

FEWS NET Special Reports provide in-depth analysis of food security issues of particular concern. In 2026–2027, FEWS NET will publish a series of El Niño Special Reports, focusing on countries where FEWS NET has a presence and where El Niño impacts are of concern. The first report, in October 2026, provides an overview of the event, distinguishes the timing of rainfall impacts from peak impacts on food security outcomes, and provides region-level summaries. It also examines the global impacts on food availability and prices and the longer-term implications for food security. A second report will be published in late 2026 and a third and final report will follow in early-to-mid 2027, both of which will provide more detailed early warning of likely outcomes in regions where El Niño impacts on food security occur later in 2027. Reports will also update on the potential transition to La Niña.

2026-2027 El Niño food security impacts

Key Messages

- The 2026/27 El Niño has rapidly strengthened to very strong levels and is expected to drive significant rainfall anomalies across FEWS NET geographies. Below-average rainfall has already occurred across unimodal areas of East Africa, the Sahel of West Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Pakistan. Southern Africa will face below-average rains during the October 2026 to March 2027 rainy season, while the Horn of Africa will see heavy rains and heightened flood risk during the October to December 2026 rains.
- The most severe food insecurity outcomes from El Niño-induced rainfall anomalies typically emerge during the following lean season, rather than during the rainy season itself. This makes El Niño an important early warning signal, giving governments and humanitarians time to deliver a humanitarian food assistance response before the most severe acute food insecurity materializes.
- Unimodal East Africa and Southern Africa are of highest concern. In both regions, El Niño is expected to result in widespread drought and be the primary driver of high food assistance needs in 2027.
- While El Niño is expected to have its most significant food security impacts in areas directly affected by extreme rainfall anomalies, indirect impacts are likely to emerge through regional and international trade and markets. These indirect import-related risks are particularly elevated in Southern Africa through regional maize trade, and in West Africa and Yemen through international imports.
- Global output of maize, wheat, and rice has [changed little on balance](#) in the strong and very strong El Niño years since 1980. In the crop marketing years of these events, global output fell by at most 3.9 percent from the year before, in 1987/88. The [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) projects global 2026/27 production of these crops to be 2.7 percent below last year, but still the [second-largest crop on record](#).
- Food security outcomes are often driven by multiple coexisting shocks. FEWS NET's assessed populations in need are available in many of FEWS NET's [global and country-level products](#), but these estimates represent needs driven by all relevant factors. This report does not seek to – and it is often not feasible to – disentangle the relative contribution of each driver in order to identify needs attributable to one factor, in this case El Niño only. Nonetheless, the regional summaries do identify where El Niño is, or is not, considered a primary driver of acute food insecurity and associated food assistance needs.
- Beyond its immediate impacts, El Niño can increase vulnerability to future shocks by eroding household coping capacity. Where livelihoods are damaged and recovery is insufficient, households will face greater difficulty managing subsequent shocks. The longer-term food security implications depend not only on current rainfall conditions, but also on efforts to mitigate risks and support recovery.
- While this report focuses on early warning of both the ongoing and forecast impacts of the 2026/27 El Niño, it is important to signal early warning for the forecast transition to La Niña in mid-to-late 2027. Although confidence in this transition is relatively low given the long lead time, a shift to La Niña should be prepared for, as it will introduce [a new set of rainfall impacts](#) and food security risks.



The 2026-2027 El Niño

Since emerging in June 2026, El Niño conditions have strengthened rapidly, reaching very strong levels (an El Niño index of ≥ 2 degrees Celsius) in September 2026. Very strong El Niño events are uncommon, occurring only seven times since 1950, most recently in 2015/16. The current event bears similarities to the 1997/98 El Niño – a key historical analog and one of the strongest events on record – in its rapid intensification. The current event is also expected to coincide with a positive [Indian Ocean Dipole \(IOD\)](#) from October to December, as the 1997/98 event did, amplifying extreme weather impacts in some regions. (See Annex 1 for more information on analog years.)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center forecasts a greater than 90 percent probability of a very strong El Niño through the Northern Hemisphere fall and winter (2026/27). El Niño remains the most likely ENSO phase into Northern Hemisphere spring 2027.

El Niño effects are global and increase the chances of above- or below-normal precipitation at certain times of the year. While these relationships are not deterministic, the wet and dry patterns shown in Figure 1 are generally considered the likely forecast and impact timings during El Niño events. These forecasts form the basis of FEWS NET's most likely rainfall assumptions and underpin expectations on food security conditions across the globe.



What is El Niño?

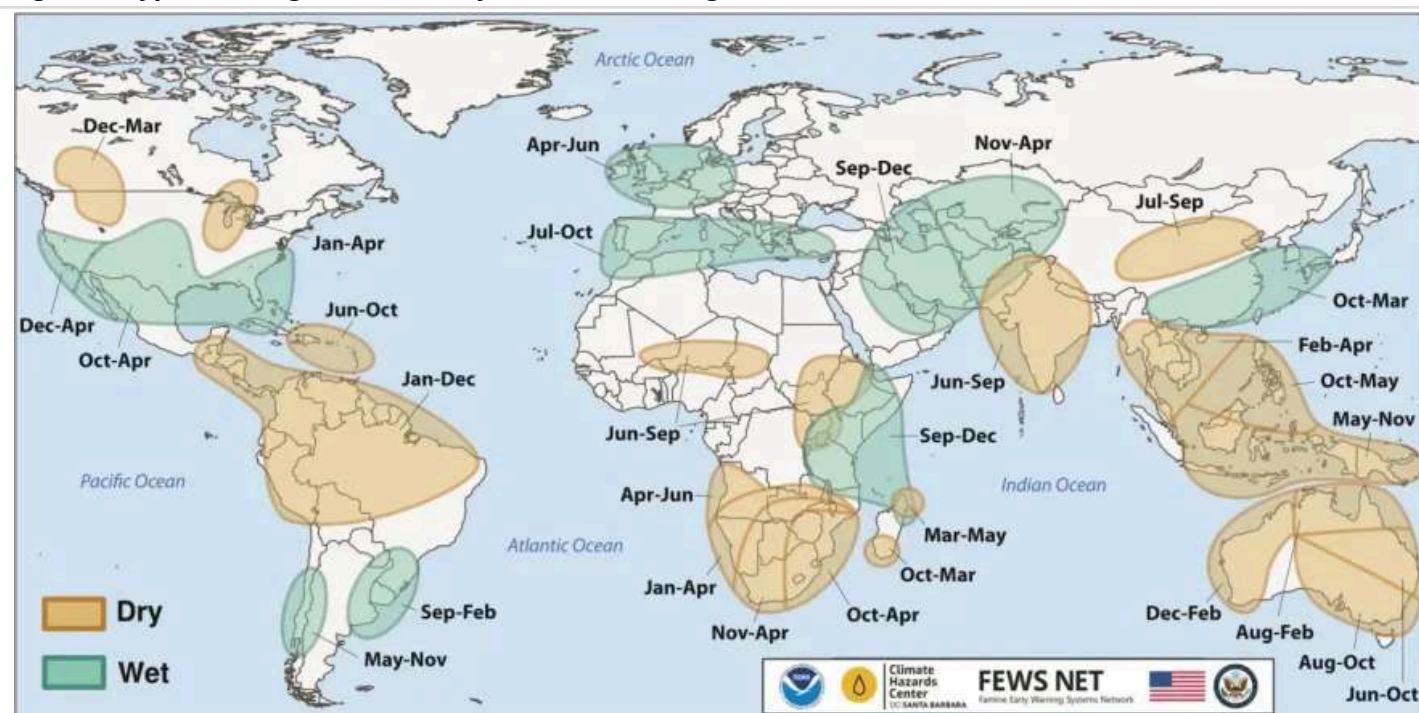
The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is a naturally occurring phenomenon involving periodic changes in sea surface temperatures and atmospheric circulation across the tropical Pacific Ocean. It has three phases: neutral, El Niño, and La Niña.

Neutral Phase: Easterly trade winds push warm surface water toward the western Pacific, while cooler deep water rises in the central and eastern Pacific. This creates warmer, wetter conditions in the west and cooler conditions in the central and eastern Pacific.

