REPORTING CLIMATE CHANGE:

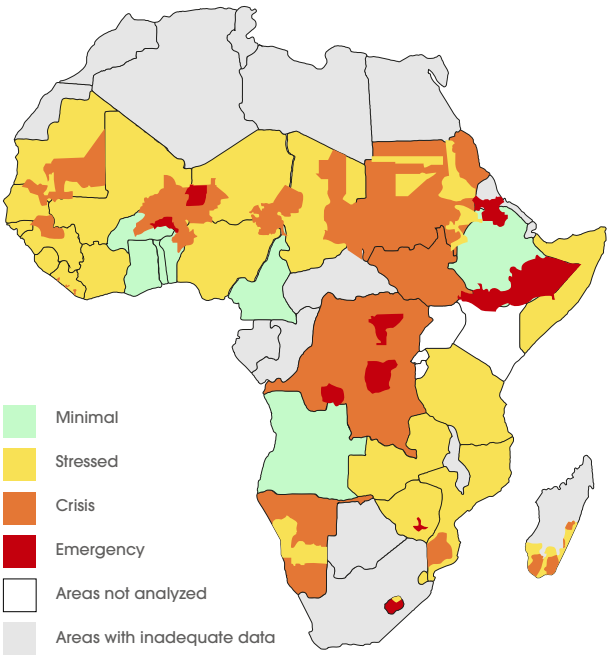
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR AFRICAN JOURNALISTS

How the climate crisis affects African food security

China 中南项目
Global South Project

The Quick Take

Africa is a food security paradox. Despite the continent's potential for food production and the high contribution of farming to its overall economy, Africa suffers chronic and increasing food insecurity. Ongoing aid efforts attempting to address the outdated farming methods and low mechanization typically attributed as a primary cause of food insecurity have not solved the problem. Climate change, in the form of increasingly extreme weather patterns, is now amplifying the threat to farmers and food security across the continent.



ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY IN AFRICA

Source: IPC 2023-2021, FEWS NET

The Story in Numbers:

>60%	of the world's uncultivated arable land is estimated to be in Africa
32%	the contribution of farming to the continent's gross domestic product
1/3	of the world's hungry people (249 million) are in Africa
1 of 54	South Africa is the only African country that might still be considered food self-sufficient
65%	of the continent's labor force work in agriculture
0.5 billion	the number of Africans affected by drought events between 1950 and 2021

3 Things you should know:

1. Food production in all its forms, whether from agricultural crops and livestock husbandry or forestry and fisheries, is vulnerable to droughts. Rainfall failure affects food production more than any other economic sector and is particularly hard on smallholder farmers and the rural poor. Climate change has triggered an increase in droughts since the 1950s that has cost the continent an estimated 700,000 people and $6.6 billion.

2. Forecasts predict that climate change will seriously limit Africa's ability to feed its people, making African populations even more reliant on imports and vulnerable to global food price volatility.

3. The global food system is the second largest contributor to climate change, responsible for about one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions. It is the primary source of methane and biodiversity loss.

Why is Africa Food Insecure?

Food insecurity, the condition of not having access to sufficient food or food of adequate quality to meet one's basic needs, can be attributed to a range of factors. In Africa, these include, among others, the legacy of colonialism, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, political instability and climate change.

Colonialism: The legacy of colonial agricultural production systems, which took advantage of fertile land, water, and low labor costs to meet the export needs of Global North industries and consumers, have had a fundamental influence on hunger in Africa.

Food crops were side-lined in favor of export cash crops, such as cocoa, coffee, palm oil and rubber from West Africa, cotton from the Sahel region, tea and coffee from East Africa, and tobacco and sugarcane from the south of Africa. Food crops were grown for subsistence purposes rather than for large-scale agriculture.

Post-independence, many African countries favored local manufacturing over agriculture, resulting in underinvestment in the agricultural and rural sectors. Agricultural policies remained focused on exports, neglecting research, development, and investment that would integrate food production systems into domestic economies, build domestic supply chains and markets, or establish necessary infrastructure. Consequently, Africa is the only region in the world where increased export production caused a decline in per capita food production.

