

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## Food Security Declines in East Africa Following Economic, Climate and Conflict Shocks

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### Key Points

- Food security has weakened in East Africa since 2016, due to conflict, climate shocks and economic instability. Each of these issues has continued to exacerbate food insecurity in 2020.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a spike in poverty and food prices, making access to food increasingly difficult in a region where extreme poverty was already very high.
- Two unusually wet rainy seasons led to floods and landslides in early 2020, destroying crops and pastureland. Those conditions provided an ideal climate for destructive desert locusts to breed. Destruction of crops and pastures by floods and locusts has caused further increases in food prices.
- Despite the signing of peace agreements and promising government reforms in the region over the last few years, sub-state and communal conflict remains a problem in East Africa. Violence posed a particular problem for Ethiopia and South Sudan in 2020, which has further driven food insecurity.

### Summary

Food security has always been a significant concern in East Africa. The region is home to some of the most food insecure people in the world, largely because of ongoing conflicts, economic instability, high levels of poverty and its vulnerability to climate shocks. Each of these issues influences the others, making for a complex and precarious food security situation. The region also hosts a large number of refugees and internally displaced people, who experience even greater levels of food insecurity.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not spared East Africa. Cases may still be low, but lockdown containment measures and weaker economic conditions internationally have sharply increased poverty in the region, while dampening economic growth and driving up inflation. These factors have, in turn, caused food insecurity to spike as food becomes more inaccessible. Agricultural trade and prices for agricultural products have also fallen, increasing poverty in rural areas.

East Africa is also highly vulnerable to weather shocks, with floods in late 2019 and early 2020 contributing to an increase in food insecurity. The March to May rainy season was the wettest in several decades and led to landslides and severe flooding in several countries. The wet conditions have also provided ideal breeding conditions for desert locusts, a pest that is capable of destroying large amounts of crops and pasture. The desert locust has been a particular problem for Ethiopia and Kenya. Destruction of crops by floods and locusts is another element that has caused a spike in food prices.

Finally, sub-state conflict and communal violence has flared in several places in 2020, including in Ethiopia and South Sudan. Humanitarian agencies have struggled to fund aid programmes for people displaced by conflicts and floods. As a result, they have been forced to cut food rations.

### Analysis

East Africa is a diverse region that [consists](#) of Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic drew attention to the issue, food security was a major concern in much of East Africa. The region hosts some of the world's most food-insecure populations; Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan are [among the ten](#) countries that are most affected by food crises. Food insecurity in the region has steadily risen since 2016, while the number of people in need of urgent food assistance rose by [two per cent](#) (or 650,000 people) between 2018 and 2019. That increase was driven by rising food insecurity in South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda (although food insecurity decreased in Sudan and Somalia during the same period).

Conflict, severe weather and economic shocks are among the key drivers of severe food insecurity in the region, with most regional countries vulnerable to all three. Each driver of food insecurity reinforces the others, creating complex situations that are not easily resolved. In South Sudan, for instance, where 61 per cent of the population experiences [crisis or worse](#) levels of food insecurity, this principle is clearly illustrated. The food security situation in South Sudan [plummeted in 2013](#), after conflict erupted. Conflict has disrupted normal ways of life, severing social and political relations. The conflict caused human and livestock displacement, early depletion of food stocks, poor access to markets as well as disruption of agricultural activities.

Conflict and macroeconomic crisis caused a [sharp increase](#) in poverty, further driving food insecurity. Finally, climate-related risks have been exacerbated by conflict and South Sudan's economic challenges. Weather patterns have become [increasingly erratic](#), with rainfall increasing in flood-prone areas and decreasing in other places. Recurrent shocks [reduce](#)

[resilience](#) to further shocks, especially among the most vulnerable and those who depend on climate-sensitive livelihoods, such as agriculture.

Climate hazards were the primary cause of food insecurity in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia in 2019, leaving [13.9 million](#) people in urgent need of food assistance. Conflict was the primary driver of food insecurity in South Sudan and Uganda in the same year, while economic shocks were responsible for a sharp decline in food security in Sudan. Food security is especially poor among refugee populations. There was a [slight increase](#) in refugee numbers between December 2018 and December 2019, with most refugees residing in Uganda (1.38 million), Ethiopia (0.73 million), Kenya (0.48 million), South Sudan (0.32 million), along with smaller populations in Somalia and Djibouti.

#### *Economic Indicators and the Covid-19 Pandemic*

As in much of the world, East Africa's economic prospects are likely to be significantly strained by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Positive growth was predicted for all East African countries (apart from Sudan, where growth was predicted to be negative due to conflict) until the pandemic emerged. The virus's effects on market demand, supply chains, revenue and expenditure have led to [more sober assessments](#) of regional growth (from forecasts of 5.1%, to a baseline forecast of 1.2% or in the worst-case scenario, 0.2%). The pandemic is not the only factor that is likely to subdue growth, however, as inflation remains stubbornly high across the region. Even pre-pandemic predictions indicated that inflation in East Africa would be the highest on the continent. Inflation has been especially acute in Ethiopia, which was already struggling with food inflation rates of [21 per cent](#) at the start of the year. Figures from July place food inflation at 24 per cent compared with the previous year, suggesting that prices have risen slightly faster during the pandemic. Similarly, Sudan declared a state of economic emergency [in September](#) after its currency sharply fell. As a result, inflation grew to a record 167 per cent, with the price of staples such as bread and sugar increasing by over 50 per cent.