El Niño Phase: Weaker trade winds allow warm surface water to shift eastward, reducing cold-water upwelling and weakening the east-west temperature gradient. Rainfall consequently shifts eastward, increasing precipitation in the central Pacific and reducing it in the western Pacific.

La Niña Phase: Stronger trade winds enhance this pattern, increasing rainfall in the western Pacific and bringing drier conditions to the central and eastern Pacific.

Figure 1. Typical timing of wet and dry conditions during El Niño events

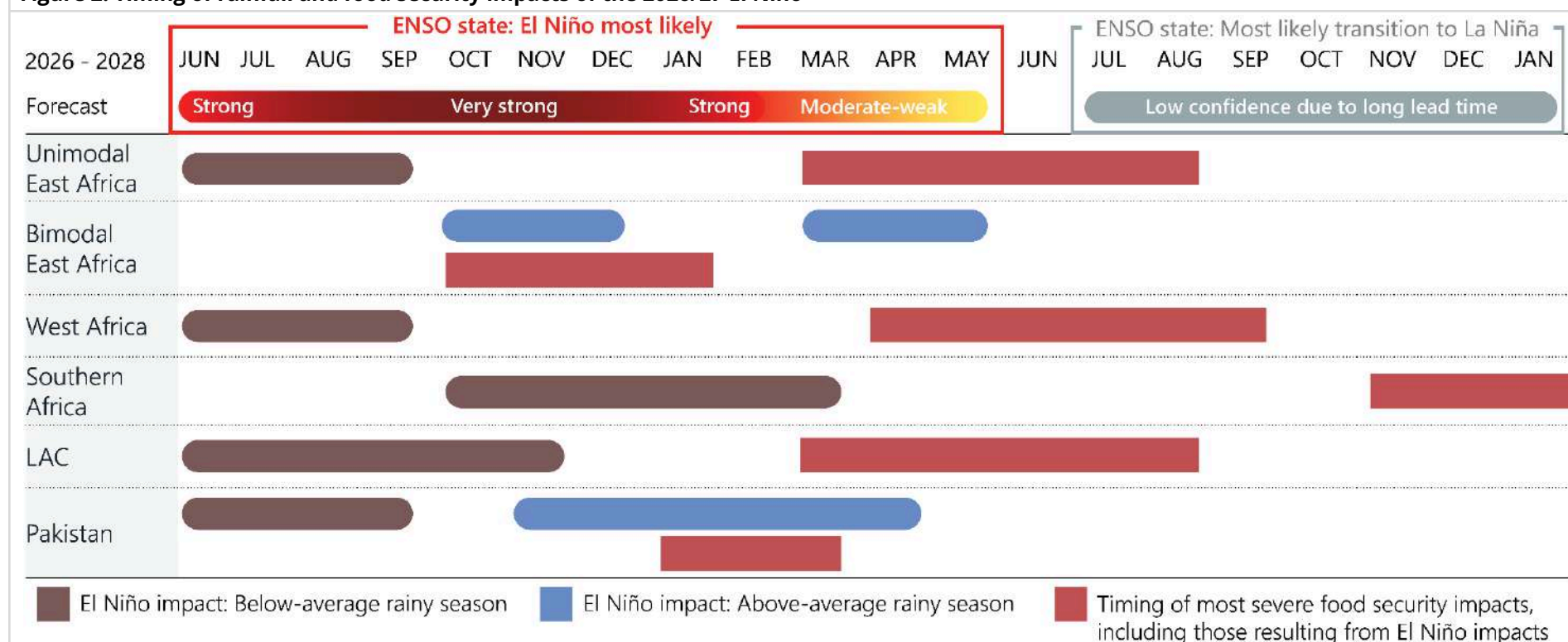


Source: Climate Hazards Center-University of California at Santa Barbara (CHC-UCSB) and NOAA

The timing of rainfall impacts versus the timing of food security impacts

The timing of El Niño impacts can be seen by examining the El Niño forecast alongside the relevant seasonal calendars across FEWS NET's geographies. It is important to recognize that the timing of El Niño-related rainfall impacts does not necessarily correspond to the timing of associated food security impacts. While rainy season performance is critical because of its effects on food and income sources, many of those effects are often not fully realized until months later. For example, agricultural labor opportunities occur during the growing season and can be affected immediately by poor rainfall. However, other impacts, such as harvests (sale and purchase), livestock productivity (births and milk), and livestock sales, can occur after the rainy season has ended. When El Niño negatively affects these food and income sources, early depletion of food stocks can lead to an earlier or more severe lean season. As a result, the most significant food security outcomes often emerge during the subsequent lean season that follows an El Niño, rather than during the period when El Niño is occurring (Figure 2). Two important implications follow for governments and humanitarian actors: first, an El Niño forecast should be viewed as an important early warning signal that allows for humanitarian food assistance response before the resulting acute food insecurity materializes. Second, the dissipation of El Niño does not mean its food security impacts have ended. In many cases, the most severe consequences may only be emerging.

Figure 2. Timing of rainfall and food security impacts of the 2026/27 El Niño



Source: FEWS NET using FEWS NET and NOAA data

High

FEWS NET's level of concern for acute food insecurity in unimodal East Africa as a result of the El Niño is high

Unimodal East Africa

Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Karamoja, Uganda, during the June to September 2026 rainy season

Across Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda's Karamoja Region, the June-September 2026 rainfall season has been substantially [below average](#), characterized by delayed and erratic rainfall onset and prolonged dry spells. The most severe deficits have occurred across northern Sudan, where rainfall totals have been 45 percent of normal or less, with similarly pronounced deficits across Karamoja and parts of Ethiopia. Greater Upper Nile and Central and Eastern Equatoria in South Sudan have recorded rainfall totals below 60 percent of average, while nearly all areas across unimodal East Africa have experienced deficits to some degree (Figure 3). In South Sudan and Karamoja, these deficits are contributing to the [driest year on record](#). Rainfall deficits have also extended to typical surplus-producing areas of unimodal western and southwestern Kenya, which is anticipated to drive increased import demand and exert upward price pressure, though this is [not resulting in notable concern for acute food insecurity](#).

Across much of Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Karamoja, El Niño-related rainfall deficits will contribute to reduced crop production and livestock productivity and higher food prices. This shock will come on top of the effects of ongoing conflict in many areas of South Sudan and Sudan, and parts of Ethiopia.

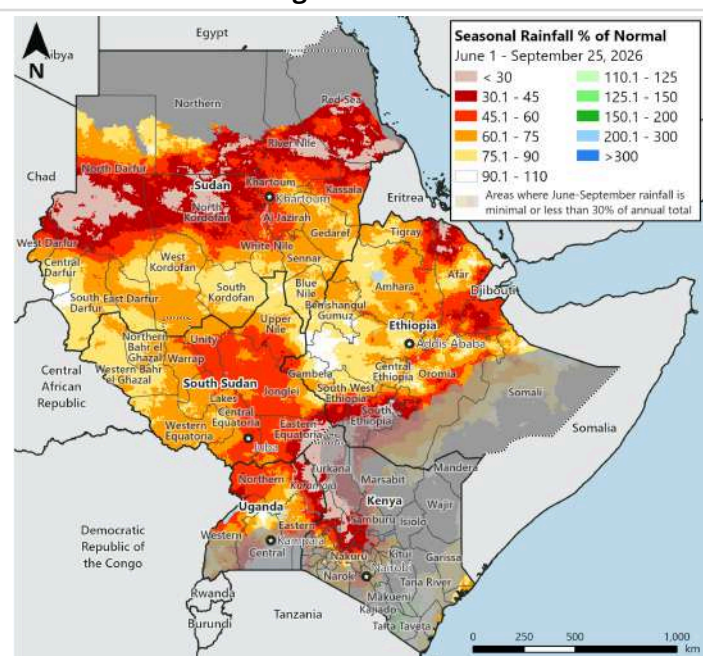
Acute food insecurity will be most severe between

March and August 2027 across these countries. Concern is the highest where El Niño is a compounding shock, specifically in South Sudan and Sudan where the El Niño-induced rainfall deficits are interacting with persistent conflict.

