



KEY PRIORITIES

298,800

CURRENTLY
AFFECTED PEOPLE

440,500

POTENTIALLY
AFFECTED PEOPLE

HIGH RISK

OF AN INCREASE IN
WIDESPREAD FOOD
INSECURITY AND
MALNUTRITION

FUNDING AND
RESPONSE CAPACITY

UN agencies
(FAO, WFP, UNICEF)

Several INGOs working
in food security in the area
(Action Against Hunger,
Save the Children, Children's
Foundation, World Vision, ZOA,
Malteser, Caritas, Halu)

Government institutions
(ICBF, Departmental
Secretary of Health)

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

La Guajira is the Colombian department with the highest food insecurity prevalence based on 2022 estimates. In 2022, a lack of economic resources resulted in 59.7% (623,000 people) of the department's households reducing the quantity and quality of their meals, while 17.5% (183,000 people) had at least one person going without food for at least a day (DANE 04/07/2023 a and 04/07/2023 b).

From 1 January to 2 September 2023, local health authorities identified 1,762 severe and moderate malnutrition cases among under-five children, with an average of 35 cases per week. The municipalities with the most cases were Riohacha (498), Uribia (495), Maicao (332), and Manaure (300). Of the reported cases, 1,342 came from indigenous communities. The number of malnutrition cases exceeded the statistically expected number, suggesting an unusual increase (La Guajira Health Secretariat accessed 18/09/2023). Some of the most affected municipalities (Maicao, Manaure, and Uribia) are in Alta Guajira region in northern La Guajira (Fedesarrollo 18/01/2019). This region is home to the Wayúu people, the biggest indigenous community in Colombia, who also lives in neighbouring Venezuela (DANE 24/09/2021). Because Alta Guajira region borders the Venezuelan state of Zulia, it serves as an entry and transit point for migrants. One-third of Venezuelan migrants enter Colombia through La Guajira, and the biggest migrant settlement in the country is in Maicao (DANE 05/07/2023; PGN 27/08/2023; El Colombiano 11/12/2022).

El Niño started in June 2023 and is forecasted to last in the country until March 2024. It has a high probability of displaying above-moderate strength that will likely cause droughts and heatwaves for the rest of the year, affecting Colombia's rice and corn yields (ACAPS 25/07/2023). Lower-than-average rains in the first semester of 2023 prompted the Colombian Government to declare an emergency in La Guajira, later declared unconstitutional on 2 October (Ministry of Environment 30/06/2023; President of Colombia 02/07/2023; Constitutional Court of Colombia 02/10/2023).

Anticipated scope and scale

As at August 2023, 621,900 people were experiencing food insecurity in La Guajira, 298,800 (48%) of whom were in Alta Guajira region (FSC accessed 18/09/2023). Most of the affected population belongs to indigenous communities, which comprise 72% of the region's total population (DANE accessed 18/09/2023). The most affected groups are indigenous communities, refugees and migrants, women, and children.

The continuing El Niño season will likely increase the number of people experiencing food insecurity. As at August, 276,100 were susceptible of experiencing food insecurity because of El Niño the department (a 44% increase compared to August 2023), 141,700 of whom were in Alta Guajira region (a 47% increase). Indigenous communities in La Guajira, particularly the Wayúu, are at risk of food insecurity, with 67% already experiencing it and 32% susceptible to experiencing it, although projections do not indicate a timeline for the susceptibility figures forecast. The map on page 5 shows the 141,700 anticipated increase in people experiencing food insecurity because of El Niño season in each of Alta Guajira's municipalities (FSC accessed 18/09/2023).

Humanitarian constraints

Bad road infrastructure and climatic events in La Guajira hinder the humanitarian response. In the 2022 flood season (from September–November), heavy rains restricted mobility across the department. Indigenous communities also live in dispersed rural areas, which are logistically difficult to reach, hindering data collection on humanitarian needs and humanitarian assistance delivery. Non-state armed groups also play a role in constraining humanitarian assistance as they endanger humanitarian workers' security and lives (OCHA 31/07/2023).

CRISIS IMPACTS

According to a 2022 WFP report on Colombia, food insecurity led many households to modify their dietary habits by opting for less nutritious options. The survey found that 17% of Colombian households did not consume basic foods and vegetables daily and seldom or never consumed protein-rich foods, such as meat or dairy products (WFP 16/02/2023). In 2021, La Guajira had the highest monetary poverty incidence (affecting 67% of its population) combined with extreme poverty levels (affecting 40%). This meant that 40% of La Guajira's households could not afford a basic food bundle guaranteeing 2,100 calories a day (DANE 26/04/2022).

