

RECOMMENDATION 6 OF 20

REGIONAL

Act within 100 days · by early January 2027

Keep grain trade open in southern Africa and buy before the hungry months

Related briefings: [Food and agriculture](#)

IN BRIEF

- South Africa and Zambia have large maize surpluses, while their neighbours face a strong El Niño drought.
- Governments in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) should promise not to ban grain exports this season, and countries short of grain should agree to buy it before the hungry months begin.
- Zambia should go first, because it has the most grain to sell and has banned exports twice in ten years.

Why this matters

The grain is already in the region. South Africa expects a record maize crop of about 17.3 million tonnes, and forecasts exports of 3 million tonnes. Zambia harvested 4.9 million tonnes. It has 2.49 million tonnes available to export, and 1 million tonnes in its Food Reserve Agency, the state body that buys and stores grain.

The need is coming. Regional forecasters expect below-normal rain from October to December across most of southern Africa. The UN expects 2.6 million people in Malawi to face a food crisis between October 2026 and March 2027. It also warns of higher food prices across the region.

Countries that act alone get it wrong. In August 2025, Zimbabwe banned maize imports on a harvest figure that proved false, and reversed the ban within weeks. It then bought 39% of South Africa's maize exports. The World Bank estimates that open borders earn Zambia about \$97 million a year. It also finds that limits on trade would cost Zambian farmers about \$1.42 billion between 2023 and 2030.

A forward contract is a deal to buy a set amount of grain at an agreed price, for delivery later. It gives the seller a sure sale and the buyer a known price. That removes the panic in which governments usually decide to ban exports.

Sources for this section (13)

- [IOL: South Africa's record maize crop and export forecast](#)
- [Zambia Monitor: Zambia's harvest, exportable surplus and reserve stock](#)
- [AllAfrica: the southern African rainfall forecast for October to December](#)
- [UN OCHA: the outlook for Malawi and for prices in the region](#)
- [Down to Earth: Zimbabwe's false harvest figure and its import ban](#)
- [Daily Maverick: Zimbabwe's share of South African maize exports](#)
- [World Bank: what open borders and trade limits mean for Zambia](#)
- [US Commodity Futures Trading Commission: definition of a forward contract](#)
- [World Trade Organization: the 2022 decision that exempts WFP food purchases from export bans](#)
- [African Union: the Kampala Declaration goal on farm trade between African countries](#)
- [ECOWAS: the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger](#)
- [Africanews: Zambia's export ban of February 2024](#)
- [Nation Online: the value of the Zambia and Malawi maize deal](#)

Four levels of action

1 What Africa asks of the world

The World Bank, the World Food Programme (WFP) and humanitarian donors should pay for grain for Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique from surplus countries inside the region. The World Bank has done this before, when it helped pay for Malawi's purchase from Zambia in 2025. WFP purchases are already exempt from export bans under a 2022 World Trade Organization decision.

WHO

The World Bank, WFP and humanitarian donors

WHEN

Crisis funding for Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique before January 2027

2 What the African Union does

The African Union Commission adds bans on staple food exports to the scorecard it uses to review each country's farm policy every two years. This supports the goal in the Kampala Declaration to triple farm trade between African countries by 2035.

WHO

The AU Commission, through its two-yearly CAADP review

WHEN

By June 2027, in time for the next review

3 What regional groups do

SADC ministers of agriculture and trade make the pledge. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the East African Community extend it to Tanzania and Uganda, which also sell maize into southern Africa. A West African version would need a separate deal between ECOWAS and Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. ECOWAS still treats goods from those three countries under its trade scheme.

WHO	SADC, COMESA and the East African Community
WHEN	Pledge by 30 November 2026; purchase contracts offered by 15 December 2026

4 Which country goes first, and why

Zambia goes first. It has the most grain to export. It banned maize exports in 2016 and again in February 2024, so its promise not to do so again would carry weight. In October 2025 it signed a direct deal with the government of Malawi to sell it maize.

WHO	Zambia's Ministry of Agriculture
WHEN	Signs the pledge and publishes export volumes each month from 30 November 2026

Before another country can do this

- ☒ Crop estimates that are published and trusted
- ☒ A national reserve agency that can sign deals with other governments
- ☒ Credit or foreign currency to pay in advance
- ☒ Membership of the SADC, COMESA or East African Community trade rules

What does not carry over from the first country

- Zambia's surplus comes from a year of good weather. In 2024 it had to import maize.
- Its deal with Malawi relied on \$45 million of World Bank money.

Who else is ready

COUNTRY	WHY	SOURCE
South Africa	A record crop and about 3 million tonnes of exports forecast.	Source
Tanzania	Its reserve agency planned to sell about 1 million tonnes in 2025 and 2026, including to Zambia, the DRC and Malawi.	Source
Uganda	It offered up to 500,000 tonnes to Zambia in 2024.	Source
Malawi	It expects 2.6 million people in crisis and already has a signed deal with Zambia.	Source

Has this worked before?

