A drought alert has been launched. The Regional Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) warned that the upcoming drought conditions in the Horn of Africa will be similar to that of the 2017 drought in terms of scale and resource requirements. The group listed southern Ethiopia amongst the areas where the condition is particularly serious. The majority of farmers and herders in Ethiopia are dependent on rain and are highly vulnerable to strong climate variations.

This forecast was confirmed by the National Meteorological Agency, which states that the below average performance of the 2019 summer (June-September) rains is expected to affect the south eastern parts of the country, mostly Somali region.

Further impacting this bleak scenario is the already dire food security and nutritional conditions of communities, particularly in lowland pastoralist and agro-pastoralist areas. The 2019 spring (mid-February-May) rains were late and sub-optimal in almost all rain-receiving areas, delaying crop planting as well as pasture regeneration and replenishment of water sources. Reports of water shortages and deteriorating livestock body conditions and livestock deaths for lack of pasture and water are increasing. Some of the drought-affected areas are also hosting IDPs and returnees, who still have persistent humanitarian needs.

The rains have relatively improved in May but were insufficient to improve the humanitarian situation of communities recovering from past consecutive years of drought. The situation is aggravated by the interruption or scale down of nutrition programs in most of the affected areas due to resource shortfalls. Reports as of the end of April indicate that nutrition support for 135 hotspot Priority 1 districts phased out, and current funding will only cover 70 districts. Food insecurity is expected to peak during June-September, with with more than half of the population in affected areas estimated to be in IPC Phase 3 or above. Malnutrition and health-related morbidity and mortality as well as protection risks exponentially increase during a drought, especially amongst the most vulnerable sections of society.

The Somali region has prepared a prioritized Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan (EPRP) targeting 1.27 million people across their 11 zones. The Plan seeks US$20.7 million to mainly address the drought impact. Half of the requirement is for emergency agriculture and livestock interventions. Communities in these areas will suffer two consecutive dry seasons.

Taking into account other drought-affected areas (outside Somali region), including lowlands of Oromia and SNNP and parts of Afar regions, some 3.8 million people will require early action to avoid a humanitarian crisis at an estimated cost of US$40 to 60 million (Agriculture, Health, Nutrition and WaSH responses). Meanwhile, the cost of inaction is estimated at $250-300 million in emergency humanitarian assistance, not to mention the loss of development gains.

On 5 June 2019, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, announced a US$45 million funding envelope from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to immediately scale up food and nutrition assistance, safe water provision, livelihoods protection, and other urgent humanitarian support to drought-affected people across parts of Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Ethiopia's portion is $10 million.

The fund is a crucial catalyst to kick start early action in the face of a crisis in the making, but urgent additional funding is required. This particular “early action” grant has two key objectives: 1) to prevent mortality and morbidity, as well as a costly humanitarian response and the loss of development gains; 2) to improve joint programming with key development partners and increase efficiency and efficacy of investments.

While announcing CERF’s contribution of $10 million to Ethiopia, Mr. Lowcock urged donors to increase their support for drought early action response, in addition to critical assistance to the ongoing nationwide response to internal displacement. The Ethiopia Humanitarian Appeal of US$1.313 billion is only 27.9 per cent funded, including 13.5 per cent from the Government of Ethiopia.