In border areas, refugees and migrants are vulnerable to experiencing severe food insecurity resulting from higher poverty and unemployment levels, coupled with conflict-related mobility constraints. These areas include La Guajira, which borders Venezuela's Zulia state. The most recent information available shows that in La Guajira, 93,500 refugees and migrants intending to stay in the country and 38,000 staying in host communities experience food insecurity, amounting to over 60% of all migrants in the department. Food insecurity is more severe among refugees and migrants from women-headed households, particularly those belonging to a minority ethnic group (Afro-Colombian or indigenous), with low education levels, or with disabilities (WFP 17/11/2022). As at June 2023, 5,000 people had received food, health, education, and protection assistance (GIFMM/R4V 08/09/2023). Despite Venezuelan refugees and migrants in La Guajira receiving attention from humanitarian organisations, the number of these groups entering Colombia increased to 62% between 2022–2023 (Migración Colombia 12/09/2023). The increase in Venezuelan refugees entering Colombia mainly through La Guajira, as well as the likely general increase in the food-insecure population in the department, poses additional challenges to the humanitarian response, which might be insufficient if it remains at the current levels.

Health

Persistent food insecurity leads to negative health outcomes, such as infectious diseases, poor oral health, injuries, chronic conditions, mental health problems, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes (University of Toronto accessed 18/09/2023; NIH accessed 18/09/2023). Children are among the most affected groups. As at mid-September 2023, La Guajira was the department with the most deaths from acute malnutrition among under-five children, comprising 43 cases out of 154 in the whole country. The number of cases in La Guajira is also atypically higher than historical trends (INS et al. 2023). In August 2023, 76% of severe and acute malnutrition cases in La Guajira were among children from indigenous communities (La Guajira Health Secretariat accessed 18/09/2023). Childbearing women are also particularly vulnerable. As at July 2023, the maternal mortality rate in La Guajira is double the national average, with 92.9 deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants compared to 45.3 for the whole country (GIFMM et al. 14/09/2023).

Migrants report the most difficulty when accessing health services, in comparison with other services such as education or justice. A May–June 2023 survey reported that 90% of refugees and migrants had difficulty accessing health services because of enrolment obstacles in the health system. 19.2% of refugees and migrants were also diagnosed with at least one chronic disease, 20.6% of whom had not received treatment (GIFMM/R4V 12/09/2023).

Food insecurity is one of the main mental health issue drivers among refugees and migrants. By September 2023, 80% of the mental health symptoms of refugees and migrants were related to economic difficulties to cover food needs (GIFMM/R4V 12/09/2023). Health infrastructure and service provision in La Guajira are insufficient, although in June, the Ministry of Health announced allocating resources to repair and expand hospital facilities in Uribia, along with similar investments in Maicao, Manaure, and Riohacha (Ministry of Health 28/06/2023). Health insurance coverage in the department is significantly lower than the national average. La Guajira also does not have the capacity to provide complex treatments, which people must seek in other departments. Health institution administration is also highly deficient. As at 2018, six state-run health providers were at high or medium financial risk and two were intervened by the national government because of deficient management (DNP 04/08/2018). Health institutions for indigenous communities who typically live in rural and dispersed areas, including in Alta Guajira region, are insufficient and located in urban areas. La Guajira's health system also faces inclusivity challenges regarding intercultural contexts and Wayúu customs (Government of Colombia 31/07/2023).

WASH

La Guajira has chronically low access to WASH services. 43% of its total population lacks access to improved water sources, increasing to 73% in rural areas. Similarly, 47% of the total population (75% in rural areas) does not have access to adequate infrastructure to manage residential wastewater, such as toilets connected to sewers (DANE accessed 18/09/2023). The situation is particularly alarming in Alta Guajira region, where 88% of households in Uribia, 65% in Manaure, and 52% in Maicao do not have access to improved water sources (DANE accessed 18/09/2023). The issue most affects the Wayúu population in La Guajira's rural areas, with only 22% having access to potable water (OCHA 31/07/2023). Lack of access to WASH services contributes to the incidence of waterborne diseases, which is one of the main drivers of malnutrition, worsening food insecurity (ACAPS 25/07/2023).

The lack of access to WASH services affects refugees and migrants more severely. Alta Guajira region is home to the biggest migrant settlement in Colombia known as La Pista, in Maicao municipality. 12,000 migrants, mostly from Venezuela, live there without access to water, sanitation, and waste collection (PGN 27/08/2023; InSight Crime 31/05/2023).

