

SECTOR 02 OF 12

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

9 min read

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.

IN BRIEF

- At the UN in September, food featured in many speeches, while the UN's food aid agency had raised less than half the money it needs for 2026.
- About 309 million Africans went hungry in 2025, and a very strong El Niño now threatens the next harvest in southern Africa.
- The tools that would help most are African: open grain trade between neighbours, fertiliser made in Africa, and money paid out before the rains fail.



Women smallholder farmers tending crops in Kenya.

Photo: McKay Savage, [CC BY 2.0](#), via [source page](#).

309m

Africans who did not get enough food in 2025, one in five people

[Source: fao.org](https://www.fao.org)

56.6%

Africans who at times had to eat less or worse food in 2025, or feared they would

[Source: fao.org](https://www.fao.org)

66.6%

Africans who could not afford a healthy diet in 2025

[Source: fao.org](https://www.fao.org)

-59%

Fall in money for food aid, emergency help for farmers and nutrition, 2022 to 2025

[Source: fao.org](https://www.fao.org)

80%

Share of fertiliser used in sub-Saharan Africa that comes from abroad

[Source: afdb.org](https://www.afdb.org)

\$19.6bn

Trade in farm goods between African countries in 2023, up from about \$6bn in 2003

[Source: resakss.org](https://www.resakss.org)

01

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

What happened at the UN

Food came up in many speeches and side meetings in New York, but it drew little new money. By 21 September, the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN's food aid agency, had received \$5.41 billion for 2026. It needs \$13 billion to reach 110 million people. WFP also warned that El Niño could push 49 million more people into acute hunger by the end of 2027. The UN's main food agency cannot carry Africa through the coming drought on its own.

The largest pledges of the week went to other regions. The Inter-American Development Bank committed \$25 billion for 2025 to 2030 through the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty. A \$150 million food and climate partnership from the Green Climate Fund covers Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the UN fund that lends to small farmers, set out \$600 million for seven countries. That includes \$120 million for Ethiopia. Little of the new money was aimed at Africa, which now has more hungry people than any other region.

The most telling African pledge was small, and it came from African budgets. Ten African governments raised their pledges to IFAD for 2028 to 2030, to nearly \$9 million in total. They include Burundi, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan and Zimbabwe, and their increases ranged from 11% to 900%. The same week, the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC) noted that only 5% of humanitarian food money goes to emergency help for farming. Most emergency money feeds people after a harvest fails, and very little helps farmers plant the next one.

Sources for this section (4)

- [WFP: contributions received in 2026](#)
- [WFP: funding needed for 2026 and the El Niño warning](#)
- [IFDC: what was pledged on hunger during high-level week, and the 5% share for emergency farming](#)
- [Global Citizen: the Green Climate Fund partnership and African pledges to IFAD](#)

02

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

What is really going on

The UN's yearly hunger report shows that the share of Africans without enough food fell slightly in 2025, from 20.3% to 20.0%. This was the first break in a rise that began in 2017. Africa now has more hungry people than Asia, 309 million against 292 million. Across the world the number fell to 645 million. Fewer African children are stunted, meaning too short for their age because of poor food, and the continent is on track for its 2030 target. The progress is real, and one bad season could reverse it.

Cost is the main barrier. A healthy diet cost about \$4.28 per person per day in 2025, using a dollar adjusted for what money buys in each country. Two in three Africans could not pay that, twice the world rate. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN's farming agency, links the high cost of healthy food to poor storage, processing, transport and cold stores. Sub-Saharan Africa was expected to spend \$65 billion on imported food in 2025, including \$21.9 billion on cereals. That money leaves the continent instead of paying African farmers, stores and hauliers.