- In **Ethiopia**, El Niño-related *kiremt* rainfall deficits will significantly reduce 2026 *meher* production and associated agricultural labor income, as well as pasture conditions. Localized conflict and high food costs will also contribute to acute food insecurity. Needs will be most severe between January and March in northern pastoral areas, between March and May in *belg*-producing areas, and between June and August in northern *meher*-producing areas. Countrywide, the highest needs are expected from June to August 2027.
- In **South Sudan**, El Niño-related reductions in the 2026 harvest will deepen food consumption deficits among a population that has repeatedly faced acute food insecurity due to prolonged conflict and recurrent, severe flooding from 2019 to 2025. The most severe impacts of these combined shocks are expected in Jonglei and southern Upper Nile. Needs will be highest and most severe between May and September 2027.
- In **Sudan**, El Niño-related rainfall deficits will exacerbate conflict-driven reductions in 2026/27 agricultural production, with the most severe losses expected in already heavily conflict-affected areas with high levels of displacement in North Darfur and Greater Kordofan, and expanding into additional areas, particularly in northern South Darfur and East Darfur. Needs will be highest and most severe between June and September 2027.
- In **Karamoja of Uganda**, needs will be primarily driven by El Niño-related below-average rains that constrain agricultural production and labor income. Needs in the region will peak between March and June of 2027.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting for [Ethiopia](#), [South Sudan](#), [Sudan](#), and [Uganda](#).

Figure 3. June to September 2026 rainfall as a percent of the 1981-2025 average



Source: FEWS NET using CHC/U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) data

**Moderate
to high**

FEWS NET's level of concern for acute food insecurity in bimodal East Africa as a result of the El Niño is moderate to high

Bimodal East Africa

South and southeastern (S/SE) Ethiopia, bimodal Kenya, and Somalia during the October to December 2026 and March to May 2027 rainy seasons

Across the Greater Horn of Africa, the [El Niño – in combination with the positive IOD](#) – is forecast to bring above-average rainfall. Based on analog years of a strong/very strong El Niño and positive IOD, the region should see rains at or above 150 percent of average in many areas (Figure 4). While above-average rains will benefit many areas through favorable crop production and improved pasture, browse, and water availability, strong El Niño events also typically bring heavy rainfall and flooding in the eastern Horn. Concern is highest for areas along the Shabelle and Juba rivers in Somalia and, to a lesser degree, low-lying agropastoral areas of southern Somalia and areas of Kenya and S/SE Ethiopia, where flooding is likely to cause crop and livestock losses and displace populations. A key factor behind FEWS NET's concern for this region is that flood-related impacts will occur in areas still recovering from consecutive seasons of drought; poor households have reduced coping capacity, leaving them vulnerable to another major weather-related shock.

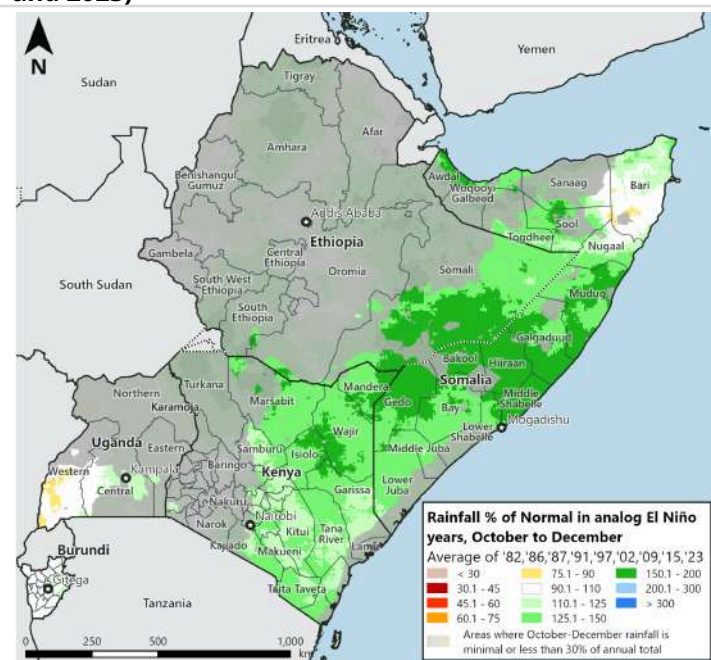
Given [forecasts](#) that El Niño conditions will persist into the March to May 2027 season, above-average rainfall is also expected across much of the Greater Horn of Africa during the first rainy season of 2027. However, as El Niño is forecast to weaken and the IOD to dissipate by this time, rainfall anomalies are expected to be less pronounced than during the October to December 2026 season. As a result, while favorable rainfall is likely to support crop and livestock production in many areas, the risk of widespread, severe flooding is expected to be lower than during late 2026.

Across these countries, where acute food insecurity will be **most severe in late 2026 and early 2027**, El Niño-related rainfall anomalies are expected to be an important compounding shock, particularly in Somalia and parts of Ethiopia and Kenya. In Burundi and Uganda, where historical analysis indicates rainfall anomalies are unlikely to be as strong as in the eastern Horn, acute food insecurity will remain more driven by economic pressures, refugee-related burdens, and localized production shocks.

- In **Kenya** and **S/SE Ethiopia**, heavy rains are likely to support ongoing recovery from the 2020-2023 drought. However, floods are likely to drive needs in [select areas](#). Food assistance needs in Kenya will peak from October to November. In S/SE Ethiopia, very few areas depend on crop production; needs will peak from January to March when livestock-derived food and income are seasonally lower.
- In **Somalia**, prior drought and conflict remain the primary drivers of food insecurity. El Niño-related rainfall will boost crop production and rangeland regeneration in many areas, but pose severe risks to crop-dependent agropastoral and riverine areas in the south, with needs peaking between October and December 2026. While not the most likely scenario, the potential for flooding on a scale similar to the extreme levels observed in the 1997/98 season underpins FEWS NET's assessment of a [risk of Famine \(IPC Phase 5\)](#) in southern Somalia.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting for [Ethiopia](#), [Kenya](#), and [Somalia](#).

Figure 4. Historical October to December rainfall as a percent of the 1981-2025 average in very strong El Niño years (1982, 1986, 1987, 1991, 1997, 2002, 2009, 2015, and 2023)



Source: FEWS NET using CHC/USGS data

Moderate FEWS NET's level of concern for acute food insecurity in West Africa as a result of the El Niño is moderate

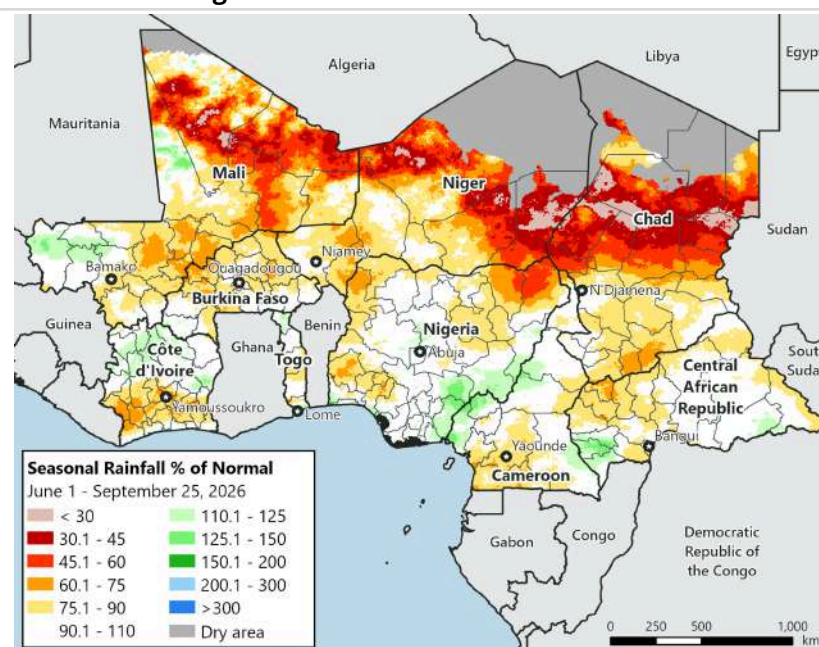
West Africa

Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger during the June to September 2026 season

El Niño's impact on West Africa is typically concentrated in localized areas in the central and eastern Sahel, namely northern Mali, northeastern Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and northern Burkina Faso. The main 2026 rainy season has been uneven across these countries, [with rainfall totals more than 40 percent below average](#) in some locations, a delayed onset, erratic temporal distribution, and prolonged dry spells (Figure 5).

