



UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF THE DROUGHT ON FOOD SECURITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA, FEBRUARY 2015



IMPACT OF THE DROUGHT

The duration of the dry spell and the delay of rainfall during the first cropping season of 2014 (*primera*) has affected the food security situation of the most vulnerable households in the affected areas of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

While the performance of the *postrera* seasonal rains and cropping season was generally normal, the relative importance of the secondary harvest coupled with the livelihood impacts of the first harvest losses equate to a continued need for humanitarian and livelihood assistance.

The level of national production during both the *primera* and *postrera* do not necessarily reflect the level of impact of production losses on areas specifically affected by the drought. Areas such as the Dry Corridor were more heavily impacted given the subsistence levels of the livelihoods of the population and the lower annual averages of rainfall compared to areas of greatest productive capacity (e.g. Peten, Guatemala).

The impact of the drought on key aspects of household food security are reflected in dietary diversity, food consumption, food expenditure shares and coping strategies.



ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT

The delayed start of rainfall and the prolonged dry spell in the first cropping cycle of 2014 have had a negative impact on the food security situation of affected households, mainly on the most vulnerable households.

The World Food Programme (WFP), in collaboration with key government counterparts, NGO and UN Agencies, conducted emergency food security assessments in El Salvador, Guatemala and

Honduras in September 2014.

Based on the analysis of household food consumption, food expenditure share and asset depletion, the level of moderate or severely food insecure was estimated at:

- Guatemala: **25%** of households / **874,000** people
- Honduras: **36%** of households **682,000** people
- El Salvador: **13%** of households / **85,000** people
- Nicaragua: **460,000** people (estimate based on initial analysis as no assessment was conducted).
- TOTAL: **2.1 million people**



KEY ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

Of particular concern was the percentage of households with low or medium levels of dietary diversity. Results ranged from 84% of households in Honduras to 77% in Guatemala to 41% in El Salvador. Across all three countries there was a very low consumption of iron rich foods, even for households with good food consumption. Households with consumption deficits also showed a deficit in consumption of protein and foods rich in Vitamin A.

Similarly, livelihood coping strategies already being employed at the time of the EFSAs point to a concerning situation which could, in part, explain how households have maintained generally acceptable and borderline levels of food consumption (albeit with poor dietary diversity). However, achieving adequate food consumption through negative coping strategies (e.g. selling land) has additional implications for livelihoods and household food security. There was a high level of crisis and emergency level livelihood coping strategies applied in all three countries:

- Guatemala: **36% crisis / 8% emergency**
- Honduras: **32% crisis / 24% emergency**
- El Salvador: **29% crisis / 5% emergency**

Crisis strategies included reducing health and education expenditures, consuming seed reserves and decreasing expenditures on agricultural inputs. **Emergency strategies** consisted of begging, selling breeding livestock and selling land.

Migration was also a concern. Households having at least one member abnormally migrate due to drought over the two months prior to the survey ranged from **12%** in Guatemala, **10%** in Honduras and **5%** in El Salvador. This does not include entire households that may have migrated before the survey was conducted.

Overall, the **high share of food expenditures** as a percentage of the total household expenditures is another indication of the vulnerability and limited coping capacity of the households affected by the drought during the *primera* season. These patterns limit the ability of households to purchase other non-food needs and indicate a potentially prolonged recovery period without adequate assistance.



LIVELIHOODS IMPACTS

A number of worrying results were obtained through the EFSAs which are important in estimating the level of continued food insecurity and needs beyond after the *postrera* harvest. Of those interviewed, the vast majority either depend on basic grain production or agricultural day labor opportunities for their main livelihood source. In around 10% to 20% of households, this is complemented by home gardens, of which a significant portion were also affected by the drought. As a result of this, a significant portion of participants reported having their first income source affected by the drought, with an important portion of second income sources also affected.

Households livelihoods were also impacted by the previously mentioned negative coping strategies employed by food insecure households. In many zones, a notable portion of households reported to not have planted during the *postrera* while other zones only benefit from one harvest in normal years:

- In the eastern parts of Guatemala most departments normally only benefit from one harvest;
- Households located in areas above 2,000 meters in the extended Dry Corridor of western Guatemala only benefit from one harvest which suffered notable losses;
- In Eastern zones of El Salvador and Honduras, the majority of households reported to have planted, with the exception in areas at higher altitudes in Honduras, where households only plant once a year;
- Of those that reported to not have planted in Honduras and Guatemala, more than 25% were already food insecure at the time of the EFSAs.



CROPPING SEASONS

The relative importance of each cropping season varies by country, however with the exception of Nicaragua, the *primera* season represents the vast majority (70 to 88 percent) of annual production. Furthermore, while the *primera* is focused on maize with some bean production, the *postrera* harvest is nearly solely beans, again with the exception of Nicaragua. Nicaragua also has a third season during which beans are harvested.

