

DISCUSSION PROCEEDINGS

CLOSING THE GAP - LINKING FOOD SECURITY INFORMATION TO EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Duration:	09. 07 - 15. 08. 2008
Number of participants:	9
Number of Contributions:	9

II. INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC

My name is Dominique Blariaux, I am working for the European Commission in Food Security and have been working for many years, in several countries, in the field of food security and information systems (Niger, Malawi, Angola).

The increasing number of food crises, particularly in Africa, shows that prevention and response mechanisms need to be improved in order to address the determinants and the dynamic nature of food insecurity, at both national and regional levels. In particular, the link between the analysis of short, medium and long-term needs and response mechanisms should be strengthened in order to avoid any repeated mobilisation of emergency assistance and food aid.

In this context and in the light of the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness, an effort should be made *to **harmonise donors' and governments' approaches, to strengthen the links between food security information/early warning systems and the development of effective response strategies***, considering the number and diversity of aid measures in the field of food security information and early warning systems, at the different geographical levels.

To improve linkages between the production of information and the development of effective response strategies, an **inclusive approach** leading as much as possible towards consensus-building between concerned stakeholders is a key condition of success. However, experience has shown that consensus building is a very difficult task, often hindered by political interference and, when achieved, does not always lead to decision making. The link between **'technical' consensus and decision making is difficult to make** partially because analysis of a food security situation, based on security information systems are often very technical and the 'translation' to a more political level are often difficult to make. The 'missing link' might be a **lack of 'communication' skills?**

Therefore I'd like to learn from your opinion and insights on this issue. Hopefully together we could look further into this issue and find possible solutions or good practices to **close the gaps in food security information systems and better link food security information with decision making**.

Regards,

Dominique Blariaux

III. LIST OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Contribution by Robert A. Best, Caribbean Poultry Association (CARICOM), Trinidad and Tobago

Dominique,

In CARICOM we can't even calculate food consumption at the national level in realistic per capita consumption terms.

The household budgetary surveys which might help are VERY infrequent and take several years after execution to be presented.

The FAO data set is wrong because it relies on national institutions which have difficulty making

expert estimates in the absence of "accurate??" national statistics. For example the poultry meat production in Trinidad is understated by 30% by the Central Statistical Office although the Ministry of Agriculture has a more realistic estimate of production .. and poultry meat based on imported hatching eggs MUST be one of the easiest things to get right. In Jamaica we had a similar situation which was corrected recently when the industry sat with the Government to change the way they were collecting and reporting data .. largely because the ongoing debate between importers and the local industry.

I have addressed some of these measurement issues in a report (Chapter 3 I believe)
http://www.crnw.org/documents/studies/Assessment_of_CARICOM_Agri-food_Distribution_Services.pdf

which you might find interesting.

We really **need to strengthen the basic food (not agriculture but including that) information system at the level of the consumer and across supply chains** (or value chains which is the new and sexy way to say almost the same thing).

Certainly in CARICOM the lack of these perspectives would make what you are saying (and which sounds very important on the face of it) difficult to do meaningfully across 15 countries.

Take care

RAB

Contribution by Joseph Opio-Odongo, Policy Specialist – Environment, UNDP Regional Service Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa, Kenya.

Dear Dominique,

I applaud your efforts in tackling the important subject of closing the gap between food security information and effective decision making. From my experience the problem tends to be mainly fourfold:

- a) **non-existent or insufficient** food security information system;
- b) information from the food security information system is provided either **too late** or in a **form that cannot be effectively used** by decision makers;
- c) the available information is **not sufficiently shared with stakeholders**, especially the vulnerable populations that need it for purposes of exerting pressure on those with the obligation to respond to their needs; and
- d) the information system lacks a **learning module** that provides access to **lessons learnt from the various food insecurity initiatives**.

