

COVID-19 pandemic drives global increase in humanitarian food assistance needs

Poor households' access to income remains constrained despite easing of movement restrictions in several countries

FEWS NET is monitoring the multiple impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity in monitored countries. This Global Food Security Alert is a part of a monthly series that aims to provide an update of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on acute food insecurity across FEWS NET geographies, highlighting countries of greatest concern. To find out more about how FEWS NET incorporates COVID-19 into its analysis, click [here](#).

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic, and measures taken to suppress its spread, have driven an increase in the scale and severity of acute food insecurity across the globe. While some nations eased containment measures over the past month, many restrictions remain in place. These restrictions, alongside broader economic contraction at the micro and macro levels, continue to limit poor households' access to food and cash income. FEWS NET estimates that, in 2020, 90 to 100 million¹ people will be in need of humanitarian food assistance across its 29 presence and remotely monitored countries.²

Status of the pandemic

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates that between February 28 and May 27, 2020, there were 55,027 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1,628 associated deaths in the 29 countries that FEWS NET monitors. Due to low testing, cases are likely underestimated across FEWS NET's regions; recent research by the [UK Research Council](#) and [Partnership for Evidence Based Response](#) suggests the true number of COVID-19 cases in Africa is likely eight times higher than reported.

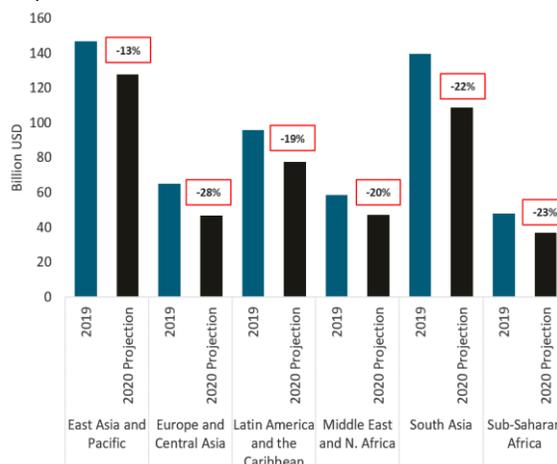
Over roughly the next 12 months, modeling by the [Center for Molecular Medicine and Infectious Diseases](#) and the [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine](#) suggests the number of symptomatic COVID-19 cases will range between 5,000 and 15,000 per 1 million people in FEWS NET's countries for which a projection was done. Given the high prevalence of endemic diseases and illnesses that already compromise the immune system (such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and dengue fever), populations are at risk of more severe COVID-19 symptoms. The seasonal prevalence of malaria (and dengue fever in Central America and the Caribbean) is expected to be at peak levels during the ongoing *gu/long* rains season over the Horn of Africa, the first rainy season in Central America and the Caribbean, and the June to September rainy season in West Africa and unimodal East Africa.

Current and anticipated impacts on food availability and access

COVID-19 is understood to directly affect the food security of some households because infected populations may be less able to participate in income-earning activities and may require additional expenditures on health-care costs. However, measures in place to slow the spread of the virus — including population movement restrictions and limitations to business operations — remain the most significant effects of COVID-19 on household food security. Since the beginning of May, the governments of several countries, including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, and South Sudan, have eased movement restrictions, while other countries have extended or tightened measures, prompting [protests in many countries](#).

While curbing the spread of the virus, these measures simultaneously restrict access to income-earning opportunities, most notably through limiting access to casual daily labor. Furthermore, the decline in global demand for fresh horticultural