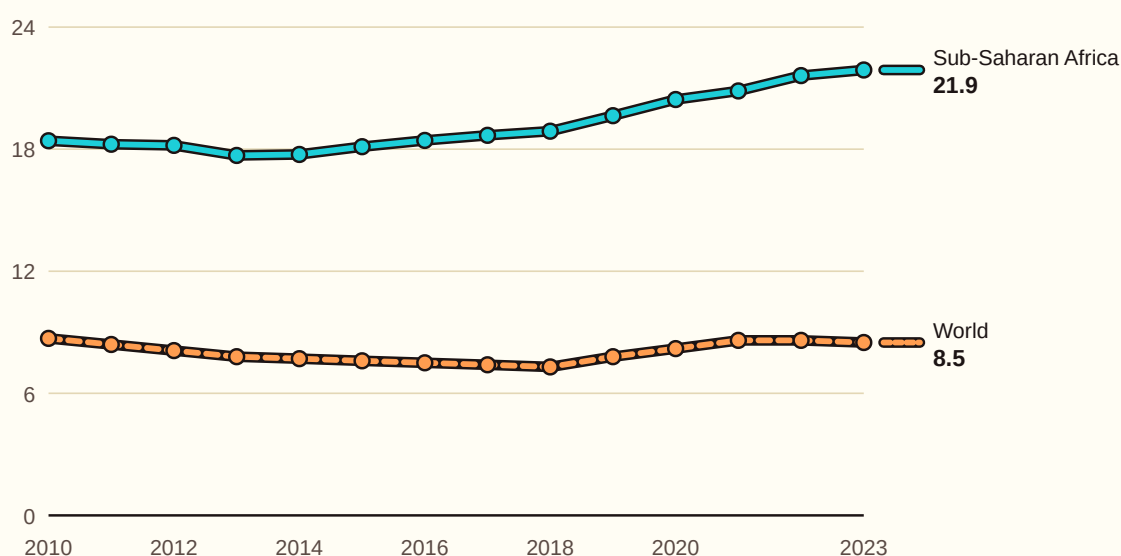
Fertiliser is the second weak point. After the Strait of Hormuz, the sea route out of the Gulf, closed, urea reached \$850 a tonne in April 2026. Urea is the most common nitrogen fertiliser, and the price was 80% higher than in February. The Middle East supplies nearly a quarter of the world's urea exports. About 80% of the fertiliser used in sub-Saharan Africa is imported. The African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank estimate that a 10% fall in supply could cut maize, rice and wheat harvests by up to 25%. A study in Ghana, Kenya and Morocco found that farmers bought less, bought later and planted less.

Aid for food is shrinking as need grows. Money for food aid, emergency help for farmers and nutrition fell by an estimated 59% between 2022 and 2025. In January 2026, WFP said it could feed 72,000 people in Nigeria in February. In the 2025 lean season, the months before harvest when food runs short, it had fed 1.3 million. African governments cannot plan on outside food aid arriving in the next crisis.

The next shock is already forming. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) gives a nearly 100% chance that El Niño lasts from December 2026 to February 2027. A UN alert for the region puts the chance of a very strong event above 90%. It also gives a 70% chance that rain from October to December will be worse than in any El Niño year since 1950. The UN plan for early action before the drought would reach 11.9 million people through 84 measures, for \$111.3 million. About 80% of it has no money, and only 13 measures have money arranged in advance. Regional forecasters expect below-normal rain across Angola, southern Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana and most of South Africa. Each week without money makes it more likely that help arrives after crops have failed.

Hunger in sub-Saharan Africa has risen since 2017 while the world average held steady

Prevalence of undernourishment, % of population

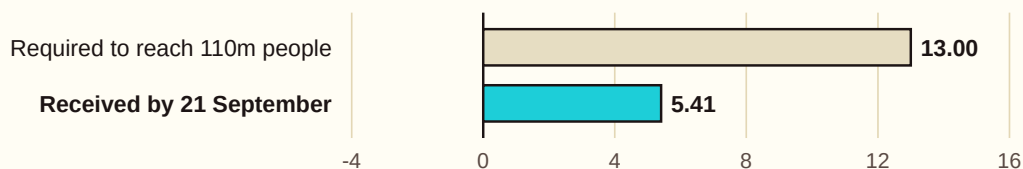


FAO's 2026 report puts Africa as a whole at 20.0% for 2025; this series covers sub-Saharan Africa to 2023.

Source: [World Bank, from FAO data \(SN.ITK.DEFC.ZS\)](#)

WFP had less than half the money it needs for 2026 by late September

US\$ billion, 2026



The requirement is from WFP's UNGA briefing: [source](#)

Source: [WFP funding and contributions 2026](#)

Sources for this section (11)

- [FAQ: hunger in Africa and the world in 2025, and the cost of a healthy diet](#)
- [FAQ: what makes nutritious food expensive](#)
- [Ecofin Agency, citing FAQ: sub-Saharan Africa's food import bill for 2025](#)
- [World Bank: urea prices after the Strait of Hormuz closed](#)
- [AfDB and World Bank: fertiliser imports and the risk to harvests](#)
- [IFDC: how farmers in Ghana, Kenya and Morocco responded to the price shock](#)
- [FAO and WFP: Hunger Hotspots, June 2026, and the 59% fall in funding](#)
- [UN News: WFP cuts in Nigeria](#)
- [WMO: El Niño update, August 2026](#)
- [UN OCHA: southern Africa El Niño preparedness alert](#)
- [AllAfrica: the southern African seasonal rainfall forecast](#)

