

# Botswana rainfed agriculture

## At the whim of a very erratic rainfall regime

Sylvia Thompson, Musonda Ng'onga, Maria Sigopi, Kosmas Shilongo, Baptista Joao, Budzanani Tacheba

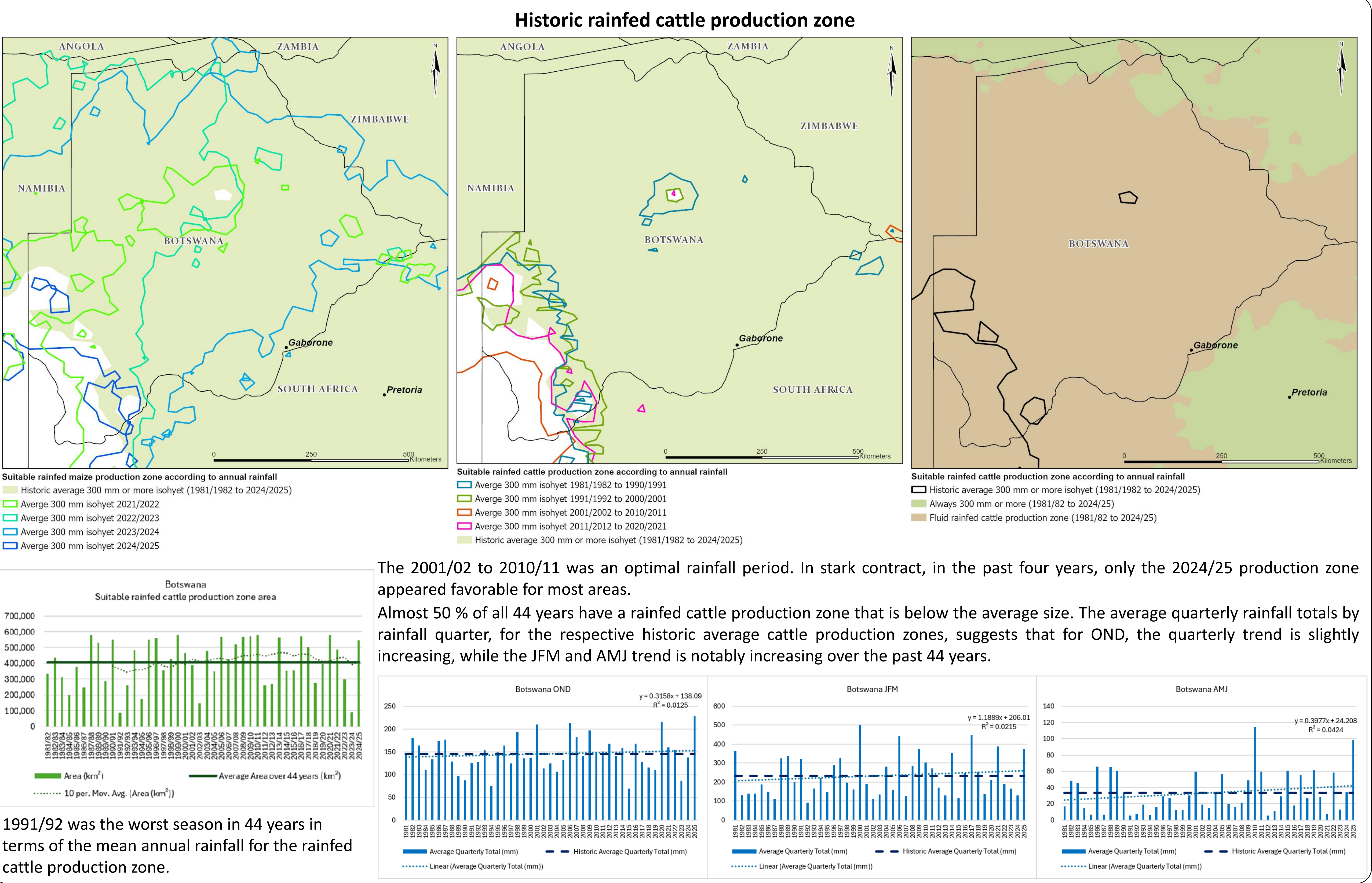
It is estimated that 70 % of the total population of Botswana relies on some sort of subsistence farming for food security or for income (Bahta 2017).

Most of Botswana's crop production relies on seasonal rainfall, with the main subsistence crops being sorghum and maize. Traditionally, livestock dominates the agricultural sector in Botswana and with 80 % relies predominantly on the productivity of the natural rangeland. Against a background, where over 70% of Botswana's surface area is classified as arid or semi-arid, and 19.7% of Botswana's population is estimated to be vulnerable (World Bank 2015), alongside 16% to 17% of the population living below the national or international poverty line (World Bank 2015), it goes without saying that Botswana's economy, as well as its food and water security are directly correlated to its precipitation regime.