Figure 1. World Bank projections for remittance inflows in 2020 compared to 2019



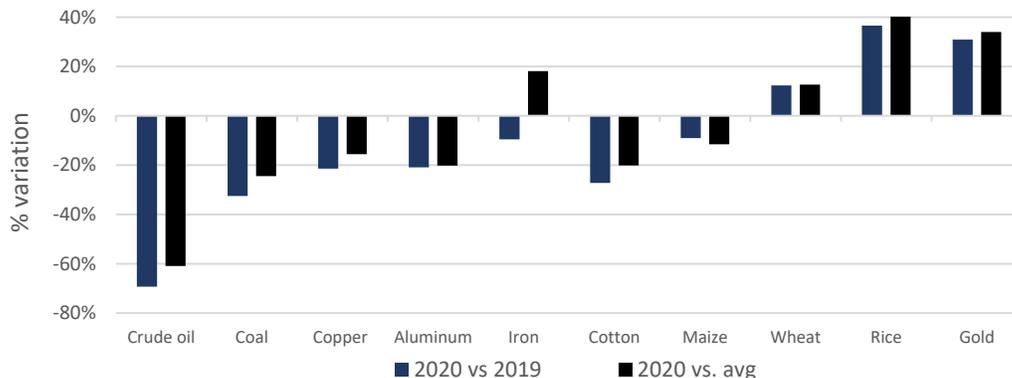
Source: World Bank data

¹ FEWS NET will continue to update 2020 peak needs estimates for monitored countries each month as the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it evolve, while also accounting for potential shifts in other food security drivers. While the net total is likely to vary somewhat from the 94 million noted in April, FEWS NET expects it to remain within the range of 90-100 million.

² FEWS NET's presence countries include Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Yemen, and Zimbabwe; FEWS NET's remotely monitored countries include Burkina Faso, CAR, El Salvador, Honduras, Lesotho, Mauritania, Nicaragua, and Rwanda.

crops and suspension of several commodity auctions has resulted in lower labor demand along the values chains of these cash crops. In April and May, several livestock markets closed in West Africa and East Africa, lowering income earned among affected pastoralists, traders, and meat processors. Furthermore, many households across geographies monitored by FEWS NET are expected to receive lower remittances, another key source of income. The World Bank projects that remittances from abroad in 2020 will decline by roughly 20 percent relative to 2019 (Figure 1). The loss of income-earning opportunities in many urban centers will also result in lower remittances transferred on domestically to rural populations.

Figure 2. World Bank commodity price forecast for 2020, compared to 2019 and five-year average prices



Source: World Bank data

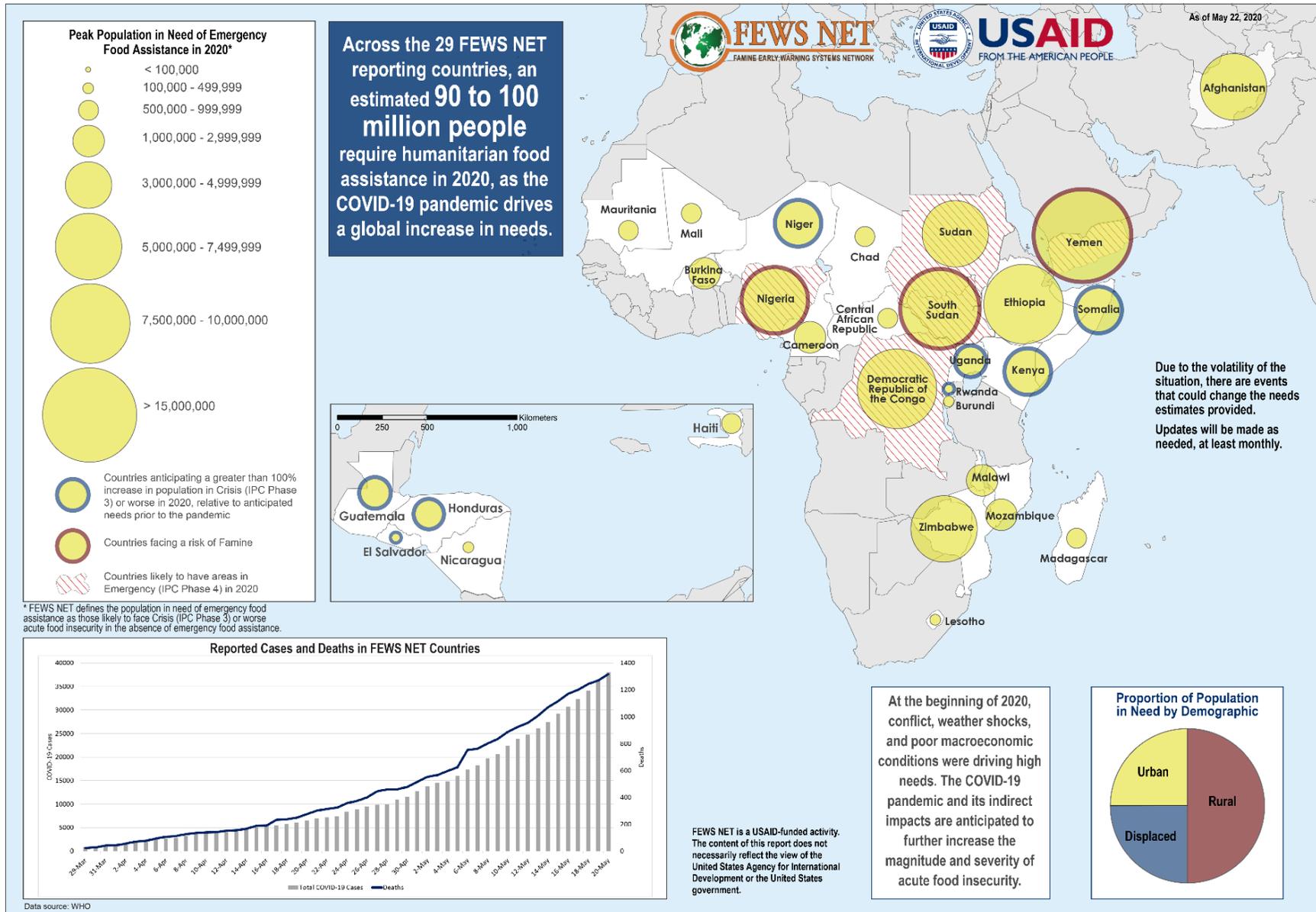
While global food commodity supply chains continue to operate at near-normal levels, global demand and, relatedly, prices for sources of essential export earnings across FEWS NET countries (e.g., fuel, industrial metals, and horticultural crops) have contracted significantly, and commodity prices are anticipated to remain below average (Figure 2). Reductions in oil export earnings have led to the depreciation of local currencies among exporting countries such as Nigeria, where the Naira has depreciated on the parallel market **by at least 20 percent since early March**. In Sudan, Yemen, Zimbabwe (where low foreign currency reserves were already driving local currency depreciation), and South Sudan (which relies heavily on oil exports), the likelihood of local currencies depreciating further remains high.

