El Niño floods worsen humanitarian needs in Kenya

March 2024 | Kenya

KEY MESSAGES

• Almost all households were in need in the counties of Garissa, Mandera, Marsabit and Turkana in June 2023. Water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH) was the most affected sector, mainly driven by lack of access to sanitation infrastructure and clean water, predisposing the community to water-borne diseases. The El Niño rainfall experienced in the last quarter of 2023, escalated the situation. Similar experience can be expected during the March-May 2024 rainy season as above-average rainfall has been predicted.

• The low or lack of income, high commodity prices, and depleted livelihoods caused by five consecutive dry seasons is expected to continue driving food insecurity in these regions. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that poor consumption levels were already being reported prior to the floods, hence increasing reliance on humanitarian aid.

• Due to the pre-existing vulnerabilities, households in these counties are highly predisposed to the negative effects of heavy rains. If there is no tangible response, the already vulnerable populations may be at risk of extreme levels of food insecurity due to lack of stable income and increased food prices.

CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Kenya is often affected by extreme climate events, in particular droughts and floods. The frequency and intensity of these events are likely to increase further due to global climate change. Consequently, communities in the Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL) region continue to face adverse effects, the since agriculture and water sectors are the most affected. For example, the 2020 to 2022 historic drought affected 4.2 million people (as of October 2022) in the ASAL region, eroding communities' livelihood and leaving them in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

In the last quarter of 2023, heavy rains and severe floods were experienced in Kenya, causing the death of at least 174 people and displacing over 500,000 households (as of 18th December 2023). It also resulted in rivers overflowing, causing flash floods and forcing communities living along rivers to move to higher ground (especially along River Tana in Garissa and Tana River, River Daawa in Mandera and Ewaso nyiro in Isiolo). Furthermore, over 17,000 acres of farmland were destroyed, and over 13,400 livestock deaths reported, as well as damage to WASH infrastructure, disruption of normal transport service and access to water sources. This likely exacerbated the situation in the ASAL regions which were the hardest hit areas by the floods, as their resilience had already been eroded by the prolonged drought. According to OCHA approximately 90% of those impacted by the flooding reside in Mandera, Garissa, Tana River, Wajir, Isiolo, and Meru counties. The meteorological department has predicted, above - average rains in these regions during the March-May rainy season. This might have similar impact in these areas.

Before these flooding, REACH - in partnership with the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) - undertook the Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) in host communities of four ASAL counties (Garissa, Mandera, Marsabit and Turkana) in June 2023. The findings from the assessment found significant pre-existing vulnerabilities, as all the assessed counties had a high prevalence and severity of living standard gaps.

38 out of **47**
counties affected

671K
people affected by the floods

545K
people displaced

1.5M
in need of humanitarian assistance

Elevated WASH needs in flood-affected areas

The absence of latrines in Turkana (65%), Mandera (38%), Garissa (33%), and Marsabit (27%) was somewhat high in June 2023, resulting to households resorting to open defecation due to this lack of sanitation facilities. Cumulatively 83% of households in the targeted counties had WASH needs, which can be attributed to lack of essential sanitation infrastructure and/or lack of access to safe drinking water.

Maalimin- Garissa County_photo by ACTED CRM

Additionally, the proportion of water-insecure households as of June 2023 was considerably high (68% in Turkana, 46% in Garissa, 36% in Mandera, and 27% in Marsabit). This indicates that the majority of households in these locations already didn't have access to adequate, reliable, and safe water.

They relied on open water sources such as rivers, and unprotected wells and springs for drinking water and other hygiene practices. Even if a high proportion of households (over 90% in Garissa, Mandera, and Marsabit) reported washing their hands during some of the critical hand-washing occasions in June 2023, there is a high probability that contaminated water was used, which further exposes them to the risk of contracting waterborne diseases. Floods busted water sources and contaminated them with human and animal waste, posing a health risk to already vulnerable communities. Cases of cholera have been reported since October 2022. Approximately, 12,256 cases were documented across 28 counties, with 205 deaths as of 13 December 2023.

El Niño floods erode livelihood opportunities

MSNA data from June 2023 indicates that 73% of households had livelihood needs. This might be due to the impact of five consecutive dry seasons, resulting in high commodity prices, a depletion of livelihoods assets and ultimately in an increase of households relying on humanitarian assistance as their main source of livelihoods.
This increasing dependence on humanitarian aid poses a concerning risk, being sometimes unpredictable, and any disruption in its delivery may negatively affect the households.

Elwak-Mandera County_photo by ACTED CRM

For example, the situation was heightened in Garissa and Marsabit, as the floods disrupted the transport system, making it difficult for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable communities. The number of households depending on humanitarian aid is expected to increase as a result of the heavy rains, due to its effect on livelihoods.

Additionally, the cost of both food and non-food items was expected to increase due to damaged impassable roads, and loss of goods on transit or from destroyed shops. Based on the MSNA and the September 2023 Joint Market Monitoring Assessment (JMMI), the average income received can only cater for 41% of the minimum expenditure basket (MEB), indicative of the financial difficulty that is faced by communities in accessing basic commodities. To bridge the gap between income and expenditure, households resort to debts which has further eroded their future capacity to deal with shocks, since their income will likely be used for debt repayment.

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Emergency levels of food insecurity in the flood-prone areas

The food security situation in the ASAL counties is extremely concerning, where approximately 2.8 million individuals continue to experience crisis or, even worse, acute food insecurity. Turkana, Marsabit, Mandera, Wajir, Samburu, Isiolo, Garissa, and Tana River were experiencing severe food consumption gaps and were classified to be in IPC Acute Food Insecurity Phase 3 (crisis) or higher during the long rains assessment in September 2023. This prolonged food insecurity situation can be attributable to households' inability to recover from the depletion of their livelihood assets as a result of the drought.

According to the World Food Programme, it will take several years for communities to fully recover from the effects of the prolonged drought.
The experienced flood-induced damage to infrastructure, livestock loss and disruption to markets may aggravate the situation and cause an extension of the recovery period. With the flooding having hit these counties hard and the expected above average rain, the food insecure population and malnutrition among children below the age of five years, as well as pregnant and lactating women is likely to escalate, thus creating the need to intensify humanitarian assistance.

Recommendations

REACH conducted the MSNA after the short rains, when households were expected to have a higher resilience due to the regeneration of pasture, recharge of open water sources and improved crop production. However, their findings are particularly alarming as the data collected during what was expected to be a recovery phase, showed that all assessed counties had a high prevalence and severity of living standard gaps.

Even as the counties are recovering from the effects of the floods, the March to May 2024 short rains are expected to be above average. This may worsen the situation and further aggravate the level of WASH, livelihood, and food security needs. Options for these communities are potentially running out, particularly for those were displaced from their homes.

Therefore, recommendations to approach the current situation include;

- Additional lifesaving humanitarian assistance for the affected and displaced population to meet basic needs (such as health, shelter, and food) and prevent further food consumption score deterioration. Although rains are expected to be mostly in the southern part of Kenya, affected communities in the northeast and coastal areas remain vulnerable.
- Provision of WASH amenities including, clean and safe water, as well as water treatment chemicals, to communities with limited access to water and provision of water storage containers.
- Rehabilitation of sanitation facilities for households without sanitation facilities to prevent open defecation.
- Continuous monitoring of the situation even as we enter the short rain season to provide early warning actions
- Expansion of the MSNA scope to include other counties that were not assessed during the 2023 assessment to fill the existing information gap.

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).

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