Colonialism also undermined the social contract between traditional leaders and communities, a relationship that probably would have been instrumental in managing food scarcity in earlier times.

Poverty: Poverty has exacerbated food insecurity since those living in poverty frequently lack the necessary resources to access or produce adequate amounts of food. Poor households spend larger shares of their income on food, making them increasingly vulnerable to market forces.

Although poverty levels have declined in most African countries since 2010, it is estimated that 80% of African households live on less than $5.5/day, while 34%, some 490 million people, live below the $1.90/day poverty line. These figures take into consideration the COVID19- pandemic, which increased the number of people living below this poverty line by around 37 million.

Inadequate infrastructure: Since the majority of those experiencing hunger live in rural areas and practice agricultural activities, lack of infrastructure, including access to electricity and irrigation as well as road or rail infrastructure, can exacerbate food insecurity.

Food wastage: Roughly one-third of food produced globally for human consumption is lost or wasted. In developing countries, this is usually the fault of inadequate storage infrastructure, which leads to pest infestations and mold-ruined crops. Better access to adequate storage facilities could play an important role in building food security and avoiding the waste of land, water, and energy resources.

Political conflict: Of the many causes of hunger in Africa, it is political conflict that is the real primary driver of food scarcity. This was highlighted by an African Centre for Strategic Studies report, which pointed out that more than 80% of Africans experiencing acute food insecurity are in conflict-affected areas.

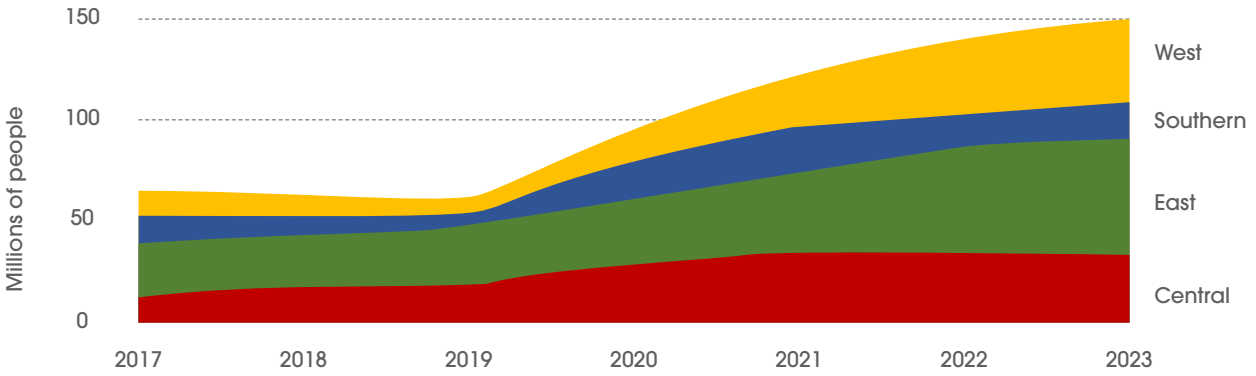
Conflict displaces people from their homes and depletes their assets and access to resources, increasing the vulnerability of those already living in poverty, explains the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (UN). Conflict makes emergency relief efforts more difficult and dangerous, compromises development

programs, and "has a much more insidious impact on long-term development efforts, diverting scarce resources, both national and external, away from development activities and into war."

Conflict and political instability, whether internal or transboundary, tend to trigger long-term food shortages that are exacerbated by natural disasters such as droughts and flooding.

Inflation: Weakening local currencies have led to inflated food prices as the cost of food imports, energy and public debt repayments are passed on to consumers. Most African countries are facing increased fiscal imbalances and rising public debt pressure, limiting their ability to deliver public-backed subsidies and social protection systems.

International events: Events such as the Ukraine/Russia crisis have affected fuel and food supplies to some African countries, triggering higher local food prices in declining or stagnating economies and eroding household purchasing power.



