millet, and sorghum in Buhera and other geographically homogenous areas will become unsuitable. Certainly, this would be devastating for Africa's food security, as maize, sorghum, and millet are all vitally important cereals in most African diets. For communities in Southern Africa and Zimbabwe to be specific, maize accounts for the largest percentage of the calories and protein consumed. To this end, the El Nino-induced drought and its negative impact on the production of maize is throwing many Zimbabweans into hunger and potentially malnutrition.

With the long dry spells and erratic rains, my local community's entitlements are failing, leaving the community at the mercy of humanitarian goodwill. This localized food insecurity

demonstrates a combination of food unavailability, failing production, and market-based entitlements. As a result, Buhera was red-flagged as a food-insecure district. A US\$11.27 million contribution from USAID) to the World Food Programme in Zimbabwe was earmarked for Buhera and other districts (Ndoro, 2024). Furthermore, Buhera is now a designated implementation location for UNESCO-driven Strengthening Local Communities' Adaptive Capacity and Resilience to Climate Change through Sustainable Groundwater Utilization project. The US\$5 million Adaptation Fund-supported project seeks to improve access to clean and safe water and food security in two poverty-stricken districts of Binga and Buhera. (UNESCO, 2024). This evidence clearly shows that climate change is hitting home indiscriminately.

The livestock production sector has not been spared. The El Nino-induced drought is leaving no sacred cows. Buhera is largely a communal area where livestock production is mainly an outdoor project where cattle, goats, and sheep graze on natural pasturelands. The long dry spells and unreliable rains have resulted in shrinkage in pasturelands. Drying or wilting pastures are becoming less nutritious for livestock. On the other hand, the extreme temperatures are causing massive evaporation hence drinking water points (rivers) are drying at accelerated speeds compromising the health of livestock. The International Livestock Research Institute recently forecasted a drastic increase in the number of days of extreme heat stress per year over the coming decades (Carleton, 2023). My experience shows me that we are living in that era now. The extreme heat is hurting ruminant production systems, especially cattle, sensitive to heat stress, and exposes livestock to increased disease. Outdoor cattle rearing, especially in communal lands, is increasingly becoming difficult as witnessed by the massive death of cattle in areas such as Buhera.

At the warming rates forecasted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), extended areas of the continent will become unsuitable for livestock production by the end of the century. In the western parts of Buhera, cattle-rearing projects have lost their profitability and prominence as a household socio-economic practice. Losing the ability to keep livestock outdoors is devastating for many people's food security, as they are all in their thousands, and millions around Africa remain dependent on livestock for food. It is a challenge to food security in three ways. First, livestock, for example, cattle, goats, and sheep have traditionally been symbols of market-based entitlements. During droughts such as these, they would be sold to raise money to buy food and supplement what the household would have produced. Also, livestock would have to be exchanged for other food items such

as maize. Secondly, livestock-derived foods are also vital in the fight against malnutrition. Such derivatives include meat for protein and milk. Third and equally important is that cattle provide the draught power that is needed to till the land where crop seeds are then planted. Livestock thus contribute much to stable food security among households. The huge losses have plunged many houses into poverty and vulnerability to food insecurity as their capacities to respond to the threat of the El Nino-induced drought have been weakened or compromised. It has weakened many households' market-based entitlement to food. This is why I am lamenting that El Nino-induced drought is hitting home.

The water scarcity is another impending challenge to Africa's agricultural and domestic systems. Concerning farming, up to 95% of farmers on the continent rely solely on rainfall since they lack irrigation infrastructure (Carleton, 2023). Communities are struggling to access adequate water to meet both agricultural (crop farming and cattle rearing) and domestic demands. This is a result of the declining rainfall amounts in Buhera and Zimbabwe in general and the frequency of droughts. Small-scale gardening that produces highly nutritious vegetables is threatened by hot temperatures resulting in the wilting of vegetables. Women in rural areas such as mine are, therefore, burdened with traveling long distances to fetch water which consumes time and energy. To some extent, the water quality is also compromised which jeopardizes the health of those who consume it.

Zimbabwe's food insecurity dilemma is complicated by the price volatility of food items which are not making things any easier, especially for the poor and vulnerable groups of our society. Increased food costs and rising inflation during the post-epidemic economic recovery have worsened the already severe food insecurity in low-income countries such as Zimbabwe, which has been exacerbated by unfavorable weather patterns, and disruptions connected to the pandemic among other factors (Bank, 2021). It makes some products unaffordable, and out of the reach of many (UNDP, 2017). Therefore, food commodity price volatility, climate change-induced crop failure, and livestock loss have combined effects of reducing household production on one hand and weakening the capacity of families to respond to food insecurity risk through the market.

In summary, Zimbabwe and the region are facing an imminent threat to food security, which is a reality. The severity of this problem will however depend on the nation's governance mechanisms which determine its capacity to effectively respond. The El Nino-induced drought put to test the government's resilience given that it was planning to export maize

just before the August 2023 election (UNDP, 2017). If there was a bumper harvest and food is available, then the nation's test would be that of ensuring equitable distribution to the most vulnerable and hard-hit areas such as Buhera. Failure to do so will thus validate the argument that famines are not a case of food not being unavailable but also inaccessibility (abundance yet inaccessible). In the case that it was just propaganda and an election banter or jibe, Zimbabwe's situation is, therefore, critically serious. It gets worse when South Africa and Zambia major producers of maize are also under great distress. Zambia for instance has already declared drought a disaster and emergency (UNICEF, 2024). The El Nino-induced drought has moved closer home, and all the entitlements are failing.

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