The pandemic has also worsened progress towards reducing poverty – progress that was already slow and inconsistent. Levels of extreme poverty were already high across the region, with over [20 per cent](#) of workers living in extreme poverty. The informal economy dominates employment in urban East Africa, with the informal sector responsible for [61 per cent](#) of all jobs and 93 per cent of all newly created jobs. Informal sector employment usually consists of casual labour or petty trade, in which employees generally subsist on hand-to-mouth wages and face food insecurity even during times of economic stability. They are also among the roles that have been most disrupted by Covid-19 containment measures.

Rural East Africa has not been spared from the economic problems caused by the pandemic. Trade restrictions have reduced imports and led to price and transport increases. As a result, farmers have [struggled to afford](#) basic agricultural inputs. Exports have also been subdued since the pandemic began. In Ethiopia 60 per cent of exports are agricultural commodities. In April, exports fell to [20 per cent](#) of their usual volume, representing a loss of US\$132 million (\$183 million). Agricultural exports have also fallen in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Access to markets has also been negatively affected by the pandemic, as [fewer traders](#) travel to rural areas. Domestic prices for producers have also fallen, due to a decline in urban demand.

Modelling suggests that the economic turmoil caused by the pandemic and associated containment measures may wipe out the savings of [30 per cent](#) of East Africans, while an additional 9.1% have already fallen into extreme poverty. The economic shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to continue to weaken food security across East Africa for many years to come.

### *Climate Shocks, Flooding and Pests*

East Africa is among the [most vulnerable](#) regions in the world to climate change and the region's agriculture is increasingly threatened by climate variability and extreme weather conditions. Weather extremes are another major driver of acute food insecurity in the region. The March to May 2020 rainy season was the [wettest since 1981](#) and came soon after another record wet season in October to December. June to September rains were [also heavy](#) in some areas. While the strong rains benefitted some farming and pastoralist households due to improved crops and rangelands, they also caused landslides and major floods, especially in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and Uganda. As a result, [1.3 million](#) people were displaced across the region, while [702 square kilometres](#) of cropland were destroyed. Pastures, housing and public infrastructure was also destroyed by flooding, which also disrupted food supply chains.

East Africa has also been plagued by an infestation of Desert Locusts, which are among the world's [most dangerous](#) migratory pests (a single swarm can contain up to 150 million locusts and travel 150km a day). The infestation first began in 2020 and is the most serious outbreak in the region in 70 years. Unusually wet conditions created an [ideal environment](#) for the locusts to breed and has disrupted surveillance efforts. Somalia has been the most severely impacted country, with the Food and Agriculture Organization labelling the infestation as "[dangerous](#)" in May. More than half of Somalia's croplands and pastures have been affected by the infestation. Ethiopia and Kenya have also been [badly](#) affected.

Environmental hazards have had severe impacts on food prices in parts of the region. In Ethiopia, the locust infestation and floods in several areas have caused a significant fall in agricultural production, which has caused a significant spike in food prices. In March, the price of staples increased by an average of [50 to 100](#) per cent.

### *Conflict*

Conflict remains a serious threat to food security in East Africa, even though conflict events [significantly declined](#) in 2019. [South Sudan](#) and [Sudan](#) both signed peace agreements this year, although observers acknowledge that in both countries the agreements are fragile and significantly flawed. In South Sudan intercommunal violence has increased by [300 per cent](#) since 2019, worsening an already precarious food security situation and preventing humanitarian access to the most-affected areas.

Political unrest has also led to [communal violence](#) in Ethiopia, particularly in Addis Ababa and the Oromia region, and ethnic tensions remain high. In Kenya, attacks by al-Shabab [spiked](#) between December 2019 and April 2020, while [political tensions](#) in Burundi have caused people to flee the country. Despite the high number of refugees and internally displaced

people in the region, funding has not been sufficient to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Funding shortfalls have caused humanitarian organisations to [cut](#) rations to refugee populations in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan (the World Food Programme, for example, was forced to make cuts of [30 per cent](#) in April 2020 due to a lack of funding), meaning rations often fail to meet the recommended 2,100 kilocalories a day and were limited in terms of dietary diversity.

Economic downturns, extreme weather and conflict have always been the most serious threats to East African food security and 2020 has seen each of these issues threaten food security in the region to a varying extent. Because of this, East African food security is likely to remain precarious for the foreseeable future, continuing the downwards trend seen since 2016.

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*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.*

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