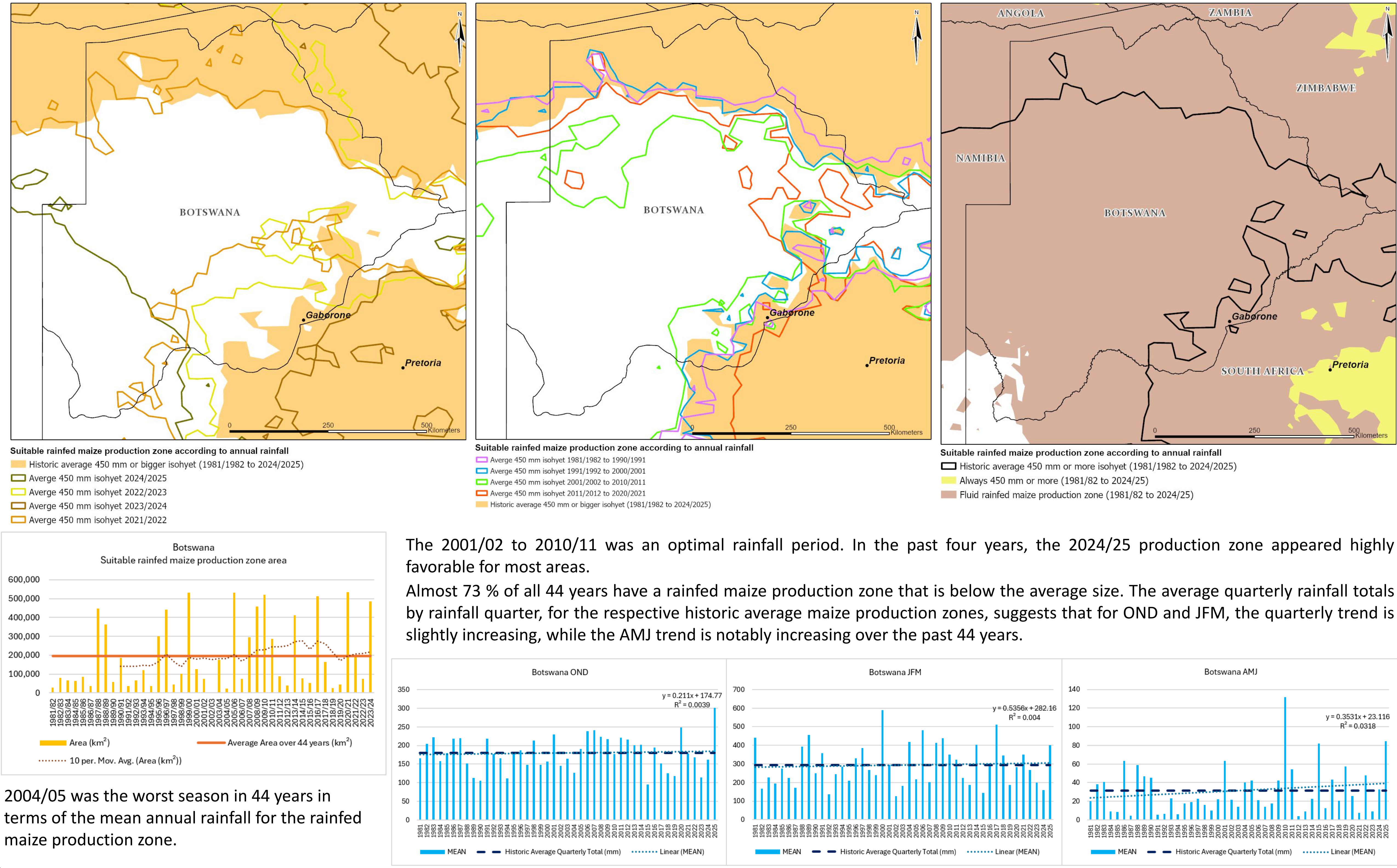
### Optimal production zones

**Cattle** production performance in southern Africa becomes less optimal when mean annual rainfall drops below 300 mm (Coetzee & Werger 1975, Briske et al 2005). In rangeland ecology and livestock management, 300 mm of annual precipitation is considered a critical ecological threshold (Tothill 1990). Below 300 mm of rainfall per season, soil moisture is the most important factor controlling plant growth, while at higher rainfall, soil nitrogen and phosphorus are major contributing factors (Penning et al 1982).

The requirement for **maize** production in the southern African region is at least 450 mm of mean annual rainfall, due to the high evaporation rate in the region (Bagula et al 2022).



### Historic rainfed maize production zone



From 44 years of CHIRPS v3 precipitation data, from 1981/82 to 2024/25, the consecutive rainfed cattle and maize historical average annual rainfall isohyets and regions of 300 mm or more and 450 mm or more were derived .

This shifting or variable isohyet, from season to season, was denoted by a fluid production zone, while the zones that for all 44 seasons, receiving at least 300 mm or 450 mm consecutively for cattle and maize, are the most reliable zones for rainfed cattle and maize production.

Notably, the fluid zone for both the rainfed cattle and maize production is large for Botswana. Almost the entire production zones for rainfed cattle and maize production can be categorised as erratic and unreliable.



### References

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