03

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

Country by country

Southern Africa enters the drought with grain in store. South Africa expects a record maize crop of about 17.3 million tonnes, and forecasts exports of 3 million tonnes, 50% more than last year. Zambia harvested 4.9 million tonnes. It has 2.49 million tonnes available to export and holds 1 million tonnes in its Food Reserve Agency, the state body that buys and stores grain. The UN alert calls this a short-lived advantage that governments should use to build reserves before conditions worsen. The grain the region needs is already inside the region.

Zimbabwe shows what bad data costs. In August 2025 it banned maize imports, claiming a harvest of 2.3 million tonnes. Millers ran short, some closed, and the ban was reversed within weeks. In the season that followed, Zimbabwe bought 39% of South Africa's 2 million tonnes of maize exports.

Zimbabwe and Mozambique have since started early drought action. In Malawi, the UN expects 2.6 million people to face a food crisis between October 2026 and March 2027, with cereal losses above 30% in the south. A government that trusts false harvest figures can create a shortage that the weather did not.

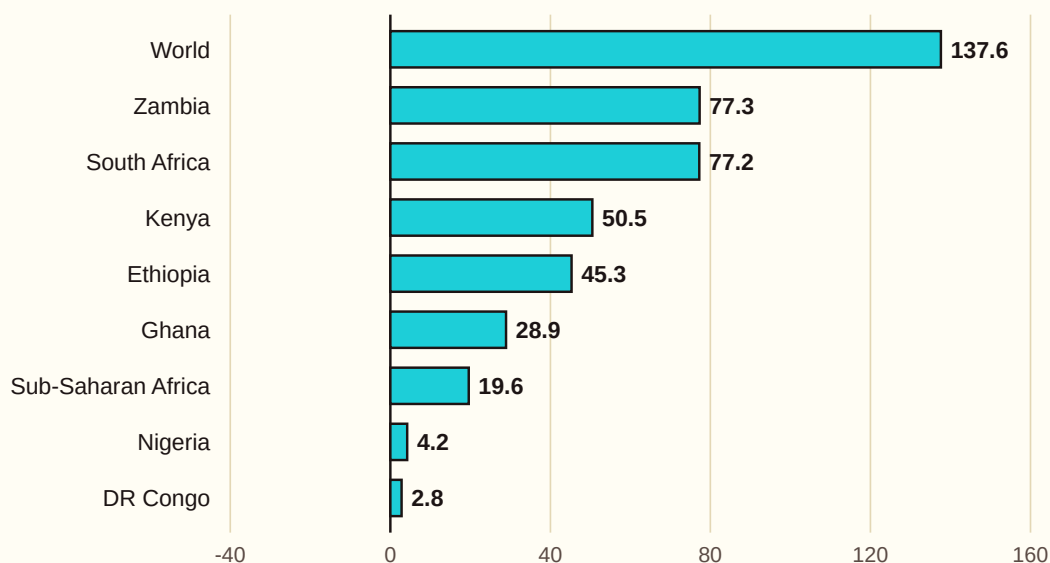
Nigeria shows the gap between making fertiliser and using it. The Dangote plant in Lagos makes 3 million tonnes of urea a year. A \$7 billion expansion, backed by \$600 million from the Africa Finance Corporation, would raise Nigeria's capacity to 9 million tonnes. By September, Nigerian urea was selling for about \$492 a tonne at the port. Yet Nigerian farmers used only about 4 kilograms of fertiliser per hectare in 2023. The share of Nigerians who at times could not get enough food rose from 35% in 2015 to 75% in 2023. FAO and WFP expected 34.8 million Nigerians to face acute hunger between June and August 2026.

Ethiopia imports more than 90% of its fertiliser, and in 2025 it was short of over 400,000 tonnes of one of its main types. Dangote is building a \$4 billion urea plant at Gode in Ethiopia, 40% owned by Ethiopia's state investment fund. Morocco and Egypt supply about 70% of Africa's fertiliser exports. During the shock, Morocco's state phosphate company, OCP, changed its mix of products so that it needed less sulphur. Africa already makes much of the fertiliser its farmers need, and the gap lies in getting it to their fields.

