

Strengthening El Niño to push 49 million more people into acute hunger



OCHA/Charlotte Cans In 2016, the El Niño-induced drought in Ziway Dugda, Oromia region of Ethiopia, caused widespread hunger.

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Nearly 50 million more people in highly vulnerable communities globally are set to be pushed into acute hunger because of the strengthening El Niño weather phenomenon, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) said on Wednesday.

In response, the agency and partners are boosting efforts in **eight countries** to protect some of the most vulnerable communities who are already struggling with poverty, conflict, joblessness and repeated climate extremes.

Priorities include preparing for floods, droughts and storms before they hit.

“El Niño is a massive threat to the food security of millions who are already vulnerable,” said Carl Skau, [WFP](#)’s Acting Executive Director. **“The sooner we help families to prepare for these climate shocks, the greater our ability to save lives and protect livelihoods.”**

Acute hunger refers to people who are unable to meet their daily food needs.

Key points

- **49 million more people** could face acute hunger because of El Niño beginning in September.
- **225-274 million:** the number of acutely food-insecure people could rise by around 22 per cent.
- **Central America and southern Africa** are expected to be among hardest-hit regions.
- **Early action benefits:** every \$1 invested in prevention can save \$3–\$7 in future losses and response.

Learning from past El Niños

WFP noted that the 2015-2016 El Niño impacted the food security of 60 to 100 million people. Early projections indicate that the 2026-2027 El Niño could **push at least 49 million more people into acute food insecurity** by the end of next year.

After analyzing 45 countries already considered food insecure – and where El Niño will significantly influence rainfall patterns, temperatures, floods and droughts – the agency expects the total number of acutely food-insecure people to rise from 225 million to 274 million people, an increase of approximately 22 per cent.

Parts of Central America and southern Africa are expected to bear the brunt of climate extremes, although significant impacts are also forecast in eastern Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

WFP stressed the variety of El Niño’s impact: “Some countries are already experiencing below-average rainfall, flooding and unusually hot temperatures, while others are expected to face deteriorating conditions during upcoming planting seasons and harvests.”

WFP report findings:

- **Latin America and the Caribbean** could see one of the sharpest rises in food insecurity, with more than 16 million people affected.
- **Central America** is projected to have the largest proportional increase (83.1 per cent) of all areas analyzed in the report.
- **East and Southern Africa** face substantial risks, particularly where upcoming rainy seasons are critical for food production. More than 18 million people could see their food security deteriorate, representing a 26 per cent increase.
- **Southern African countries** are particularly exposed because many households depend on rain-fed subsistence agriculture.

- **Asia and the Pacific could see significant impacts in several already vulnerable countries with an estimated 8.2 million additional people facing acute food insecurity.**
- **West and Central Africa are also at risk with food insecurity projected to increase by 12 per cent, affecting nearly six million additional people.**

[WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\) have already appealed](#) for increased support to help at-risk communities prepare for El Niño to help protect lives, livelihoods and food security before emergencies escalate.

Investment multiplier

El Niño is expected to peak between September and December 2026, but the effects will be felt throughout 2027 in many countries, owing to impacts on future harvests. “Drought, flooding and extreme temperatures are already putting communities at risk,” WFP warned.

Working closely with [FAO](#), [OCHA](#) and other partners, WFP has active prevention plans in more than 50 countries and is supporting governments and communities to reduce risks.

Since May, WFP has triggered anticipatory action plans in South Sudan, Chad, Mauritania, Uganda, Guatemala and El Salvador, providing more than \$14 million in lifesaving responses to support half a million people. This includes scaling its pre-arranged financing mechanisms such as disaster risk insurance, credit, and digital payments, to make more money available at lower cost.

These efforts help communities and governments prepare for and withstand sudden shocks while reducing future humanitarian needs. In fact, experiences from prior El Niño events have shown that \$1 invested in anticipatory programs can save between \$3 and \$7 in avoided losses and response costs.

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