COVID-19 caseloads decline, but high staple food prices continue to drive large assistance needs

KEY MESSAGES

- **Humanitarian assistance needs are expected to remain very high through January 2021, due to the ongoing macroeconomic crisis, persistent civil insecurity, and the COVID-19 outbreak.** The number of people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse will peak in September 2020. The harvest starting in October 2020 should improve food access among many poor rural households. However, the very high staple food prices, continued impacts from COVID-19 containment measures, and flooding are likely to contribute to above-average assistance needs through January 2021.

- **Staple food prices remain much higher than normal as Sudan’s macroeconomic situation continues to deteriorate.** The Sudanese Pound depreciated further from 140 SDG/USD in June 2020 to 200 SDG/USG in August 2020. Prices for sorghum and millet increased by approximately 15 percent in August, which was likely due to continued currency depreciation and seasonally low supply during the lean season. The high staple food prices continue to drive low purchasing power among many poor households.

- **Seasonal rains have performed well over most areas of Sudan, although below-average rainfall and flooding have been reported in some areas.** Remote sensing products suggest rainfall has been somewhat below average in parts of southern and eastern Sudan. Meanwhile, flooding in Gezira, Kassala, and other parts of eastern Sudan, alongside the collapse of a dam in Blue Nile state, have led to multiple deaths, damaged crops, and the loss of livestock.

- **The weekly number of officially confirmed COVID-19 cases has declined in recent months, but the ongoing outbreak remains a concern for food insecurity through January 2021.** The weekly average of newly confirmed cases in August 2020 is approximately 315, compared to a weekly average of 920 in June 2020, and the positive test rate has also declined. However, access and availability of testing facilities nationwide are extremely limited. Despite the recent relaxation of some measures designed to contain the spread of COVID-19, the potential impact of renewed outbreaks is a strong possibility, along with the potential of the reinstatement of containment measures.

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CURRENT SITUATION

Macroeconomic crisis and prices

Sudan continues to face a macroeconomic crisis, as the value of the Sudanese Pound continues to weaken on the unofficial market. Low reserves of foreign currency, and increased shortages of USD in the official banking system, have combined to drive the depreciation of the Sudanese Pound from 140 SDG/USD in June to 200 SDG/USD in August. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the national inflation rate has increased by 72 percentage points over the last six months. In July 2020, the national inflation rate was approximately 144 percent, which represents an increase of 7.4 percent points from June 2020.

Household purchasing power remains poor, as staple food prices remain much higher than normal. Retail prices of the main staples, such as sorghum and millet, continued to increase between July and August 2020 across most monitored markets in Sudan. In the Al Qadarif market, sorghum sold for 82 SDG/kg in August, which represents a 15 percent increase from July 2020 and is approximately 10 times the five-year average for August. Across Sudan, the prices of millet and sorghum remain 220-230 percent higher than they were in August 2019. This is a five to six-fold increase compared to the five-year average across the main markets in Sudan. The increase in sorghum and millet prices is being driven by seasonally reduced supplies, the high cost of transportation, and the depreciation of the Sudanese pound. Meanwhile, livestock prices have continued to increase in July and August 2020. Goat prices have increased by 15-35 percent across most monitored markets and remain four to six times higher than the five-year average. The high livestock prices are being driven by seasonal high demand during Eid al-Adha festivals, as well as improved animal body conditions due to improved pasture and water availability. High transportation costs and further currency depreciation are also contributing to increases in livestock prices.

COVID-19

The weekly number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has declined in recent months, but the ongoing outbreak remains a major concern for Sudan. The weekly average of officially confirmed cases in August 2020 is approximately 315, compared to a weekly average of 920 in June 2020. In July, there were approximately 2,000 new confirmed COVID-19 cases, less than half the number of new confirmed cases reported in June (4,500). Additionally, the positive test rate declined from 55 percent in May-June to 27 percent in July-August 2020. Confirmed cases have been reported in nearly all states, with about 71 percent of confirmed cases being registered in Khartoum, followed by 9 percent cases being reported in Gezira state. By August 27, there were 13,045 confirmed COVID-19 cases, a 41 percent increase in confirmed cases since June 30, 2020. This includes 823 COVID-19 attributed deaths, according to the Federal Ministry of Health (FMoH). By the third week of August, only Khartoum, Al Jazeira, and Northern states reported confirmed COVID-19 cases, but access and availability of testing across the country is limited.

The government of Sudan further relaxed measures designed to contain the spread of COVID-19 in August 2020, including restrictions on internal population movements. Residents of any given state can now travel across the country using public or private transportation. Before the relaxation of COVID-19 control measures, adherence was generally low among rural and urban populations. Nevertheless, the cost of civilian transportation (buses and taxis) has increased significantly, quadrupling in price during the last two months. The price increase is negatively impacting daily laborers who regularly travel from urban and rural areas.

Restrictions on movements of people across land border points remain in place, leading to reduced numbers of migrant laborers seeking labor opportunities in Sudan. Although limited informal population movement continues across these borders, reduced numbers of migrant laborers are traveling from Ethiopia and South Sudan to seek labor opportunities that are typically available, particularly during the harvest season, in higher producing areas of Gadaref. Additional factors such as seasonal flooding of roads and small-scale insecurity along the border with Ethiopia have also made cross-border population movement more difficult. Farmers in the semi-mechanized sector, are expected to face increased labor shortages and wage rates during the harvest period which is likely to result in high harvesting costs, delayed harvests, and increased levels of pre-harvest losses.

