**OPINION PIECE:**

# Is it too little too late for Zimbabwe's maize imports?

*By Wandile Sihlobo, Business Day, 07 January 2020*

In 2019 I applauded the Zimbabwean government for having grasped the urgency of a potential maize shortage in time and outlining a plan to address it. This after Joseph Gondo, chief director of Zimbabwe's agriculture ministry, told Bloomberg on June 6 that the country's Grain Marketing Board, a state-owned agency, would float an international tender to import 750,000 tons of maize.

While this was set to be the largest maize import volume since the 2016/2017 season, it was somewhat less than what I thought the country needed to fill the shortage in the 2019/2020 marketing year of 1-million tons. Nonetheless, I was encouraged by the government's proactive stance.

The need for maize imports was caused by a poor domestic harvest, which fell 53% year on year in the 2018/2019 production season to 800,000 tons, according to data from the US department of agriculture.

The dearth of credible statistics on the maize trade in Zimbabwe made it difficult to follow the planned import activity. But the news of food shortages in a country that has dominated headlines over the past few weeks show that the Grain Marketing Board didn't actually import the 750,000 tons that was planned in June. Had this been imported, Zimbabwe would not be facing the current maize (and food) shortages.

On January 3, Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa told Bloomberg his country would import maize from Mexico, Ukraine and SA to help ease pressure in the country's stocks. But again there were no details on whether this was the maize that would be supplied by organisations such as the World Food Programme, private businesses or the Grain Marketing Board.

Mexico had about 1.5-million tons of maize for export in 2019/2020, according to the US department of agriculture. Meanwhile, in the same season, SA had about 1.1-million tons for export, according to our estimates. The US department estimated that Ukraine had the largest volume of about 25-million tons of maize for the export market in the 2019/2020 season.

It is unclear how much maize Mexico and Ukraine have exported thus far from their 2019/2020 allocations. By the second week of December, SA had already exported 67% of the allocated maize for exports in the 2019/2020 season, which ends in April 2020. Zimbabwe was one of the smallest buyers, having imported only 32,124 tons of maize from SA between May and December.

This means SA, and possibly Mexico, now have relatively tighter stocks compared to midyear, when it became clear that Zimbabwe would need to import a large volume of maize. Had the sales been facilitated then, Zimbabwe would have found abundant maize supplies in the market. It will therefore be interesting to see where Zimbabwe sources its maize from over the coming few weeks, and at what price.

Another possible source is Tanzania, which sent its first consignment of maize to Zimbabwe, of about 1,200 tons, on September 20. But I am concerned the maize shortage in Zimbabwe could be prolonged. The 2019/2020 production year crop outlook points to the possibility of another poor harvest because of a second consecutive year of below-normal rainfall. Furthermore, a recent report from the Group on Earth Observations Global Agricultural Monitoring Initiative indicates a high probability of below-normal rainfall in Southern Africa between December 2019 and February 2020. This is a period when the maize crop will need more moisture as it will be at pollination.

Under these circumstances, it would be advisable for the Zimbabwean government and World Food Programme to go beyond making public statements about the possible dangers, and plan ahead. As things stand, it is plausible that Zimbabwe's food shortage could remain an issue until the first quarter of 2021.

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