Although the architecture of the information system should respond to the circumstances prevailing in a particular country, **there are generic elements of that system which are noteworthy**. It has to be guided by the country's agricultural and food security policies and strategies. It has to be adequately informed by the available scientific and technical knowledge on food security and nutrition. It should not simply be data-based but capable of distilling essential information from the data sub-system to provide users with evidence-based information for action. It must draw upon lessons learnt from the various efforts in dealing with food insecurity in the country. It is essential that it responds directly to the needs of users of the information and the national and sub-national levels; and hence the need to ensure that there is adequate interaction between information providers and information users.

The issue of **communication skills** that you touched upon is critical. The **forms** in which the technical information is presented to various stakeholders makes a difference in terms of the ultimate motivation to act. Where available information on the costs of inaction by decision makers is credible enough, communicating such information is likely to spur action. Related to this is the need for some **capacity building at the sub-national levels** to enable decision makers and other stakeholders not only access and apply available information, but also learn to adapt elements of the information system to their local situation for purposes of generating relevant data and information that may not be adequately provided by the national information system. That local system also provides a platform for dialogue with decision makers and contributes to the development of civic competence, especially in the rural sector.

The issue of **harmonization** and **coordination** that you mentioned is equally important. Given the capacity constraints in most poor countries, such harmonization permits the most optimal use of available capacity. Where capacities for assessment/early warning and vulnerability analysis, for instance, already exist, but in various agencies in a country, a coordinated harnessing of that capacity and the adequate sharing of the results of the assessments and analyses would be beneficial. A critical aspect of the harmonization also relates to the interface with the national system for disaster prevention and response. This is essential given the increasing vulnerability of the food system to the impacts of climate variability and climate change.

Regards.

Joseph Opio-Odongo

Contribution by Denise Melvin, from the EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme

I am the communication officer of the EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme where – as the name suggests – we often deal with the issue of linking food security information to decision making. As communication officer, I am especially interested in the “missing link” – ie. making sure the **information reaches decision-makers in a way which is appropriate for their needs**.

Institutional mapping is a necessary first step. For example, if the report goes directly to the decision maker it should be brief, non-technical and possibly include some actionable recommendations. If it goes to the team who prepares the information for the decision-maker, then there should perhaps be more detail. Some **basic rules of good communications** also apply:

1. Identify your primary audience in a very specific way
2. Identify how they will use this information
3. Package/Re-Package information to suit the needs of your various target groups
4. Monitor if it is being used. If not, start a dialogue on how to improve what you are supplying.

Our programme’s e-learning course on FSIS (see below) suggests assessing:

- the decision making processes around food security actions;
- who the key stakeholders and decision makers are;
- if and how information is used for making those decisions; and importantly
- to what extent the information provided is demand-driven, which is an essential aspect for the sustainability of the FSIS.

Another important audience could also be the media and CSO’s. Indeed, some policy research shows that policy making takes place within a wider context and is indeed influenced by shifts in public awareness - brought about by the media and other active, awareness raising groups. Again the analysis needs to be presented in a way that is easy to understand, though based on solid evidence.

I would also like to point out my programme's series of free food security related e-learning courses aimed at building capacity in national FSIS. There is a specific one on Food Security Information Systems (see lesson list below). Register at: www.foodsec.org/dl

Lessons include:

Lesson 1: Food Security Information Systems This lesson introduces a basic framework for examining the various components of information systems and how they work together to support the decision making process.

Lesson 2: The Institutional Context This lesson examines institutional responsibilities for the collection, analysis and reporting of food security information. It looks at the problems that arise from poorly integrated national information systems and considers possible solutions.

Lesson 3: Improving Food Security Information Systems This lesson introduces a process for assessing national information systems concerned with food security analysis. It also provides guidelines on how to use the results of the assessment to strengthen food security information systems.