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Climate change and geographic vulnerability

Most of La Guajira's territory is arid and semi-arid, with scarce vegetation and water. The department is also highly susceptible to the impacts of climate variability and natural hazards that directly affect rural and peri-urban informal settlements. These areas are mostly inhabited by indigenous Wayúu, migrant, refugee, and returnee populations. Climate change and its effects are increasingly causing humanitarian crises, with droughts, hurricanes, floods, storms, erosion, flash floods, and lightning. The most intensely affected municipalities are Albania, Barrancas, Dibulla, Fonseca, Maicao, Manaure, Riohacha, Uribia, and Villanueva (OCHA 31/07/2023; Fedesarrollo 18/01/2019).

Along with geographic vulnerability to climate hazards and weather extremes, northern Colombia is also susceptible to El Niño's effects, which tend to bring dry conditions. El Niño started in the country in June 2023, and prediction models show that it is more than 95% likely to persist until March 2024, with a 71% chance of exceeding moderate strength (NOAA 12/10/2023).

Colombia is anticipated to experience droughts and heatwaves during the rest of 2023 (ACAPS 25/07/2023). Rainfall levels in La Guajira in November are expected to be 10–30% lower than the historical trend and 10–20% lower in December (IDEAM 20/09/2023). Most of the agricultural production is located south of the department, although the semi-arid geography does not favour agricultural productivity.

Food inflation

Global food prices have considerably increased in recent years, increasing vulnerability to food insecurity. The FAO Food Price Index increased by 64 points between June 2020 and March 2022 and, although it has lowered since, remains at levels higher than previous food inflationary cycles. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has also affected international food provision, since both countries are among the most important food product providers in the world; both countries provided 12% of commercialised calories in 2021 (ECLAC et al. 06/12/2022). In Colombia, food inflation peaked in 2022 and reached 28% in 2023 (DANE 05/01/2023). The rate has slowed down in 2023, reaching 5% between January–August, but remains at higher-than-normal levels (DANE 07/09/2023). This consequent increase in food prices has escalated people's vulnerability to food insecurity.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Venezuelan crisis

La Guajira department has the sixth-biggest Venezuelan refugee and migrant population in Colombia as it borders Venezuela's Zulia state. As at September 2023, there were 2.9 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants living in the country, 33.5% of whom entered through La Guajira (R4V 05/09/2023; DANE 05/07/2023). La Pista, in Maicao municipality, is the biggest migrant settlement in the country (PGN 27/08/2023; El Colombiano 11/12/2022). La Guajira department hosts 178,500 Venezuelan refugees and migrants or 6% of the total in Colombia. The municipalities with the highest concentration of these people are Maicao (82,800) and Riohacha (48,900) (GIFMM/R4V 14/03/2023). Refugees and migrants tend to have acute food security needs because of higher poverty and unemployment levels and conflict-related mobility constraints (as explained in more detail in the Crisis Impacts section above). This puts additional pressure on governmental and humanitarian efforts to attend to food security needs.

Economic vulnerability

La Guajira experiences high rates of poverty, unemployment, and labour informality that are correlated with low- and unstable-income sources, which in turn decrease people's resilience against food insecurity (WFP 28/02/2023). La Guajira has the biggest monetary poverty rate in the country and the fourth-highest multidimensional poverty rate (43% in total, 65% in rural areas) (DANE accessed 18/09/2023). Multidimensional poverty rates are even higher in Alta Guajira region: 92% in Uribia, 87% in Manaure, and 60% in Maicao (DANE accessed 18/09/2023). Women are more economically vulnerable in La Guajira, with 113 women for every 100 men experiencing poverty. La Guajira's wage gap (29.6%) is the highest in Colombia (12.1% for the whole country) (GIFMM et al. 14/09/2023). Practices such as child marriages involving underage girls from indigenous communities and older men contribute to women and girls' economic vulnerability (EE 01/08/2023).

Riohacha, La Guajira's capital, has an unemployment rate of 13.3% (June–August 2023), the fifth highest of the cities measured by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE 29/09/2023). 62% of Riohacha workers do not have a formal contract with access to social security (pension funds and healthcare insurance) (DANE 11/09/2023). Labour informality is typically associated with unstable economic conditions, low incomes, low access to social security, and, in general, high vulnerability (Periodico UNAL 23/01/2023). There is an information gap about labour informality in municipalities other than Riohacha (DANE 11/09/2023). Food insecurity also increases households' economic vulnerability, with 43% of people obtaining loan shark debts to afford food and other basic services (WFP 28/02/2023).