Rainfall deficits have been most severe in the [Sahelian zones](#) of Chad, Niger, and Mali, while moderate deficits are also observed in Burkina Faso and northeast Nigeria. Impacts on crop development and pasture conditions have been particularly pronounced in Chad, while impacts in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have been more moderate. Seasonal performance has been more favorable across the Sudano-Guinean zones of West Africa.

Figure 5. June to September 2026 rainfall as a percent of the 1981-2025 average



Source: FEWS NET using CHC/USGS data

Across West Africa, **acute food insecurity will be most severe between March and September 2027**, depending on the livelihood zone and seasonal calendar. Needs will be driven primarily by conflict, displacement, and economic pressures across most of the region. El Niño-related production and income losses will compound these pressures in affected areas, with the most significant contribution to acute food insecurity expected in Chad. West Africa also faces an external market risk from its reliance on imported rice, as El Niño-related production losses in India and Thailand or renewed Indian export restrictions could place upward pressure on regional rice prices.

- In **Burkina Faso**, needs will peak between June and August 2027, driven primarily by conflict and poor economic conditions. El Niño-related rainfall deficits, erratic rainfall distribution, and associated crop losses will contribute to overall needs.
- In **Chad**, needs will be highest in pastoral areas between March and June 2027, and in cropping areas between June and August. Severe rainfall deficits have reduced agricultural production and incomes, increasing needs among local populations already facing high food prices. The most severe impacts are expected in the east, which hosts large numbers of Sudanese refugees, and Lac Province, which is affected by conflict.
- In **Mali**, conflict will remain the primary driver of acute food insecurity, but El Niño-related production losses and reduced agricultural income among poor households will also play a role. Needs will be highest in pastoral areas between April and July 2027, and in cropping areas between June and September.
- In **Niger**, conflict will also remain the principal driver of needs, but delayed or absent planting in areas with significant rainfall deficits – as well as isolated flood incidents – will contribute to acute food insecurity. Needs will be highest in pastoral areas between April and July 2027, and in cropping areas between June and September.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting for [Burkina Faso](#), [Chad](#), [Mali](#), and [Niger](#).

High

FEWS NET's level of concern for acute food insecurity in Southern Africa as a result of the El Niño is high

Southern Africa

Angola, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe during the October 2026 to March 2027 rainy season

[Forecasts by USGS and NOAA](#) indicate that the October 2026 to March 2027 rainfall season will be characterized by a late onset, below-average rainfall, prolonged dry spells, and above-average temperatures across much of Southern Africa, driven by the very strong El Niño event. The areas with the most consistent historical El Niño signal for dryness, and thus of greatest concern, include Zimbabwe, southern and central Mozambique, and southern Malawi, southern Zambia, southern Angola, southern Madagascar, and Lesotho (Figure 6).

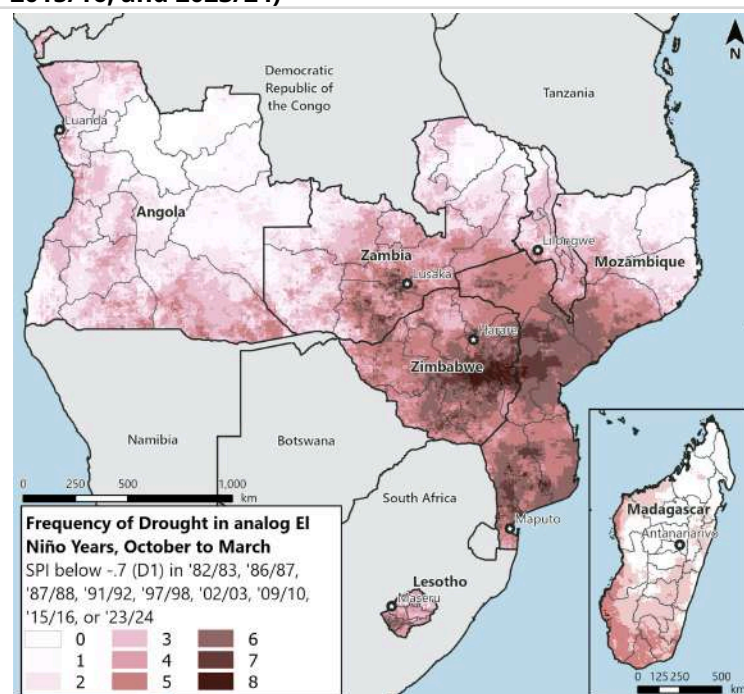
The strong historical relationship between El Niño and dryness, together with forecasts that this El Niño could rival the strength of the 1997/98 and [2015/16](#) events, elevates the risk of widespread drought. The below-average rainfall season is expected to substantially affect agricultural production and broader livelihoods by constraining planting and crop establishment, pasture and water availability for livestock, and agricultural labor opportunities. Lower water availability would also limit hydropower generation and domestic water access, with cascading effects on household food access and utilization.

Southern Africa enters the 2026/27 season following a cereal harvest nearly 10 percent above the five-year average, with strong maize harvests in South Africa and Zambia – key regional suppliers – supporting carryover stocks and buffering near-term supply and price pressures. This differs from 2015/16, when many areas entered the El Niño-driven drought following a poor preceding harvest. However, a below-average 2027 harvest would tighten regional supply as carryover stocks decline, with resulting price pressures compounded by already high food, fuel, and fertilizer prices.

Across these countries, acute food insecurity will be most severe during the November 2027-March 2028 lean season, well beyond the end of the rainfall shock. FEWS NET's current projection period for subnational acute food insecurity outcomes extends through January 2027, but historical analog events – and particularly the 2015/16 El Niño event – provide relatively high confidence that food assistance needs in Southern Africa are likely to increase substantially as 2027 progresses. An atypically early onset of the lean season is possible in some areas, and needs during the 2027/28 lean season will likely rise well above current levels and those of recent years. While the precise magnitude and geographic distribution of need will depend on the distribution and severity of rainfall deficits, historical trends suggest widespread Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are likely.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting for: [Angola](#), [Lesotho](#), [Madagascar](#), [Malawi](#), [Mozambique](#), [Zambia](#), and [Zimbabwe](#).

Figure 6. Frequency of drought, October to March rainy season, during strong and very strong El Niño years (1982/83, 1986–1988, 1991/92, 1997/98, 2002/03, 2009/10, 2015/16, and 2023/24)



Source: FEWS NET using CHC/USGS data

Moderate

FEWS NET's level of concern for acute food insecurity in Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of the El Niño is moderate

Latin America and the Caribbean

Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, and Honduras during the April to November 2026 rainy season

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, El Niño is driving a drier and more erratic 2026 rainy season. The deepest deficits are [observed in the Central America Dry Corridor](#), while rainfall in Colombia, Venezuela, and Haiti has been spatially and temporally uneven (Figure 7). Across much of the region, above-average temperatures and dry spells during critical crop development periods have increased soil moisture deficits and water stress, reducing rainfed staple grain production among small-scale producers. Localized crop losses and livestock deterioration have been reported, especially in the Dry Corridor and La Guajira in Colombia. At the same time, episodic heavy rainfall in parts of Guatemala, Honduras, and Colombia has led to crop damage.