Trends in Acute Food Insecurity in Africa by Region

Source: Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023

Source: BSIP SA / Alamy Stock Photo

Colonial agriculture in Africa favored cash crops (coffee, tea, sugar, cocoa, tobacco, sugarcane, rubber and palm oil) for export over food crops

Source: Giuseppe Cipriani / Alamy Stock Photo

The Effect of Climate Change on African Food Security

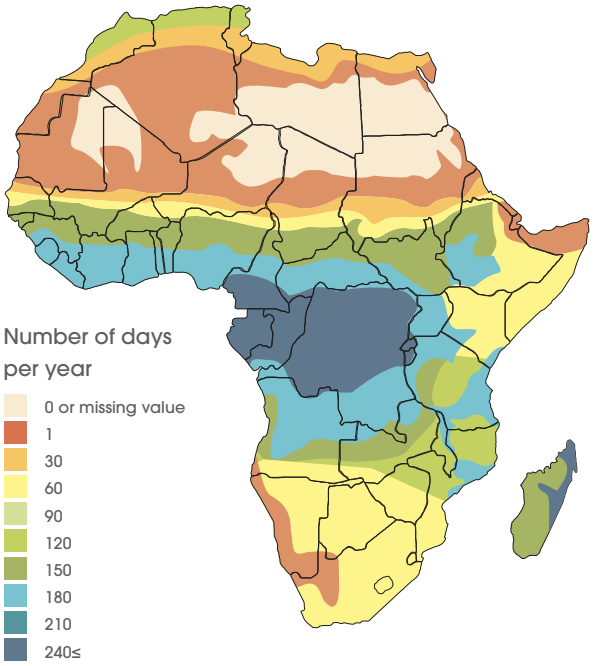
Although Africa contributes only 2% - 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions, climate change is hitting African communities, economies, and ecosystems disproportionately hard. Africa's climate has warmed more than the global average since pre-industrial times, and sea level rise along African coastlines has accelerated faster than the global mean, triggering more frequent and severe coastal flooding, erosion, and soil salinity in low-lying cities. Some 116 -108 million Africans are expected to be exposed to sea level rise risk by 2030.

While rising temperatures and higher carbon dioxide levels can have a beneficial impact on crops in certain areas, higher temperatures also reduce the available water necessary for crop survival, both by evaporation of water sources and evapotranspiration from plants and soil.

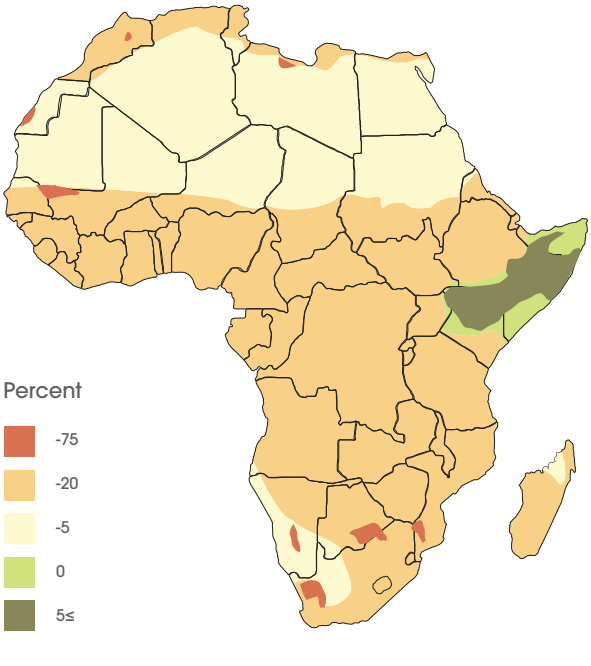
In areas where water is already scarce, climate change will challenge agricultural production by reducing water supplies, increasing extreme weather events, and increasing the prevalence of pests and diseases.

Climate change will seriously limit the continent's ability to feed its people, despite current agricultural potential. Modeling suggests that a climate that is 3°C warmer than preindustrial levels, which is likely, will limit total food production in Africa to feed only 1.35 billion of the continent's expected population of 3.5 billion.

