The parched south-east of Madagascar suffers from perennial food security problems and annual cyclones. Malnutrition rates are high, but a continuing political crisis has left foreign aid reduced to only emergency assistance.

This part of the large island in the Indian Ocean is also highly vulnerable to locust attacks; they arrive in swarms and wreak havoc on crops. In one day, a single locust can consume roughly its own weight — about 2 grams. According to FAO, 500,000 locusts, a relatively small part of an average swarm, eat the same amount of food a day as about 2,500 people. The particular type of locust found in southern Madagascar can produce a new generation roughly every two months, and up to four generations during one year.

Beta, a 60-year-old farmer from a small village in the south-east, knows only too well how locusts can destroy crops and livelihoods. Dependent on agriculture and with 18 children to support, Beta saw a massive swarm of locusts descend on his fields in July. He feared the worst.

“We were afraid we would lose all of our crops and our pastures,” he said. “We feared young seedlings would be destroyed and there would not be enough grass for our animals.”

Under normal circumstances, the Government’s Locust Control Centre (CNA) would contain the insects. However, underfunded and unable to adequately monitor locust movements, CNA was caught off-guard by the massive swarms forming in 2010. “The locusts return each year, but during the two last years we’ve seen the big swarms,” Beta observed.

News of a locust plague was devastating for a region already in the throes of poverty. Fortunately, Beta was not alone in sounding the alarm. In July, FAO had warned of an “imminent and severe threat” from an increasing number of locust plagues, requiring “immediate response assistance to prevent a humanitarian disaster”.

CERF responded promptly, providing $4.7 million to help FAO and CNA contain the outbreak. Experts say the speed with which the money was released was essential. Had funds arrived later, they would have had much less impact.

Alexandre Huynh is FAO’s Emergency and Rehabilitation Operations Coordinator in Madagascar. He explained that there had been no time to waste, and that if a major control campaign had not been set up quickly, infestations could have reached “plague proportions” with disastrous consequences for agriculture. He said: “When there is a locust infestation, Malagasy farmers do not even sow, as they know their harvest will be destroyed.”

Thanks to CERF funds, a locust-control campaign began in September. The funds allowed the timely dispatch of necessary inputs. These included two helicopters and special equipment for survey and control operations; pesticides; communication materials; and international and national expertise.

Beta said: “This year the assistance arrived on time. We are very happy because our crops and pastures were protected. Without that help, we would not have the quality maize crop that you see around you now.”