Another important e-learning course is one called “**Reporting Food Security Information.**” Training Materials from the course were also used in a series of face to face training workshops in 7 countries. The workshops brought together both users and producers of food security information to see how to make food security information products more useful for decision making. Find out more : http://www.foodsec.org/tr_fsip.htm

Denise Melvin

Contribution by Dominique Blariaux, from the European Commission

Thank you for these useful suggestions, the e-learning is indeed very relevant, not too long and provide very useful information. However I feel that one aspect of the food security information and the link with decision making is not developed enough: it is the need to reach **a consensus**. Collection and analysis of food security information needed to be implemented through a negotiation process, at the diagnostic, needs assessment and response levels, that could be achieved only through **a multi-partners participatory coordination and steering process, a country-specific institutional set-up and regional coordination mechanisms**. Without consensus at technical level on the diagnostic and response levels between all actors involved (Government, donors and civil society), messages to decision makers could be weak and unclear.

Contribution by Eltighani Elamin, from the Agricultural Economic & Policy Research Center, Sudan

I am sorry to contribute quite late. To my understanding the consensus between technical and political decisions is important, however, this consensus could be achieved indirectly by injecting marketing information and current and anticipated political decision in the food aid assessment.

In other wards, instead of focusing on imputation of the food gap through interviewing and measurements the target communities we should find mathematical formulas that incorporate market findings and modification of current policies to adjust our physical assessment of food aid needed. The current story is that we usually undertake these analyzes separately and then later on try to incorporate them to come out with aid policy/programs .

Truly

TighaniProfessor Eltighani Elamin (PhD)
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Contribution by Rene Verduijn, from South Africa

In response to Blariaux Dominique's posting how to improve linking food security information to effective decision-making I feel there is something missing in the discussions. Food security information specialists will always find it difficult to reach decision-makers directly. There is a community of planners and policy makers that are much closer to decision-makers and have the skills to translate our complex messages into budgeted action points by sector.

INFORMATION SPECIALISTS are too much interested in the detail of the assessment and analysis, and have great difficulties translating such complex information into straightforward policy and programmatic recommendations. We generally stop with some general recommendations at the policy level, but never have the time (or skills) to study the regional and national policy environment in detail, building scenarios, testing what effects policy changes would have on different socio-economic groups. This includes all policies relevant to food security, including agriculture, health, poverty and social, infrastructure, and macro-economic policies - exchange rate, monetary and fiscal ones. I believe all this preparatory work is needed to allow one to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the most feasible policy options, which can then be presented to the Minister. I've been told directly (on several occasions actually) that they do not want more details or maps (despite the beautiful colour scheme selected) presenting an ever better refined situation analysis. They simply want to know what their options are, and how much BANG they will receive for their BUCK. Who ever can undertake this work, should find themselves in high demand!

In short, I feel that the real answer to an increase the so-called evidence-based decision-making lies not within the community of information specialists itself but through INTERACTION with POLICY AND PLANNING SPECIALISTS from other sectors. Food security is useful as an analytical concept, understanding all the steps involved before one can claim to be food secure, but in practise I find it also very cumbersome and complicated when relating to other sectors because it is conceptually very broad and covers too many sectors. In addition, the strict concept promoted by FAO assumes food security as the main organizing principle for development asking partners to find their roles under food access (poverty for instance) or utilization. This is in stark contrast with reality, where a response is organized sectorally using a poverty umbrella. Breaking up food security early on into its 3 main components (food availability, accessibility and utilization) and tackling the related problems individually may be more successful altogether. And this finally links up nicely with the discussion started by Maarten Immink, i.e. the mainstreaming of food and nutrition security... in poverty reduction strategies for instance. There is much work ahead of us.

Rene Verduijn

Contribution by El fadil Ahmed Ismail, from the Food Research Centre, Sudan

I find my self in agree with Rene V. that in developing countries we generally tend to stop at making some broad and vague or general recommendations for matters that require in-depth analysis and detailed plans and actions. May be he is right in this judgment for policy makers usually appear as being busy with their personal problems/interests and do not have the time (or skills) to go over in-depth analyses to the problems under focus in order to come out with effective decisions.