As temperatures rise beyond our ability to predict their effects, generally referred to as 'runaway climate change', adapting to the effects of climate change becomes increasingly difficult and expensive. Climate events that destroy crops and disrupt food transport, in turn, trigger higher food prices, increase poverty, and slow economic growth.



MAP 1: Average length of growing period (LGP) for current conditions, 2000s



MAP 2: Projected mean change in length of growing period (LGP) in 2050

Average length of growing period to 2050

Source: Atlas of African Agriculture Research & Development

As the effects of climate change increase, the length of growing periods is likely to change across the continent. This could reduce crop and livestock production or cause complete crop failures in some areas. Some of the ways to counteract this include planting crop varieties that require shorter growing seasons, are more drought-resistant and heat-tolerant.

Farmers affected by climate change use mound and zai pit techniques to channel water into compost and nutrient-rich pits where crops are more productive.

Source: Jake Lyell / Alamy Stock

Drought-affected crops in Kenya reap a meager harvest.

Source: Jake Lyell / Alamy Stock Photo

Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier

Climate change is considered a threat multiplier as its effects are likely to exacerbate existing challenges to human upliftment and trigger even greater ones. The changing climate is likely to exert ever more pressure on natural resources, increase food and water insecurity, trigger further conflict, displace people and spread disease, creating ever greater humanitarian crises.

While climate change is hitting many global regions hard, the United Nations identified the African continent as the most vulnerable region to climate change in 2017. Vulnerability is not just a matter of exposure to increasingly severe weather events, however, but also the ability of communities to adapt, their wealth distribution, the extent of inequality and degree of effective governance.

Food security is not only at risk from climate change but also contributes to accelerating climate change. Producing food demands water and energy. Agriculture is the biggest consumer of global freshwater resources and requires more than a quarter of global energy.

In this way, food production is integral to both water and energy availability, making up the 'food-water-energy nexus'.

The Role of Women in Food Security

Women are responsible for between 60% and 80% of food produced in developing countries and are the foundation of the small-scale agriculture, farm labor, and family subsistence that makes up the majority of Africa's agricultural sector. Despite this responsibility, women's societal, cultural, and economic subjugation and subsequent lack of access to the fundamental building blocks of success limit their ability to thrive in this sector, to the detriment of the food security of an entire continent.

Women have limited access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. They lack access to research and technological innovations, especially technology that better services their needs in terms of reducing their workload. Their roles in decision-making are traditionally more constrained.

Women are less likely than men to have access to education and training. While literacy rates are climbing, women are

still less likely to be literate than their male counterparts. Around 40% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa are illiterate, compared to 27.5% of men.

As rural men migrate to urban centers in search of employment, the number of female-headed households increases. Female-headed households typically have lower incomes than male-headed households and are more labor-constrained. The absence of male labor tends to limit agricultural yield and directs crop production towards less labor-intensive and less nutritious crops, perpetuating the cycle of food insecurity.

However, research suggests that improvements in household food security are closely linked to women's access to income and their decision-making power with regard to expenditure. Greater emphasis on the needs of women in agriculture could have a key role to play in addressing food insecurity and building resilient food systems.

Women collect water from a well to water their crops in The Gambia.

Source: Finnbarr Webster / Alamy Stock Photo

Building More Resilient Agricultural Systems

Climate change affects each link in the food system chain, from production and supply chains to social considerations, infrastructure, and dietary choices. Africa's food systems will need thorough and transformative resilience and mitigation measures to serve the continent's people.

The African Civil Society Common Position on Climate Adaptation and Loss and Damage for COP28 highlights that the global food system remains a key driver of the climate crisis delivering biodiversity loss and socio-economic challenges that reinforce Africa's reliance on food aid. These burdens fall most heavily on women, smallholders, farm workers, and informal traders, particularly those with limited or no social protection or land rights.