Presence of non-state armed groups

The presence of non-state armed groups in the region aggravates food insecurity and hinders the humanitarian response. Their activities, such as extortion, restrict the mobility of civilians, disrupting the department's already difficult economic situation. In June 2023, there was an increase in selective and collective homicides, threats, and extortion, among other violent acts against the civilian population. The violence is related to conflict between the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada (ACSN) and Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC) over the control of illegal businesses, such as drug trafficking (DPC 27/06/2023).

The AGC is rooted in paramilitary groups that demobilised in 2006 but resumed operations in 2008. The AGC integrates several organisations, including regional criminal structures, drug traffickers, collection offices, and urban and semi-urban criminal gangs. The group operates in several Colombian departments and municipalities. Among its activities are transnational drug trafficking and the facilitation of cross-border illegal economies between Colombia and Venezuela (ACAPS 13/01/2023). Similarly, the ACSN also came from paramilitary groups and was part of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, an umbrella organisation of paramilitary groups active until the mid-2000s. The ACSN is present in northern Colombia, including Atlántico, La Guajira, and Magdalena departments. The group is involved in illegal economies, which is the main motivation for its disputes with the AGC (Pares 16/06/2023). Fighting among these armed groups poses additional risks to the civilian population, and humanitarian resources are required to address related protection risks, such as gender-based violence. Clashes between these groups in 2023 have generated violent acts, such as massacres, selective homicides, extortion, threats, mobility restrictions, the imposition of behavioural rules, and stigmatisation (DPC 21/06/2023). In September 2023, 70 families were reported to be displaced from the rural area of Riohacha through violent acts, such as assassinations and kidnappings (DPC YouTube 05/09/2023). In July 2023, a Wayúu community leader was assassinated in Maicao municipality (RCN 26/07/2023).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Even though humanitarian organisations delivering food security aid have a strong presence in La Guajira, including Alta Guajira region, their efforts might be insufficient given the likely magnitude of the crisis. 12 humanitarian organisations are working on food security in La Guajira. In 2022, they reached 190,000 people in the department, 124,000 (65%) of whom were in Alta Guajira region. As at August 2023, these figures were 59,000 and 31,000, respectively. The assistance they provide includes monetary transfers, capacity-building, productive projects for food production, data collection, and food supplements. WFP is the organisation that has reached the most people in La Guajira (52,500 in 2023), followed by

UNICEF (2,200) and Save the Children (1,605) (FSC; Nutrition Cluster accessed 29/08/2023). The humanitarian response plan required USD 47.6 million to address Colombia's food security and USD 14.3 million for all sectors of humanitarian assistance in La Guajira (OCHA 13/03/2023).