African governments have also missed their own targets. Under the African Union's last farm plan, the most recent review found no country on track. Rwanda scored best, and 30 of the 49 countries that reported were off track. African governments, as well as donors, have fallen short of what they promised farmers.

Most African farmers apply a fraction of the world average of fertiliser

Fertiliser consumption, kg per hectare of arable land, 2023

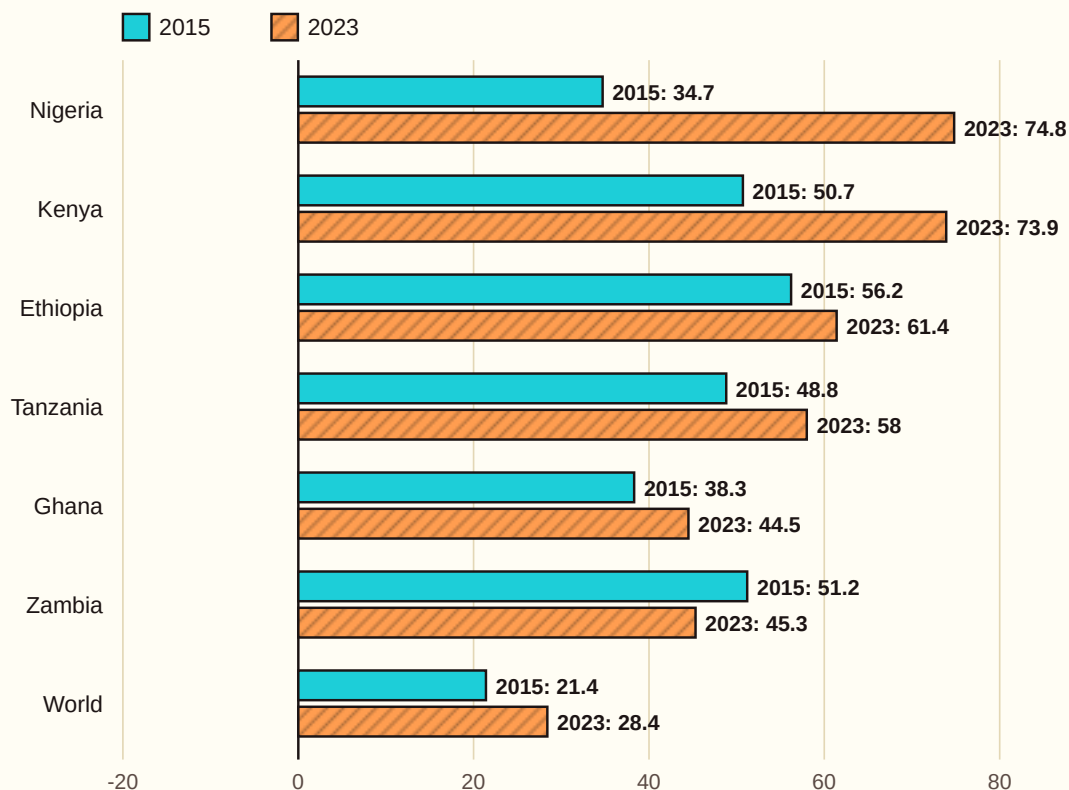


Selected countries. The Abuja Declaration of 2006 set a target of 50 kg per hectare. Nigeria's figure moves sharply from year to year (22.6 in 2020, 7.3 in 2022). Egypt, at 532.8, is left out so the scale stays readable.

Source: [World Bank WDI, from FAO data \(AG.CON.FERT.ZS\)](#)

The share of Nigerians and Kenyans facing food insecurity has risen sharply since 2015

Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, % of population



Zambia is the one country shown where the share fell. FAO's 2026 report puts Africa as a whole at 56.6% in 2025.

Source: [World Bank WDI, from FAO data \(SN.ITK.MSFI.ZS\)](#)

Sources for this section (13)

- [IOL: South Africa's record maize harvest and export forecast](#)
- [Zambia Monitor: Zambia's harvest, exportable surplus and reserve stock](#)
- [UN OCHA: reserves, early action in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and the outlook for Malawi](#)
- [Down to Earth: Zimbabwe's false harvest figure and the import ban](#)
- [Daily Maverick: Zimbabwe's share of South African maize exports](#)
- [Africa Finance Corporation: the Dangote fertiliser expansion](#)
- [IFDC: Nigerian urea prices in September 2026](#)
- [World Bank: food insecurity in Nigeria, 2015 to 2023, from FAO data](#)
- [FAO and WFP: acute hunger forecast for Nigeria](#)
- [BusinessDay: Ethiopia's fertiliser shortfall and the Gode urea plant](#)
- [ISS: Morocco's and Egypt's share of African fertiliser exports](#)
- [Fertilizer Daily: OCP's response to the supply shock](#)
- [AUDA-NEPAD: the fourth review of the African farm plan](#)