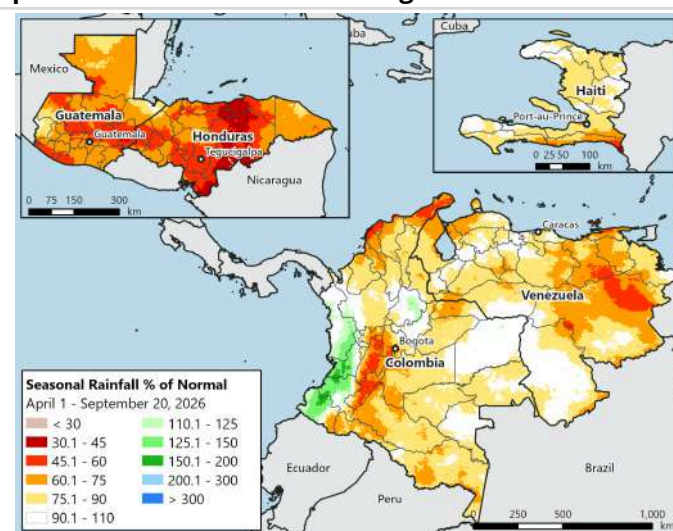
With a very strong El Niño forecast to continue into 2027, below-average and erratic rainfall will likely persist through the remainder of the 2026 rainy season, with the strongest deficits observed [in the Dry Corridor](#). In areas that experience notable deficits, below-average crop production will increase poor rural households' reliance on markets at a time of elevated staple food, fuel, and transportation prices. However, in Venezuela, the impacts are limited; aggregate production is recovering compared to recent years, and production losses are highly localized among rainfed small-scale producers.

Across the region, **acute food insecurity will generally be most severe during lean season periods from March to August 2027**. El Niño-related rainfall deficits will be the primary driver of acute food insecurity in Central America, while other drivers remain more significant in Haiti and northern South America.

- In **Colombia**, El Niño's impact on agricultural production and acute food insecurity is most substantial in La Guajira. Elsewhere, El Niño-related losses are less severe and secondary to the impacts of localized conflict, flooding, and other factors. Needs will peak in the coastal and northern regions in early 2027, in the Amazonía Region between April and June, and in the interior regions between June and July.
- In **Guatemala**, consecutive years of prior weather shocks combined with current El Niño-related rainfall deficits will drive crop losses and reduced yields among subsistence farmers, particularly in the Dry Corridor, Alta Verapaz, and Western Highlands. Needs will be highest between May and August 2027.
- In **Haiti**, gang violence will remain the primary driver of acute food insecurity, compounded by high fuel, freight, and transportation costs. El Niño-related rainfall deficits will likely further contribute to reductions in the fall and winter 2026 harvests and spring 2027 harvest. Needs will be highest between February and June 2027.
- In **Honduras**, El Niño-related deficits are a principal driver of acute food insecurity, reducing 2026 harvests and crop labor income among poor farmers in the Dry Corridor. Insufficient imports are tightening maize supply, while high fuel and fertilizer costs are increasing production and transportation costs. Needs will peak between April and August 2027.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET's country-specific reporting for: [Colombia](#), [Guatemala](#), [Haiti](#), and [Honduras](#).

Figure 7. April to September 2026 rainfall as a percent of the 1981-2025 average



Source: FEWS NET using CHC/USGS data

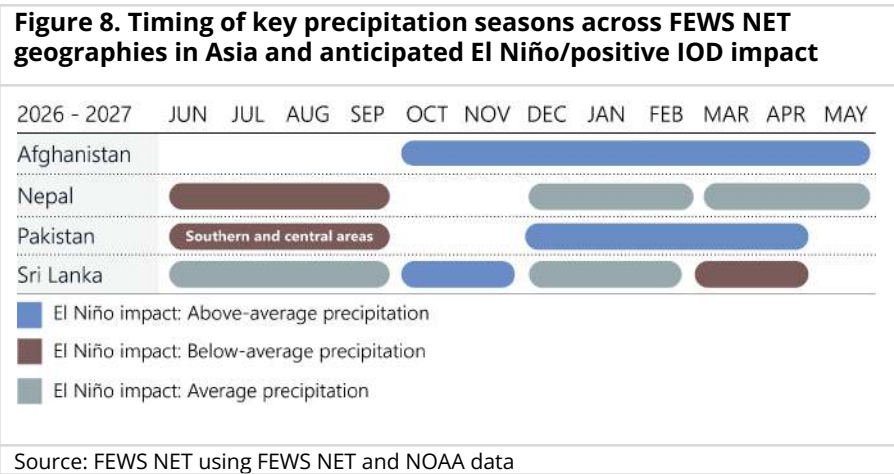
Moderate

FEWS NET’s level of concern for acute food insecurity in Pakistan is moderate

Pakistan

June to September 2026 rainy season

El Niño's impacts on rainfall across Asia are complex and vary by location, season, and monsoon cycle (Figure 8). El Niño is generally associated with suppressed rainfall during the May to September season across parts of Asia, while it tends to drive above-average precipitation during the October to April season in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nepal and Sri Lanka typically experience more mixed rainfall patterns, with the direction of El Niño's influence varying by season, resulting in below-average rainfall during some periods and average or above-average for others.



Amid its mixed influence in the region, El Niño is expected to have a relatively limited impact on acute food insecurity, and in some cases will likely contribute to improved food security outcomes. In Nepal, although most areas received [below-average June-October monsoon rainfall](#), more favorable upcoming seasons will drive improvements, and needs will overall be driven by livelihood losses due to flooding and landslides not directly associated with El Niño. In Sri Lanka, although localized below-average rainfall and extreme heat have been observed in the dry zone, rainfall has been average nationally. In Afghanistan, forecast above-average precipitation may result in some flooding, but is overall likely to support a favorable 2027 agricultural season. The clearest negative impacts are observed in Pakistan, where [June-September rainfall was significantly below average](#) across much of Sindh, Balochistan, southern Punjab, and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

In Pakistan, acute food insecurity will be most severe from January to March 2027, and El Niño is a key driver. In Pakistan, El Niño-related rainfall deficits are expected to reduce *kharif* production, and the resulting impact on agricultural labor income upon which poor and landless rural households depend will contribute notably to acute food insecurity, alongside high food prices and localized conflict. El Niño's favorable influence on the subsequent *rabi* wheat season is expected to support improved production and mitigate outcomes, but only partially.

For more information on the rainy season, its implications for food security, and projected acute food insecurity outcomes resulting from the combined effects of El Niño and other ongoing and anticipated shocks, see FEWS NET’s country-specific reporting for: [Pakistan](#).

How El Niño can increase long-term vulnerability to subsequent shocks

A population’s risk of acute food insecurity is rarely limited to a single shock or a specific moment in time. Rather, it operates as a cycle in which shocks can compound (or contract) over time. When a shock is not fully mitigated through interventions, or when households do not have sufficient time or resources to recover, losses of income and productive assets can erode their coping capacity and increase vulnerability to subsequent shocks. As a result, households enter the next shock with fewer resources and options to protect their food consumption and livelihoods.

This dynamic is important for understanding both FEWS NET’s level of concern about El Niño-related acute food insecurity across regions and vulnerability to subsequent shocks well after El Niño dissipates. For example, in the Horn of Africa, [El Niño is expected to contribute to above-average October to December rainfall](#), which will likely support crop and livestock production in many areas and lead to improvements in food security. However, this potential benefit does not diminish concern in areas where preceding drought has depleted soil moisture and led to successive crop failure and widespread losses in productive assets, notably livestock. Heavy rainfall will also increase flood risk in riverine and low-lying areas,

potentially causing additional crop and livestock losses, displacement, and market disruption. Moreover, households that have lost livestock during previous droughts may be unable to fully capitalize on improved pasture and water availability.

Understanding this distinction is also critical to understanding the longer-term implications of the current El Niño, as these effects can persist long after the El Niño event itself has ended. Substantial losses of income and productive assets can prolong the time horizon for household recovery and leave populations more vulnerable to subsequent hazards. Without a sufficiently robust response that addresses not only immediate consumption needs but also prevents livelihood deterioration, the food security consequences of this El Niño could persist for years.