Zambia's 2016 ban on maize exports is the warning. Studies found that it kept Zambian prices about 35% lower than they would otherwise have been. It also hurt consumers in Zimbabwe, and in later years it pushed maize farming into neighbouring countries. A ban can help at home for one season and cost the region for years. [Source](#)

World Bank: maize trade policies in Zambia

First steps

- 1** **AFRICAN UNION** the AU Commission adds bans on staple food exports to its farm policy scorecard by June 2027.
- 2** **REGIONAL GROUPS** SADC ministers of agriculture and trade issue a joint pledge against grain export bans for 2026 to 2027 by 30 November 2026. Reserve agencies in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique invite offers for forward contracts by 15 December 2026. Afreximbank, the African trade finance bank, opens a credit line by 31 January 2027.
- 3** **ZAMBIA** the Ministry of Agriculture signs the pledge and publishes the amount of maize available for export each month from 30 November 2026.

Who acts, and with what

WHO LEADS	SADC ministers of agriculture and trade, with Zambia's Ministry of Agriculture going first
INSTRUMENT	A pledge by ministers within 30 days, and signed purchase contracts within 100 days
HOW PROGRESS IS CHECKED	Tonnes of maize under signed forward contracts before January 2027
SIGNAL TO CHANGE COURSE	A country with surplus grain announces an export ban
WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY	Countries with surplus grain face pressure at home to keep food in the country when prices rise. Countries short of grain may lack the foreign currency to pay in advance. Wrong crop estimates, as in Zimbabwe in 2025, mislead both sides.
COST AND MONEY	Importing governments or their reserve agencies pay for the grain, using trade credit. The cost depends on the amounts and prices agreed, which are not yet known, and no reliable estimate of the savings exists. As a guide, the Zambia and Malawi deal was worth \$77 million, of which \$45 million came from the World Bank.

Who else contributes

WHO	CONTRIBUTION
The governments of Zambia and South Africa	Keep exports open and publish how much grain they can sell
National reserve agencies	Coordinate releases and sales between governments
Afreximbank and the World Bank	Lend the money for forward purchases
Grain traders and millers	Supply, store and move the contracted grain
The SADC secretariat	Publish a regional balance of grain held and needed

What each audience can do

Governments

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Sign the pledge and agree purchases in advance

WHAT YOU GAIN

Lower and steadier food prices

AU and regional bodies

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Publish the regional grain balance and score export bans

WHAT YOU GAIN

Proof that regional trade works in a crisis

Business and investors

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Offer forward contracts, storage and transport

WHAT YOU GAIN

Demand that can be planned for

NGOs and civil society

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Watch prices and warn early of bans

WHAT YOU GAIN

Early warning for consumers

Researchers and media

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Check crop estimates against trade and satellite data

WHAT YOU GAIN

Trade rules based on honest figures

The briefings behind this

Sector · Observed

Food and agriculture

Africa's hunger stopped rising in 2025 at the highest rate of any region, and the price of food, fertiliser and transport now decides who eats.

[Open the briefing](#)

Words used on this page

El Niño

A warming of the Pacific Ocean every few years that changes weather worldwide. In southern Africa it usually brings drought, and in the Horn of Africa it often brings floods. [Our recommendation on this](#) · [Food and agriculture briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

SADC

The Southern African Development Community, 16 states from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Africa.

[Glossary](#) · [Source: sadc.int](#)

Forward contract

A deal in which a buyer and a seller agree now on the amount, quality and price of goods to be delivered on a later date. It gives the seller a sure sale and the buyer a known price. [Food and agriculture briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: cftc.gov](#)

World Food Programme (WFP)

The UN's food aid agency. It depends on voluntary donations, which fell sharply in 2025. [Food and agriculture briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) ·

[Source: wfp.org](#)

World Trade Organization (WTO)

The international body that sets and enforces the rules of trade between countries. A member can complain that another has broken the rules, and a panel of the WTO decides. [Our recommendation on this](#) · [Climate and energy briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source:](#)

[wto.org](#)

African Union Commission

The African Union's secretariat. It prepares decisions for heads of state and carries them out. [Glossary](#)

CAADP and the Kampala Declaration

The African Union's plan for farming and food. The Kampala Declaration sets its goals for 2026 to 2035. [Food and agriculture briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

COMESA

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, a trade bloc of 21 member states. Its members cooperate on trade and development across eastern and southern Africa. [Food and agriculture briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: comesa.int](#)

East African Community

A bloc of eastern and central African states, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [Glossary](#)

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left it in January 2025. [Politics and governance briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Africa's second-largest country by area, in central Africa. Its east has seen armed conflict for three decades, and it holds much of the world's cobalt. [Security and conflict briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)