Localized national and cross-border trade disruptions and panic purchases drove staple food price increases in April in many countries, although overall the status of staple food prices varies significantly by region and context. In much of Southern Africa, staple food prices are declining with the ongoing harvest, with the exception of Zimbabwe, where the very poor macroeconomic conditions that existed prior to COVID-19 continue to drive up prices. In both Yemen and Afghanistan, cereal prices increased in mid to late March, but stabilized in April. In Central America and West Africa, prices are increasing seasonally, though increases are higher than normal in some markets due to movement restrictions. In East Africa, prices are also following seasonal trends, but continue to increase atypically in Sudan. Movement restrictions between surplus producing areas and deficit urban consumption centers have also had varying effects on prices and the availability of perishable goods and livestock. In some surplus-producing areas, perishable goods and/or livestock are not able to reach final consumers as they would normally, resulting in excess supply and lower prices, including in Ethiopia and Madagascar. Conversely, in some urban center, perishable goods and livestock availability is now constrained, resulting in excess demand and higher prices. However, countries continue to make efforts to support the flow of these goods, both internally and across borders with neighboring countries.

Projected humanitarian food assistance needs

Millions of households are facing sharp declines in income, forcing them to make difficult decisions between either purchasing food or continuing to cover non-food expenditures, including rent in urban areas. Very poor and poor urban and peri-urban households constitute a majority of the increase in global food assistance needs following the COVID-19 pandemic, although rural households continue to make up the majority of the total population in need of food assistance. Across the 29 countries monitored by FEWS NET, 90 to 100 million people are likely to face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse outcomes and will need urgent humanitarian food assistance in 2020, with eight countries experiencing a greater than 100 percent increase in needs due to the impacts of COVID-19 (Figure 3). Greater severity of acute food insecurity is also likely among some already food insecure populations. This increase in acute food insecurity also risks driving higher levels of acute malnutrition, compounding the impacts of already-anticipated seasonal increases in acute malnutrition during the April-July/August lean seasons in West Africa, Central America and the Caribbean; and the June to September lean season across unimodal East Africa. Acute malnutrition may also increase if individuals are reluctant to seek treatment due to the risk of COVID-19 infection or concern with health facilities' capacity.

Figure 3. FEWS NET’s anticipated peak needs in 2020 across 29 countries, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, May 2020



Source: FEWS NET

For more detail on each country, please see FEWS NET’s country-specific reporting at [fews.net](https://www.fews.net)