One analysis that sheds light on these potential long-term impacts is the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) [Rural Investment and Policy Analysis \(RIAPA\) data and modeling system](#), a recursive-dynamic Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) model that simulates the economy-wide effects of shocks, policies, and investments. The model can help illustrate how weather shocks may affect economic growth, agricultural production, household incomes, and poverty over time, while also highlighting the uncertainty surrounding such outcomes. [IFPRI modeled](#) crop-yield shocks based on Malawi's experience during the five strongest El Niño events since 1980 and layered these onto the fuel and fertilizer price shock. Combined GDP losses ranged from 1.0 to 7.0 percent across the scenarios, averaging 2.9 percent. In the average scenario, nearly 500,000 additional people fell into poverty.

While such modeling does not project future acute food insecurity outcomes, it provides important insight into conditions that may increase longer-term risk. While increases in poverty should not be interpreted as a direct measure of acute food insecurity, it indicates that a larger share of households may lose income and productive assets, reducing their capacity to cope with future shocks. Furthermore, lower crop production also raises domestic food prices and import requirements, compounding the effect on household purchasing power. At a macro level, economic losses shape the broader environment within which households manage risk and recover from shocks. Declines in economic growth can weaken a country's ability to respond to populations in need, constrain investments in social protection and essential services, limit the ability to import needed commodities, and reduce broader investment in economic development and recovery. El Niño's long-term impacts to food security depend not only on the event's direct and immediate impacts, but also on past and ongoing shocks that define populations' starting point, and whether recovery is sufficiently supported before the next shock.

Implications to global food availability and staple food prices

Global output of maize, wheat, and rice has changed little on balance relative to long-term production trends during strong and very strong El Niño years since 1980, according to [USDA](#) data (Table 1). El Niño has historically driven [reduced harvests](#) for a group of major exporting producers, including South Africa (maize) and Australia (wheat). However, [gains in other regions](#), including [maize in Argentina](#), have partly offset these losses. When measured against the preceding production year, global output fell by at most 3.9 percent in an El Niño year. The largest year-on-year decline since 1980 came in 1983/84, a year of a fading El Niño and transition to La Niña. Importantly, a U.S. [acreage-reduction program](#) and drought that summer cut in U.S. maize output in half. These historical patterns indicate that agroclimatological conditions are not the only force behind the largest swings in global production.

Table 1. Change in production in strong and very strong El Niño events since 1980 among key exporters, percent from normal (trend-expected) production

Exporter and crop	1982/83	1986–88		1991/92	1997/98	2009/10	2015/16	2023/24	Average
		1986/87	1987/88						
Exporters exposed to losses									
South Africa, maize	−52.0	−18.1	−14.3	−64.3	−18.0	+17.7	−40.0	−21.2	−27.7
Australia, wheat	−40.0	+2.0	−17.6	−33.8	+7.7	+1.3	−12.0	−22.2	−15.3
Indonesia and Malaysia, palm oil	0.0	−4.8	−7.4	−4.9	−12.3	+2.8	−4.7	−2.6	−4.0
Thailand, rice	−6.6	−0.4	−5.1	−0.1	+4.1	+5.9	−20.2	−1.5	−3.0
India, rice	−16.9	−4.6	−14.4	+1.5	+1.6	−8.0	−6.0	−2.8	−5.7
Exporter whose output gains on average									
Argentina, maize	+8.5	+6.3	−0.2	+9.3	+49.9	+6.8	+1.0	−1.0	+11.1

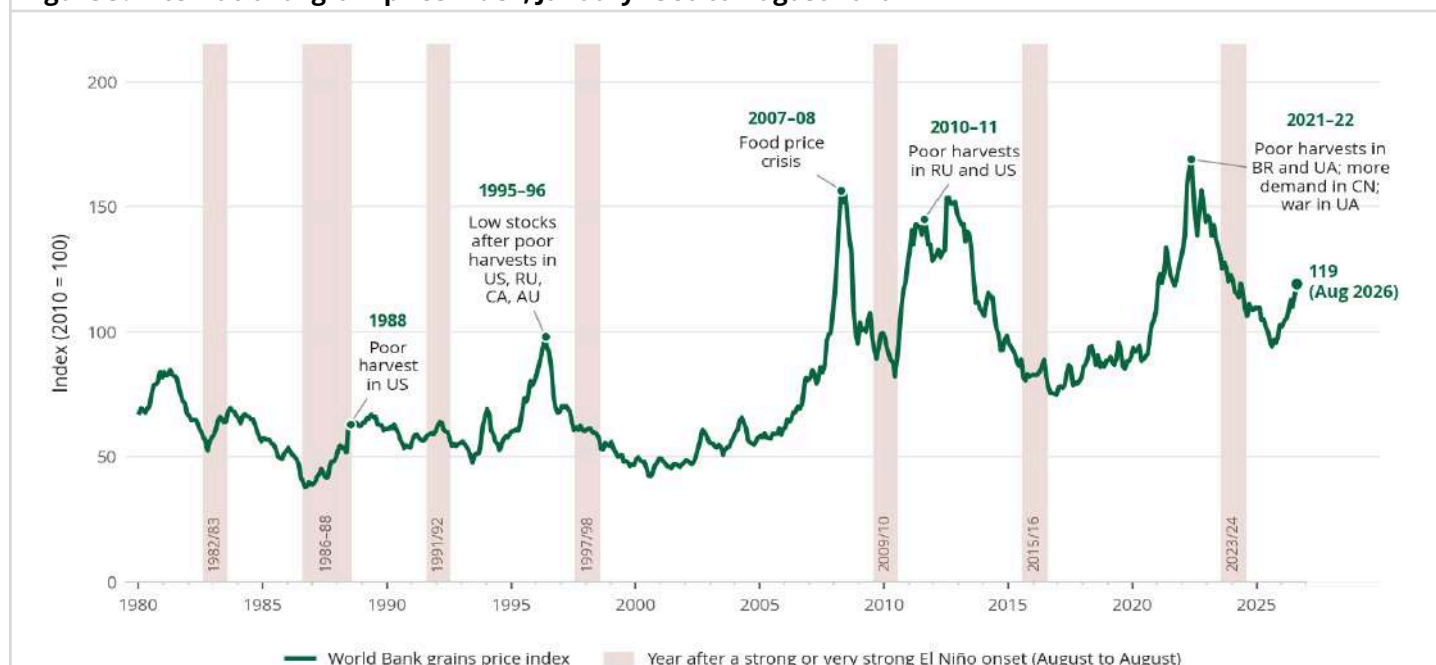
Exporter and crop	1982/83	1986–88		1991/92	1997/98	2009/10	2015/16	2023/24	Average
		1986/87	1987/88						
World, wheat, maize, and rice	+3.8	+4.0	–1.8	–0.2	+3.4	+1.2	+0.2	–0.6	+1.3

Source: FEWS NET using [USDA](#) and [NOAA](#) data.

Note: Each cell is the percent difference between production and normal production in the crop year of the event. Normal production is the level a crop's long-run growth trend predicts for that year, estimated from up to seven years before and after it, with the strong and very strong El Niño years left out. Measuring against it keeps a crop's steady growth from hiding a shortfall. 1986/87 and 1987/88 are the two crop years of one event (1986–1988). The average is taken per event across the seven events, with 1986–1988 counted as the mean of its two crop years. Orange marks output below normal production, and green marks output above. Darker shading marks a difference of 5 percent or more, and the darkest marks 20 percent or more.

Because many drivers influence global commodity markets at any given time, international grain prices have not followed a clear pattern after El Niño events (Figure 9). Maize and wheat [export prices](#) declined or changed little following the El Niño events in 1991, 1997, 2015, and 2023. Rice prices rose by 13 percent after the 1997 onset and 11 percent after the 2015 onset. The largest grain price increases after El Niño onsets, in 1983, 1988, and 2010/11 coincided with other major production shocks or policy responses. In 1983, drought and a U.S. [acreage-reduction program](#) halved the U.S. maize crop. In 1988, [the worst U.S. drought](#) since the mid-1930s cut the U.S. maize crop by about a third, after a [weak 1987 monsoon](#) had already cut rice production prospects in many Asian countries. In Russia, drought cut the [2010 grain crop](#) by more than a third, prompting [export bans](#) for wheat, maize, and other grains from August 15, 2010. In 1995/96, the U.S. maize crop declined about 25 percent from 1994, which compounded the impacts of poor wheat harvests in Russia, Canada, and Australia. In 2021/22, the main drivers of grain shortfalls were [smaller maize crops in Brazil and Ukraine, a spike in Chinese import demand for maize](#), and the onset of the war in Ukraine.