The position calls for "a rapid transition from the current global food system to decentralised, farmer-led food systems rooted in democratic, human-rights based policy frameworks" that creates enabling conditions for smallholders, pastoralists, fisherfolk, informal traders, protects Indigenous knowledge, promotes gender equality, inclusivity, agroecology, and food sovereignty. It proposes that "Agroecology, tied to Indigenous knowledge and food sovereignty movements, shifts power back into smallholders' hands, enhances farms' resilience to extreme weather events through its practices, and promotes local food sovereignty".

Strategies to Improve Africa's Food Security in the Face of Climate Change

Invest in Agriculture: African countries can prioritize investing in agriculture by providing subsidies for farmers, improving infrastructure, and increasing access to credit for smallholder farmers. This will help improve crop yields and increase production, leading to greater food security.

Diversify Production: Diversifying agricultural production by growing a range of crops and livestock can help mitigate the impact of climate change on food security. This approach can help farmers adapt to changing weather patterns, reduce the risk of crop failure, and improve nutrition.

Promote Sustainable and Climate-Smart Farming Practices: African countries can promote sustainable farming practices such as crop rotation, agroforestry, conservation agriculture and precision farming. These practices help improve soil health, increase crop yields, and reduce the use of chemical inputs. A crucial aspect is improving access to off-grid agro-processing, refrigeration and storage.

"Ignorance is expensive and it is costing Africans their livelihoods and lives. When it comes to food production, they are using synthetic fertilizers and planting the wrong crops, having discarded their indigenous seeds. This practice will perpetuate the expensive farm inputs trend," Henry Mbowa, Environmental Management expert and Senior Lecturer, Kampala University.

Increase Access to Water: Access to water is critical for agricultural production, and many African countries face water scarcity. Governments can invest in water management systems, such as irrigation systems, dams, and rainwater harvesting, to increase access to water for agriculture.

Improve Market Access and Build Resilient Infrastructure: Farmer market access can be improved by building storage and processing facilities, establishing market information systems, and promoting fair trade policies. This will help farmers sell their produce at a fair price and reduce post-harvest losses. Resilient infrastructure, including irrigation systems, storage facilities, and roads will be needed to help farmers adapt to changing weather patterns.

Address Climate Change Drivers: Governments can take steps to address climate change by promoting renewable energy, promoting sustainable land use practices, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Promote Access to Climate Information: African countries can promote access to climate information by investing in weather monitoring systems, early warning systems, and climate data services. This will help farmers make informed decisions about planting, harvesting, and marketing their crops.

Provide Social Safety Nets: Vulnerable populations, including smallholder farmers, especially women, would benefit from social safety nets such as cash transfers and food subsidies. This will help ensure that these populations have access to food and are not left behind in efforts to achieve food security.

Strengthen Institutional Capacity: African countries can strengthen their institutional capacity by improving governance, enhancing transparency, and increasing accountability. This will help ensure that policies are implemented effectively and resources are used efficiently.

Support Research and Development: Research and development to develop climate-resilient crop varieties, improve water management, and promote sustainable land use practices will help farmers adapt to changing climate conditions.

Source: Westend61 GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo

The Bottom Line:

African nations already unable to feed their people are being disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, making it unlikely they will be able to achieve food security for anticipated future populations. Since food production is itself a significant contributor to climate change, the system will need to undertake radical transformation and adaptation measures to achieve its goals. African people will need to activate international support while employing their resilience and innovative spirit to the challenge.

AFRICAN VOICES:

Insights about covering climate change from leading journalists across the continent

A Senior Climate Journalist and Lecturers' Tips and Insights on How to Improve Your Coverage of Africa's Just Transition and Climate Change Issues

Climate change stories are not a major priority in most African newsrooms and it will take educating reporters and editors to understand the climate story to prioritize it. With the financial challenges facing a lot of newsrooms, it is sometimes understandable that editors prioritize stories that appeal to large audiences.

Enoch Sithole, a senior journalist and lecturer at Wits University in South Africa, has noted that there needs to be an understanding that climate change affects everyone in society, and therefore, stories about it should appeal to all audiences.