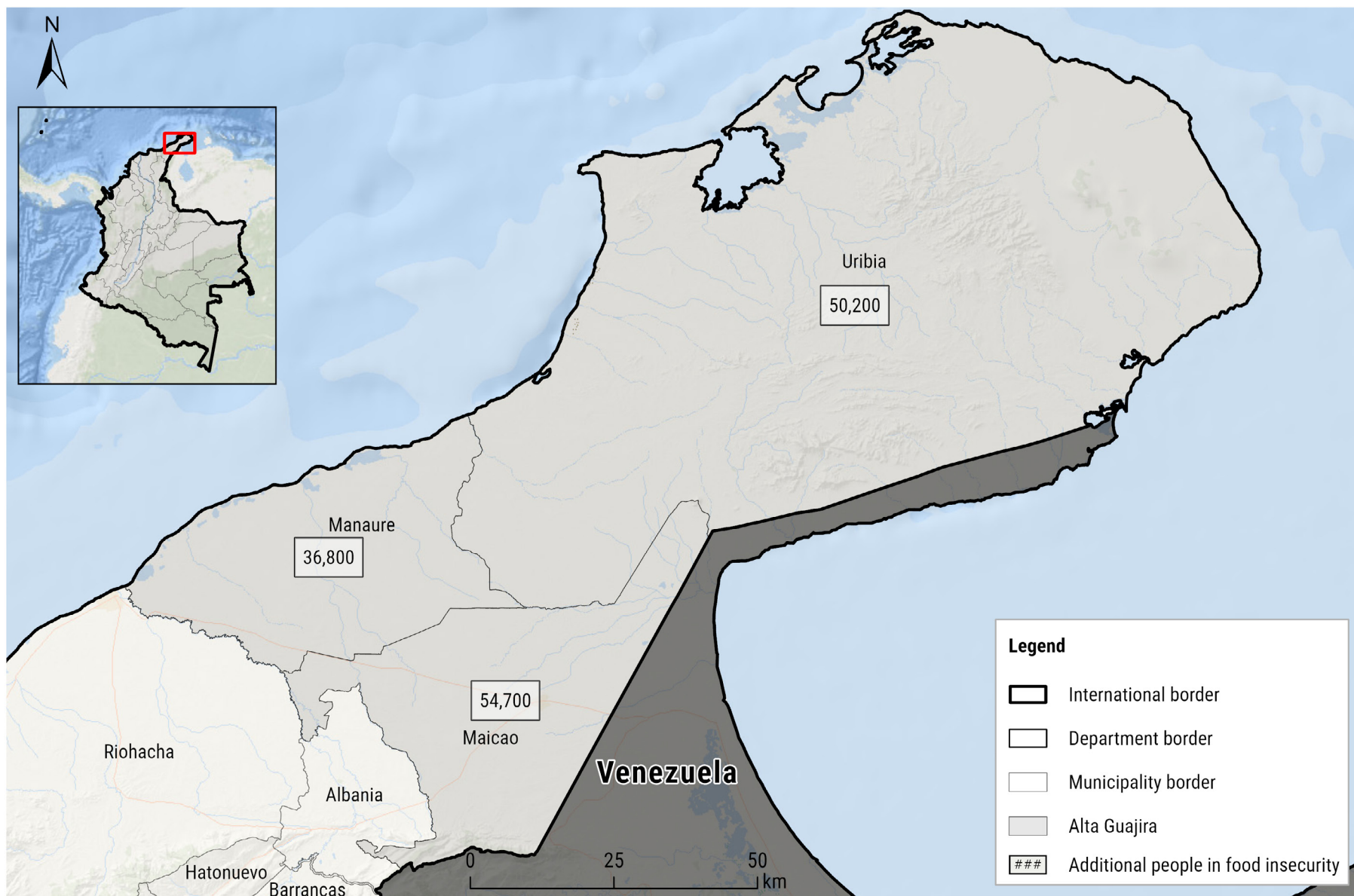
The humanitarian sector's current capacity to attend to the future food security crisis in La Guajira, including Alta Guajira, might be insufficient. Since the number of people experiencing food insecurity in Alta Guajira region might increase by 47%, from 298,800 to 440,500 (projections do not indicate a timeline for the susceptibility figures forecast), the crisis will require a significant increase in humanitarian response and coordination with national and local authorities (FSC accessed 18/09/2023).

Besides humanitarian organisations, national and local authorities have also been allocating resources to focus on La Guajira's humanitarian crisis. On 2 July, the Colombian Government issued an executive decree declaring a state of emergency given La Guajira's humanitarian crisis. This allowed the Government to issue decrees for urgent actions without congress approval and bypass some legal requirements, subject to review by the Constitutional Court. Under the state of emergency, the Government issued 12 decrees across several areas. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture gained authority from the decrees to buy food from small- and medium-sized food producers to guarantee food distribution without following standard procurement rules (La Silla Vacía 03/10/2023). On 2 October, the court declared the state of emergency unconstitutional, taking away the legal foundation of the decrees. Only decrees related to water availability were allowed to continue until July 2024. The court prompted the Government and Congress to attend to La Guajira's humanitarian crisis through measures other than the state of emergency (Constitutional Court of Colombia 02/10/2023).

The decision's impact on government-provided assistance is still unclear. Several government organisations provide assistance to La Guajira's population, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, which has signed an agreement with Wayúu communities to promote food production projects. Under the agreement, the ministry will provide technical assistance to the communities in structuring business plans for crop production, benefiting 6,900 people (Infobae 27/07/2023).

The Ministry of Housing has also committed resources to improve La Guajira's WASH infrastructure, including an agreement to build a water provision system in Uribia for 2,800 people and an agreement with WaterAid to rehabilitate WASH infrastructure used by the Wayúu (Ministry of Housing 17/07/2023). The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare has distributed drinking water to more than 54,000 children in the department, including Alta Guajira region (ICBF 30/08/2023).

ANTICIPATED INCREASE IN FOOD INSECURITY IN THE ALTA GUAJIRA REGION



Source: ACAPS using data from FSC (accessed 18/09/2023)