Why this matters

Africa's new farm plan, the CAADP Kampala Declaration for 2026 to 2035, aims to raise food output by 45% and halve losses after harvest. It also aims to triple farm trade between African countries and raise \$100 billion. The trade goal starts from a weak base. Farm trade between African countries rose about threefold in twenty years, to \$19.6 billion in 2023, mostly because prices rose. Over the same years, the share of Africa's farm imports bought from other African countries fell from over 20% to about 16%. The last plan also left a gap between promises and money, since only 28 of 45 national plans raised funds. Without a change in how the plan is paid for, the new targets risk the same result.

Smallholder farmers grow nearly 70% of the food in sub-Saharan Africa. When fertiliser prices, shipping routes and aid budgets are set elsewhere, these farmers are hit first. They already use about 17 to 23 kilograms of plant nutrients per hectare, against a world average of 135. In the Nairobi Declaration of May 2024, African leaders promised to triple the production of certified fertiliser in Africa by 2034. African urea now exists. What is missing is the credit, storage and regional rules to move it, and surplus maize, to African buyers before a crisis.

Timing decides the cost. Grain bought under a contract agreed before the lean season costs less than emergency imports bought after it. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has the surplus countries and the short countries inside one bloc. Its governments can agree those contracts now, while the grain is still in store.

Sources for this section (6)

- [African Union: the CAADP Kampala Declaration for 2026 to 2035](#)
- [AKADEMIYA2063 and IFPRI: Africa Agriculture Trade Monitor 2025](#)
- [Farm Future Africa: national plans under the last CAADP cycle](#)
- [AfDB and World Bank: smallholders' share of food production](#)
- [ISS: fertiliser use per hectare in Africa and the world](#)
- [African Union: the Nairobi Declaration on fertiliser and soil health](#)

The case against this view

The fall in hunger in 2025 is real, and a push to grow more food under the Kampala Declaration may pay off over ten years. Export bans may also make more sense than critics say. A World Bank study of

Zambia's 2016 ban found that it kept Zambian maize prices about 35% lower than they would otherwise have been. Studies in Malawi and Tanzania found short-term gains for consumers there too. A government facing hungry voters in a drought may decide those gains outweigh the cost to its neighbours. Forward contracts and shared reserves would make open trade safer for the selling country, so that it does not face this choice in a panic.

Sources for this section (1)

- [World Bank: maize trade policies in Zambia, and the evidence on export bans](#)

BY AUDIENCE

What you can do

Governments

DO THIS

Publish how much maize you hold and need, and sign contracts to buy or sell it before December.

WHY

South Africa and Zambia have grain to sell now, and prices will rise if the rains fail.

AU and regional bodies

DO THIS

SADC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) should agree that no member will ban exports of staple grain in the 2026 to 2027 season.

WHY

Zambia's 2016 ban hurt consumers in Zimbabwe and moved maize farming to neighbouring countries.

Philanthropy

DO THIS

Pay for the unfunded part of the UN's \$111.3 million El Niño plan for southern Africa through one shared grant.

WHY

About 80% of the plan has no money, and help given early costs far less than relief after the harvest fails.

Business and investors

DO THIS

Fertiliser makers and traders should offer seasonal credit and delivery of Nigerian and North African fertiliser to buyers in East and Southern Africa.

WHY

Nigerian urea sold for about \$492 a tonne while farmers in Kenya and Ghana cut their use.

NGOs and civil society

DO THIS

Track maize and fertiliser prices in local markets and publish them every week during the lean season.

WHY

Zimbabwe's 2025 import ban rested on harvest figures that proved false.

Social entrepreneurs

DO THIS

Build storage, grain collection and weather advice services that small farmers can pay for in instalments.

WHY

FAO links the high cost of healthy food to poor storage, transport and cold stores.

Researchers and media

DO THIS

Check national crop estimates against satellite and trade data before governments set trade rules.

WHY

Inflated harvest figures led to mill closures in Zimbabwe.