By mid-July, in Khartoum, markets were back to near normal activities following the easing of the lockdown, however curfew hours and bridge closures remain in effect between 18:00-05:00 hrs. Local public transportation, in most cases, is limited to small vans and taxis. Restrictions on travel between Khartoum and other states have been lifted except for Northern and River Nile state due to a high number of COVID-19 suspected cases among new returnees from Sudanese citizens who were
stranded in Egypt. Government institutions have also reopened with 30-50 percent staffing. Nevertheless, the urban poor and labor-dependent households in Khartoum are still being affected by the shortage and high cost of transportation, and the curfew hours and bridge closures, which force most people to reduce working hours and close their businesses earlier than normal. On July 13, Khartoum International Airport (KRT) partially re-opened to international flights, while domestic flights resumed on August 15.

Seasonal performance

As of late August, the ongoing June to September 2020 rain season has been generally good across the country, although flooding and below-average rainfall have occurred in localized areas. According to CHIRPS, across most of the country cumulative rainfall has been greater than 95 percent of normal. However, in South Kordofan, Blue Nile, Sennar, Gadaref, and Kassala states cumulative rainfall has been 85-95 percent below normal, which is due to below normal rainfall in July and early August. The Sudan Meteorological Authority has reported somewhat poorer performance this year compared to last year in Kassala, South Kordofan, West Darfur, and North Darfur, and better performance in South Darfur, Gadaref, and North Kordofan. Overall, the Water Requirements Satisfaction Index (WRSI) suggests rainfall amounts and distribution are generally satisfactory for the growth of crops such as sorghum, although rainfall has been below levels required for full crop growth in Kassala.

Heavy rainfall in August across most parts of the country resulted in flooding, causing death to populations and livestock, and damage to homes, crops, and water sources. According to the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), by mid-August, more than 380,000 people have been affected by torrential rains and flooding across the country. More than 1,200 heads of livestock have been lost and approximately 20,000 hectares of cropped land were affected in the middle of the agricultural season. The worst affected states are Gezira and Kassala, followed by the Red Sea, North Kordofan, South Darfur, North Darfur, West Kordofan, and Northern states. In Blue Nile state, in addition to heavy rains and flooding, Bout and Tadamon localities were further impacted by the collapse of the Bout Dam at the end of July.

Relatively good rainfall has improved pasture conditions and increased availability of water resources. The USGS water point viewer indicates positive water conditions across most monitoring points. Generally, improved pasture and water availability have improved animal body conditions in the main pastoral and agro-pastoral areas. However, the rapid increase in the cost of animal drugs and vaccines, the high cost of herding, and the expansion of cultivation over the grazing areas remain challenges for animal herders.

Limited sightings of locusts have been reported in Sudan since July. According to FAO's July 2020 Desert Locust Bulletin, limited breeding occurred along the Nile and the Atbara River where groups of hoppers and immature and mature adults were observed. Mostly scattered immature adults were present in the Nile valley from Shandi to the north of Dongola while mature adults were present in White Nile, North Kordofan, Khartoum, and Kassala states as well as in the western side of the Red Sea hills.

Humanitarian assistance

From May-July 2020, WFP provided humanitarian food assistance to approximately 5.7 million beneficiaries in Sudan, through various modalities including general food distributions (GFD). Among those receiving GFD, it is estimated the average ration was between 50 and 100 percent of the required 2,100 kilocalories. Approximately 34 percent of beneficiaries reached were long-term IDPs in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile, 9 percent were South Sudanese refugees, and 31 percent were urban poor households affected by low production, conflict, and COVID-19 control measures while the remaining were returnees and rural residents. It is anticipated that this assistance is improving food security among beneficiaries in targeted areas.

UPDATED ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions used to develop FEWS NET's most likely scenario for the Sudan Food Security Outlook for June 2020 to January 2021 remain unchanged.
PROJECTED OUTLOOK THROUGH JANUARY 2021

- The ongoing macroeconomic crisis, alongside protracted displacement, the COVID-19 outbreak, and recent flooding are expected to lead to “well above-average” needs for humanitarian assistance through the end of the lean season in September 2020. Although the number of people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) will decline as harvests and associated agricultural labor improve food access among poor rural households, needs are expected to remain above average through January 2021.

- Poor households in pastoral areas are likely to face difficulty accessing food and income through September 2020, followed by improvements between October 2020 and January 2021 when poor households have improved seasonal access to labor opportunities and animal products. Food consumption of poor households is likely to improve through January 2021, leading to a decline in the number of households facing Crises (IPC Phase 3) outcomes, including pastoralists in northern parts of North Darfur, parts of North Kordofan as well as poor households in the Eastern Pastoral zones of northern Kassala and Red Sea states.

- Poor households in agricultural and agropastoral areas of Sudan will continue facing difficulty meeting their food needs until October when access to income from agricultural labor and food from their production begins to increase. IDPs in less accessible areas of SPLM-N-controlled areas of South Kordofan and Jebel Marra are expected to continue facing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) acute food insecurity between August and September 2020, as displacement and very limited market access continue to drive large food consumption gaps among populations in these areas. However, harvests beginning in October should help improve food access and result in an improvement to Crisis (IPC Phase 3) between October 2020 and January 2021.

- Poor households in urban areas engaged in the informal sector (daily casual labor wages and petty trade) are likely to see slight improvements to access to food and income from September 2020 as the relaxed COVID-19 restrictions allow some income-earning opportunities to resume. Under the most likely scenario, poor urban households will continue facing difficulty meeting the basic food needs as staple food prices remain extremely high and labor opportunities remain limited in the presence of COVID-19 containment measures. Should containment be relaxed for a prolonged period, improvements to Stressed (IPC Phase 2) acute food insecurity are possible among poor urban households. However, potential improvements could be mitigated by a spike in COVID-19 cases.

ABOUT THIS UPDATE
This report covers current conditions as well as changes to the projected outlook for food insecurity in this country. It updates the FEWS NET’s Food Security Outlook, which is published three times per year. Learn more about our work here.