Figure 9. International grain price index, January 1980 to August 2026



Source: FEWS NET using [World Bank](#) Pink Sheet (September 2, 2026) and [NOAA](#) data. Labeled price spike drivers adapted from [Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City](#), USDA ERS (2009 and 2011), [Headey \(2011\)](#), World Bank (April 2021 and April 2022).

Country codes: AU Australia, BR Brazil, CA Canada, CN China, RU Russia, UA Ukraine, US United States.

Trade and price risks are concentrated among a few major exporters and import-dependent regions

Global production and markets are essential to monitor for price and trade drivers. However, acute food insecurity analysis requires focus on regional agricultural production losses that may not be offset by broader global availability. Production losses among major regional suppliers can tighten local and regional markets, raise prices, and increase import requirements in food-deficit countries, particularly where those countries depend on a small number of exporters.

Southern Africa is particularly exposed to El Niño-related maize losses because regional deficit countries depend heavily on imports from [South Africa](#) and, in surplus years, Zambia. In strong and average production years, it is the [main source](#)

of maize for the region's deficit countries. Since 1980, production in South Africa has been [14 to 64 percent](#) below normal in every strong and very strong El Niño event, except 2009/10, when it was 18 percent above. During the 2015/16 event, drought cut South Africa's maize production to 40 percent below normal, and its white maize price reached a [record high](#) in early 2016. This diverged sharply from world food prices, with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index then at its [lowest level](#) since 2009. Zambia also exports maize to the [DRC, Malawi, and other neighbors](#) in surplus years. Its crop came in [38 to 60 percent](#) below normal production in 1991/92, 1997/98, and 2023/24, but more than 40 percent above it in 1986–1988 and 2009/10. It restricted maize exports [from April 2016](#) to April 2017, with a full halt from [mid-October 2016](#), and [from April 2023](#) to [August 2025](#).

For wheat-importing countries, El Niño-related production losses in Australia can tighten supply from a major global exporter even when overall world wheat availability remains adequate. Australia typically supplies [about 11 percent](#) of global wheat exports, for example, supplying [more than a third](#) of Yemen's wheat imports in 2024/25. El Niño often brings drier winters and springs to [eastern Australia](#), and wheat production has averaged [15 percent](#) below normal production in the strong and very strong El Niño events since 1980, with shortfalls of 12 to 40 percent, although production was near or above normal in 1986/87, 1997/98, and 2009/10.

Global rice markets are especially sensitive to India because El Niño can affect its production while domestic price pressures can also trigger export restrictions that amplify international price movements. El Niño tends to weaken India's [June-September monsoon](#), which waters the main rice crop. India's rice crop came in [well below normal production](#) in 1982/83 (17 percent), 1987/88 (14 percent), and 2009/10 (8 percent), all strong or very strong El Niño years. In 1997/98 and 2015/16, it came in [2 percent above and 6 percent below](#) normal production, respectively. Only about [12 percent](#) of world rice production is traded, and India supplies on average around 40 percent of world exports. As a result, changes to India's export policy can sharply move international prices. Export restrictions by India and Vietnam were a major driver of the [2007/08 rice price spike](#), even as [world production was rising](#). An [IFPRI](#) study of export restrictions from 2007 to 2023 finds that domestic food inflation predicts such restrictions better than world prices do: India's restrictions of 2022/23 followed increases in its domestic food prices. In July 2023, amid an uneven monsoon season, India banned exports of non-basmati white rice [to curb domestic rice prices](#), which had risen 11.5 percent in a year, despite [its record 2022/23 harvest](#). India lifted its 2022/23 restrictions on non-basmati white and broken rice exports between September 2024 and [March 2025](#).

West Africa is particularly exposed to changes in Indian rice supply and export policy because many countries in the region rely heavily on Indian imports. Among the nine West African countries that report comparable rice import volumes by weight for both 2023 and 2024, India supplied [about 60 percent](#) of imports in 2023 and about 44 percent in 2024, while its restrictions on non-basmati white and broken rice were in force for most of that year. Nigeria, the region's [largest rice importer](#), reports almost none of its rice imports by weight, so its trade data are not comparable to the rest of the region. Nigeria prohibits rice imports across its land borders, but imported rice reaches it informally through neighboring countries, including Benin. India is the main source of its parboiled rice, and lower-priced milled rice also arrives informally from India and Thailand.

Thailand, the [world's third-largest](#) rice exporter, introduces an additional source of El Niño-related rice market risk because drought can reduce its exportable surplus at the same time that other major suppliers face production or policy constraints. [El Niño-related drought](#) in 2015 and 2016 reduced Thailand's irrigation supplies and rice area. The irrigated off-season crop, which supplies much of Thailand's [exportable surplus](#), is the most exposed. Thailand's rice crop came in [20 percent below normal](#) production in 2015/16, its largest shortfall in a strong or very strong El Niño year since 1980. In the other El Niño events, output stayed within 7 percent of normal production. Among the same nine West African countries, Thailand was the second-largest source of imported rice in 2024, its share rising from about 9 percent in 2023 to [about 21 percent in 2024](#).

El Niño also poses risks beyond staple grains: production losses in Indonesia and Malaysia can raise vegetable oil import costs across sub-Saharan Africa, where palm oil dominates edible oil imports in many countries. The two countries [supply 87 percent](#) of world palm oil exports. Their combined output has [averaged 4 percent below](#) normal production in the strong and very strong El Niño events since 1980, with the largest shortfall, 12 percent, in 1997/98. In Malaysia, [losses can begin within months](#) of an El Niño dry spell and continue for [up to two years](#). In Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, and Senegal, palm oil made up [72 to 95 percent](#) of vegetable oil imports by value in 2023. In 2025, higher costs for edible oils and other foods raised sub-Saharan Africa's food import bill [by 4.8 billion USD](#), even as its cereal import bill fell.

Current market status and prices by crop

The early and potential impacts of El Niño on crop production are just one of several drivers of international grain prices in 2026 and heading into 2027. Although all three staple grains had record global production in the 2025/26 marketing year, meaning supplies entered the El Niño period from a place of strength, 2026 has also brought upward price pressures from rising crude oil prices and volatile fertilizer prices due to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, as well as shipping constraints related to conflicts around Bab al-Mandeb and the Black Sea.

International grain prices are generally higher than a year ago. [In August 2026](#), U.S. wheat export prices were 43 percent higher than in August 2025, with rice and maize up 26 and 21 percent, respectively. Maize and rice were close to their five-year averages. Wheat was [about 10 percent](#) above its five-year average. Part of the year-on-year increase reflects how atypically low prices were in 2025, when world wheat export prices were near five-year lows in [September 2025](#). Wheat and maize prices then rose in three steps, which the available evidence ties mainly to factors other than El Niño. Prices first rebounded through February 2026, on [strong U.S. export demand](#) and [dry weather](#) in the U.S. Plains. U.S. wheat export prices then rose from [258 to 303 USD/metric ton](#) between February and May 2026. The [Agricultural Market Information System \(AMIS\)](#) attributed the March rise partly to surging energy prices as the conflict in the Middle East escalated. The [FAO](#) tied it to drought in the U.S. and to smaller plantings expected in Australia because of higher fertilizer costs. At the time, El Niño was [still only forecast](#), and it tends to bring [more rain](#) to the U.S. southern Plains, where the drought was ongoing. From June to August 2026, wheat rose 15 percent and maize 14 percent. [AMIS](#) ties that rise chiefly to disrupted Black Sea shipments and, for maize, to uncertain U.S. yields. In June, early El Niño signals had [limited impact on maize futures](#). Rice markets, on the other hand, have shown somewhat greater sensitivity to emerging El Niño concerns. The International Grains Council's [rice price index](#) rose 3 percent in August to its highest level since March 2025, which AMIS attributed to concern over El Niño's effect on crops across Asia.