Young people and citizens

DO THIS

Ask candidates and local leaders how they will keep food prices down during the drought, and hold them to it.

WHY

Two in three Africans cannot afford a healthy diet, and food prices depend on political choices as well as the weather.

Dates to watch

OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2026

Planting rains in southern Africa during a strong El Niño

The UN says money that arrives after October may come too late to protect crops and livestock. [Source](#)

9 TO 20 NOVEMBER 2026

COP31, the UN climate summit in Antalya, works on ways to measure adaptation, including on farms

These measures decide what counts as spending to help farms cope with climate change. [Source](#)

14 TO 15 DECEMBER 2026

Final pledging meeting for IFAD's next funding round

IFAD is one of the few funds that lends to small farmers at scale, and ten African governments have already raised their pledges. [Source](#)

DECEMBER 2026 TO FEBRUARY 2027

El Niño expected at its peak, as the lean season begins in southern Africa

Food prices and aid needs will rise fastest in Malawi, Mozambique, Madagascar and Zimbabwe. [Source](#)

JULY 2027

FAO's next yearly report on hunger in the world

It will show whether Africa's break in rising hunger lasted through the drought. [Source](#)

Recommendations

100 DAYS · BY EARLY JANUARY 2027

REGIONAL

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

Leads: SADC ministers of agriculture and trade, with Zambia's Ministry of Agriculture go first

30 DAYS · BY 28 OCTOBER 2026

REGIONAL

Pay for southern Africa's El Niño plan with African money before the rains fail

Leads: The SADC secretariat and African foundations, with the African Development Bank holding the money; Zimbabwe and Mozambique go first

2 YEARS · BY SEPTEMBER 2028

REGIONAL

Build shared regional stores of grain and fertiliser, paid for by Africa

Leads: SADC and ECOWAS, with the African Development Bank; Zambia and Nigeria go first

Dig deeper

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026

FAO

The annual global hunger report, with Africa's figures for 2025.

Southern Africa 2026 El Niño Preparedness Alert

UN OCHA

Country risks, caseloads and the \$111.3m anticipatory plan.

Hunger Hotspots, June 2026

FAO and WFP

Early warning of where acute hunger is likely to worsen, and the 59% funding fall.

WFP funding and contributions 2026

WFP

Contributions received by WFP this year, by donor.

African governments need to take urgent action on fertiliser shortages

African Development Bank

Import dependence, the yield risk and five priority actions.

Fertilizer Crisis Response Bulletin 31: UNGA81

IFDC

What was committed on hunger and food security during high-level week.

Africa Agriculture Trade Monitor 2025

AKADEMIYA2063 and IFPRI

Intra-African agricultural trade, rice and fertiliser trade to 2023.

Maize Trade Policies in Zambia: Options for Growth

World Bank

The evidence on maize export bans and the gains from open borders.

Nairobi Declaration on fertiliser and soil health

African Union

The 2024 targets for African fertiliser production and use.

CAADP Kampala Declaration 2026 to 2035

African Union

The continental agriculture strategy and its targets.

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](#) · [Glossary](#)

World Food Programme (WFP)

The UN's food aid agency. It depends on voluntary donations, which fell sharply in 2025. [Glossary](#) · [Source: wfp.org](#)

IFAD

The International Fund for Agricultural Development, a UN fund that has invested in rural people since 1977. It lends to and funds programmes for small farmers, and donor governments refill it in pledging rounds every three years. [Glossary](#) · [Source: ifad.org](#)

FAO

The Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN's agency for farming, fishing, forests and hunger, based in Rome. [Glossary](#) · [Source: fao.org](#)

WMO

The World Meteorological Organization, the UN's agency for weather, climate and water. It coordinates forecasts and early warnings. [Glossary](#) · [Source: wmo.int](#)

Anticipatory action

Releasing money and help when a forecast shows a disaster is likely, before it strikes, because acting early costs less. [Glossary](#)

African Union (AU)

The organisation of 55 African states, based in Addis Ababa. Its heads of state meet each February. It can suspend members after a coup. [Glossary](#) · [Source: au.int](#)

CAADP and the Kampala Declaration

The African Union's plan for farming and food. The Kampala Declaration sets its goals for 2026 to 2035. [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. [Our recommendation on this](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: cftc.gov](#)

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. [Our recommendation on this](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: comesa.int](#)

COP climate summits

The yearly UN climate conference. COP31 meets in Antalya, Turkey, from 9 to 20 November 2026. [Climate and energy briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: unfccc.int](#)