The planting of the *primera* ranges from April to May with the harvesting ending in August to November. The *postrera* normally involves planting in August/September with the harvest in December/January. Again there are variations across and within each country. In the case of Nicaragua, the third season takes place with planting beginning in December and harvesting beginning in March.



OUTLOOK

Based on an analysis of the impact of the drought, an understanding of livelihoods in the region as well as levels of assistance provided between the *primera* and *postrera* it is clear that significant levels of need will continue until the next *primera* harvest in August 2015.

Populations that will continue to require a level of humanitarian and/or livelihood assistance are likely to include:

- Households that were identified to be severely food insecure and households that had employed emergency livelihood coping strategies already at the time of the EFSAs.
- Food insecure households in areas with only one harvest in normal years;
- Food insecure households that reported they were unable to plant a *postrera* harvest due to the impacts of the drought on their livelihoods;

Furthermore, it is expected that an above normal level of food insecurity will continue in areas that do benefit from *postrera* harvest, but where it represents a minor portion of annual production.

In general, for households affected by the drought during the *primera*, an early start to the lean season should be expected requiring further support to prevent a deterioration in food and nutrition security.



FOOD ASSISTANCE RESPONSE

In coordination with and under the broader plans of government counterparts, WFP has contributed to the response to the drought through the provision of food assistance. Building on the piloting of cash and voucher transfers during the response to the Coffee Rust crisis in the first half of 2014, WFP significantly scaled up these market access programmes in the response to drought.

Guatemala: The Government declared an emergency and appealed for international assistance as the scale of the crisis became evident. Building on experience gained with WFP through the resilience component of the WFP Country Programme, the government launched a plan to provide food assistance through conditional transfers to over 1.5 million people. As Government resources were insufficient to cover all the needs, WFP supported the overall response to around 180,000 people, of which nearly 85 percent has been through voucher transfers. Although the Government has requested additional support from WFP, additional resources are not available for further expansion at this stage.

Honduras: The Government also declared an emergency, however available government resources plus those available through WFP and other actors remains well below the assessed needs. WFP has worked closely with the Government to refine a community based targeting mechanism which is applied beyond the WFP supported communities. While WFP plans were to reach 150,000 people through the drought response, some 56,000 have been reached although assistance is scaling up based on available resources. As with Guatemala, assistance is now being provided through cash and voucher transfers.

Nicaragua: WFP has worked closely with the Government to combine available resources to meet the most urgent needs through unconditional transfers of food to priority geographic areas. Over the course of the initial response from August to November, WFP and the government have jointly reached over 270,000 people, initially with a greater level of WFP resources, but this gradually transitioned to a greater allocation of Government resources.

El Salvador: WFP has focused its response on conditional transfers of cash and vouchers. With some 85,000 people targeted, WFP has been able to meet the needs of nearly 40,000. There remains a significant gap in reaching the 480,000 people in need.

With the exception of Nicaragua, WFP assistance has been through conditional transfers in order to provide

livelihoods training and increase productive assets. This approach has allowed WFP support to the emergency to not only meet urgent food needs, but also to address some of the underlying causes of food insecurity in vulnerable areas—particularly the Dry Corridor.

By December 2014, 100 percent of WFPs assistance to the drought in all but Nicaragua was implemented through cash or voucher transfer modalities. This approach has ensured WFPs assistance contributes to addressing the dietary diversity issues identified during the assessments; provides greater flexibility and choice to beneficiaries; and was more timely than regional and international procurement efforts. Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador all gained valuable experience in scaling up market access interventions in response to emergency that will also contribute to continued support during the recovery period and potentially beyond in supporting broader social protection systems in each country.



NEXT STEPS

While it is clear that assistance is needed until the next *primera* harvest for an important portion of the 2 million people originally assessed to be food insecure, additional field validation is also required.

WFP is working with government counterparts to put in place household food and nutrition security and market monitoring activities in the drought affected areas. This will enable governments and WFP to provide a further update on the situation of affected food insecure households and fine tune response.

WFP has developed tools to gather necessary information through both key informant interviews and household surveys, designed to also gather outcome data on interventions to date. This will be further complemented with additional secondary data from each country.

It is also expected that market access interventions, through the use of cash and voucher transfers, will continue to be the most appropriate especially after market speculation by traders at the onset of the drought has stabilized. This approach will continue to contribute to improved dietary diversity and will benefit from a more timely response—particularly with systems established over recent months. Beneficiaries have expressed in general a strong preference towards such transfers.

While this information will also assist governments to elaborate further responses, they have also expressed concerns with areas with only one harvest and the severity and duration of the lean season.