For 2026/27, [USDA](#) projects global production of maize, wheat, and rice at 2.7 percent below last year's, but still the [second-largest crop on record](#). Within that relatively strong global outlook, production is expected to decline in some El Niño-exposed exporters. [USDA](#) forecasts Australia's 2026/27 wheat crop at 14 percent below last year's, after raising its forecast in September. [Australia's agricultural statistics bureau](#) forecasts a 17 percent fall, largely driven by a drop in the area planted of 11 percent. [USDA also forecasts](#) Thailand's 2026/27 rice crop to be 2 percent smaller than the previous year, driven by a decline in the off-season crop harvested in 2027.

India's smaller 2026/27 rice crop is not currently expected to materially constrain exports, but domestic prices remain an important signal to monitor. [USDA](#) projects that India's 2026/27 rice production will decline 4.6 percent (7 million metric tons [MMT]) from last year, the first annual decline in 10 years, due to below-normal and uneven monsoon rainfall. [USDA](#) links the weak August rains to strengthening El Niño conditions. It still expects [record exports of 25 MMT](#), drawing from substantial stock levels. USDA's forecast includes [no export restriction](#), and to date there are no strong market signals indicating an export ban is likely this year. In 2023, [USDA's July forecast](#) put India's 2023/24 exports at 23.0 MMT, and [its August forecast](#) cut them to 19.0 MMT after India's ban on July 20, 2023. At the start of August 2026, India's government held [40.2 MMT of milled rice](#) in reserve, excluding unmilled paddy, about three times its normal [buffer of 13.54 MMT](#). However, India's stocks were also above the buffer norm in [July 2023](#), when rising domestic prices led it to ban exports. [USDA](#) reports that speculation about El Niño has fueled increases in India's [domestic retail rice price](#) in recent months.

Southern Africa's maize harvest depends on the December-to-February core of the rainy season. The regional [climate outlook forum](#) gives high confidence in below-normal rainfall over most of South Africa, Zimbabwe, southern Zambia, and much of Mozambique through February 2027. The region enters the season after a 2026 cereal harvest [nearly 10 percent above the five-year average](#). During the El Niño-related droughts in [2015/16](#) and [2023/24](#), South Africa's white maize price [peaked](#) in early 2016 and January 2025, respectively – about 10 to 20 months after El Niño conditions first emerged. In 1997/98, South Africa's harvest was about a [fifth below average](#), as farmers planted less and dry spells cut yields. If this El Niño results in drought, the 2015/16 and 2023/24 pattern would indicate a likely price peak between about April 2027 and early 2028.

Regions of higher concern for food availability and price shocks

Considering previous production outcomes during El Niño events, current forecasts for 2026/27 agricultural production, and typical trade flow information, several regions are of elevated concern due to potential shocks to food supply and/or prices driven by international market impacts of El Niño.

- In **Southern Africa**, maize, the primary staple across most of the region, is largely supplied by domestic and regional production. Maize production in South Africa has come in [well below normal production](#) in most strong and very strong El Niño events since 1980, and has been a key driver of rising acute food insecurity. Stocks from strong early-2026 maize harvests, particularly in South Africa and Zambia, are expected to buffer regional supply and prices into early 2027. The larger risk is a below-average 2027 harvest. As carryover stocks decline, price pressure would build. Following the same pattern as in 2015/16 and 2023/24, South Africa's white maize price would peak between about April 2027 and early 2028.
- In **West Africa**, a substantial portion of rice, a key staple in many countries, is imported from Asian markets. [India's rice production](#) was well below normal production in 1982/83, 1987/88, and 2009/10, and Thailand's in 2015/16. In July 2023, the Indian export ban was followed by a rapid increase in global prices. Thai 5 percent broken rice rose [16 percent from July to August 2023](#). In most of the West African markets analyzed, retail prices of imported rice held steady through late 2023. Several then rose and, by May 2024, stood 29 percent above their June 2023 level in Dakar and 18 percent above in Cotonou. While India's restrictions were in force, importers turned to Thailand, and its share of their reported rice imports rose from about [9 to 21 percent](#).
- **Yemen** imports a substantial portion of its main staple, wheat, from Australia. Australian wheat production has [averaged 15 percent below normal production](#) in the strong and very strong El Niño events since 1980 (Annex 1). Australia supplied [more than a third](#) of Yemen's wheat imports in 2024/25.

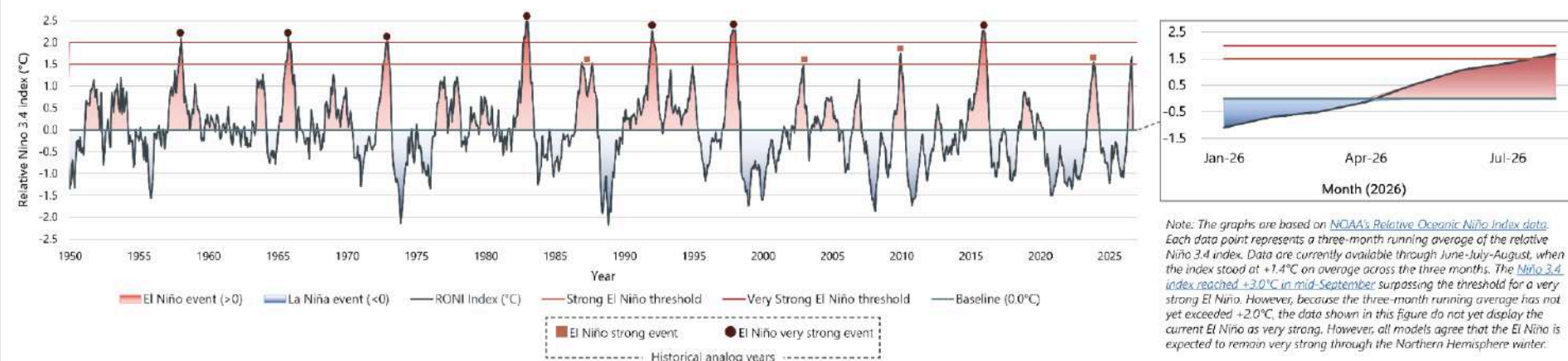
Annex 1: El Niño analog years

Analog years can provide a useful empirical basis for assessing the potential impacts of current and forecast ENSO and IOD conditions. Years with similar conditions can illustrate the range and geographic patterns of rainfall anomalies. Since 1950, 11 ENSO events have met the criteria for a strong (≥ 1.5 degrees Celsius) or very strong (≥ 2.0 degrees Celsius) El Niño: 1957/58, 1965/66, 1972/73, 1982/83, 1986-1988, 1991/92, 1997/98, 2002/03, 2009/10, 2015/16, and 2023/24 (Figure 10; underlying data [here](#)), although three of the events (1986-1988; 2009/10; and 2023/24) only narrowly reached the Celsius threshold. Eight of these events fall after 1980, the start of the historical CHIRPS rainfall record.

Four of these events are similar to the current El Niño event in terms of strength: 1982/83, 1991/92, 1997/98, and 2015/16. However, only two of the four very strong El Niño events - 1997/98 and 2015/16 - also featured a positive IOD, a phenomenon present during the 2026/2027 very strong El Niño. While that makes 1997/98 and 2015/16 the two closest analogs to the current El Niño event, relying on only two historical events provides a relatively thin empirical basis for characterizing the range of possible impacts.

Moreover, several strong (rather than very strong) El Niño events, including 2023/24, occurred alongside a positive IOD. These events are useful for examining how ENSO and IOD conditions interact to influence rainfall, even when El Niño intensity is lower, and may be more relevant than very strong El Niño events that did not coincide with a positive IOD. FEWS NET therefore uses the full available set of strong and very strong El Niño events to capture variability across events of different strengths. This approach allows the analysis to identify recurring precipitation patterns while recognizing that individual events can produce substantially different outcomes even under broadly similar ENSO-IOD conditions.

Figure 10. Relative Oceanic Niño Index (RONI), showing historical El Niño and La Niña events, (1950 – 2026)



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Links to data: [Relative Oceanic Niño Index data](#); [Niño 3.4 index in mid-September](#)

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