He added that it will take educating editors to buy into this narrative.

Sithole spoke with Njenga Hakeenah, a journalist based in Nairobi about what limits journalists and newsrooms from pursuing and sustaining climate change storytelling in newsrooms across many African countries.

NJENGA HAKEENAH: What are the biggest hindrances to telling climate change stories in African newsrooms?

ENOCH SITHOLE: Firstly, climate change is a relatively new subject, certainly from a journalism point of view. While some newsrooms were used to covering environmental stories, climate change is a lot more than the environment. In some instances, journalists find the beat to be complex and involve science, and they are not comfortable covering it.

Secondly, there is reluctance among editors who sometimes believe that news consumers do not quite warm up to the climate story. Therefore, they do not dedicate resources to cover the subject. In some instances, there is the wrong claim that climate news is scarce, leaving journalists to mainly cover conferences on the subject, climate disasters, such as storms and droughts, and the release of scientific reports. This claim reveals a lack of understanding of the broadness of the climate story.

NJENGA: How does this affect food security or insecurity caused by climate change

ENOCH: While it would be difficult to establish a direct link between inadequate media reporting of climate change and food security, droughts and storms, particularly in Africa, have had a detrimental effect on food production. Therefore, food security has definitely been affected. Media reporting would help immensely in helping communities to understand the impact of climate change on food production. Because of poor journalism and overall communication and education on the subject, communities simply do not know much about climate change, let alone its effects on their daily lives.

> **Media reporting would play a critical role in educating communities and helping them prepare and mitigate the effects of climate change on food production. This would improve food security.**

NJENGA: What are the challenges with finding and interviewing African voices in climate change?

ENOCH: There is very little research originating from Africa on the subject. Most of the knowledge is generated by Western scholars with little involvement of their African counterparts. In the same breath, there are relatively very few climate change experts from the continent. As a result, African voices are scarce in the media and other communication platforms. This needs to change because climate change needs to be communicated from the local perspective to enable communities to relate to it. While climate change is a global phenomenon, people tend to relate to it as a local issue because its impacts are local.

NJENGA: Are there dedicated desks and reporters for this?

ENOCH: There is a view among scholars, such as myself, that the climate story needs to be mainstreamed into all news beats. Economics reporters, for example, should be trained and encouraged to find climate change angles in their stories. This should be the case in all other bits such as politics, agriculture, etc. This way, the argument that there are no climate change stories to be covered would be addressed.

NJENGA: Are climate change stories technical to tell, locking out journalists from this field?

ENOCH: There are very technical, scientific issues in climate change reporting. However, not all are technical. For instance, reporting about how climate change affects food production and consequently the cost of food is not much of a technical issue. These are the sort of stories that communities should hear about. A story about warning people not to build their homes in lowlands that are susceptible to flooding during storms doesn›t require any technical knowledge to report on. Journalists are usually trained to report on subjects that might not be part of their training.

NJENGA: What can be done to improve African journalists' news coverage of food security under climate change?

ENOCH: A few steps. Editors and media house bosses need to be sensitized to give the climate story the priority it deserves. Training of journalists needs to be improved in both quality and quantity. Researchers in all subjects related to climate change, such as food security, energy, new technologies, etc. need to improve their communication with journalists so that their research can be translated into news stories for the consumption of communities who need it to mitigate the effects of climate change on their daily lives.

Reporting Guide: Resources for African Journalists

Resources focused specifically on African food security issues that will help you to improve your reporting on the subject.

Who to Follow

Fatou Jeng

Founder: Clean Earth Gambia
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Dolores Mache

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Book Recommendations

African Food Security Research Hub:

The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) Centre of Excellence in Food Security (ACoE) brings together East, West, and Southern African ARUA members as well as African and international partners working on food security research, policy, and capacity development to increase the networks of each participating institution and to maximize the translation of knowledge into impact at the grassroots and/or policy levels.

ARUA-SFS
Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Food Systems