In many countries, most of policy makers are politicians who lack the technical and a systematic & analytical-mind and this is further aggravated by severe lack of information/data, knowledge, skills, and capacity needed for making and implementing decisions. So, they tend to make arbitrary decisions based on their personal accumulated knowledge rather than knowledge acquired through an organized information system or procedure as due to a "no-system". In a "no-system" the factors that govern the decision making are basic education, tribal or personal interest & or personal judgment. This "no-system" by itself became an on-going system that runs the whole life ending into endless crisis and renewable catastrophes. In a more clear word, decision making in a developing country context is far different compared to a less developed country, therefore require steadying the 'body' to erect the 'shade'. To overcome this shortcoming

we need to translate the global knowledge-base information on "effective decision making" into practical policy tools and actions at every country level, incorporating all aspects (social, economic and political decisions). Hence, we should capitalize on initial investment in DECISION SUPPORT METHODS such as economic valuation and impact assessment. The point that requires particular focus is how to generate awareness that decisions must be cost-effective and this should be made while assessing the potential impacts early in the decision or policy process. Below are some recommendations that can help in mitigating the information gap in effective decision making and subsequently lead to improve the quality of decisions and its effectiveness

- Capacity building for policy action at local, national and regional levels through technical workshops that gather policy-makers, scientists and civil society activists to endorse a viable mechanism for learning how a decision can be made "cooked" and the various channels, costs and impacts
- Senior Level Training & Guidance procures/programmes on how to effectively use impact assessment and economic valuation techniques when making a decision
- Alumni that permit access to compact and thoroughly refined policy-relevant knowledge, resources, and tools, using electronic media and printed materials
- Organize Forum gatherings/Alliance between government and civil society sectors to assess and recommend integrated policies on any of the raised issues prior to implementation rather than a single (usually ad hoc) minister's opinion

Dr. El fadil Ahmed ismail Food Research Centre Khartoum North ARC-FRC Sudan

Excerpts of the summary of the Forum's first discussion

Gaps in information generation:

- Inconsistent information inputs (including delays and inadequacy) received from the main partners are reflected negatively in the reliability and credibility of information outputs (E.F.A Ismail, Sudan)
- Methods used are not transparent, not understood, not validated with users; information provided inconsistent with other information sources or previous recommendations; data/information not (considered) reliable (C. Lopriore, EC/FAO Programme Training on Producing Food Security Information Products that Result in Action)

• Gaps in communication:

- Lack of organizational clarity in line of communication (E.F.A Ismail)
- Poor communication (vertically and horizontally) between the centre and state levels (E.F.A Ismail)
- Insufficient coordination and dialogue between users and producers of information resulting among others in lack of common understanding of FSN problems and decision-making agenda not aligned with country priorities (C. Lopriore)

• Inadequate access

- Lack of communication infrastructure and low performance of existing information systems. Even when data is adequate, it remained unanalyzed and unused or under-used (E.F.A Ismail, Sudan)

- Most key answers remain undocumented with technicians, experts and practitioners in the field, and are not reaching the target audiences (A. Acosta, Mozambique)
- Target audience preferences/needs not taken into account in terms of timeliness, format, dissemination channel etc. (C. Lopriore, EC/FAO Programme Training on Producing FSN Information Products that Result in Action)

SUGGESTIONS

• **Capacity building activities**

- **Training of FSN analysts** in improving reporting and communication skills with active participation of decision-makers (C. Lopriore, EC/FAO Programme. Countries: Mozambique, Cape Verde, Cambodia, Burkina Faso)
- **Build local capacity** to generate more information and data on these lower [sub-national] levels for the decentralized decision-making and local ownership of response packages that vulnerable communities and households are demanding (C. Teller)
- Develop **local area Vulnerability Profiles and Vulnerability Working Groups**, in a capacity-building mode, as useful assessment strategies and tools to stimulate local action and prompt more responsive and effective early warning systems (C. Teller)
- Train scientists and service providers to repackage information from fact sheets (F. Imakorit-Oumo)
- Intensive 'on-the-job' training components. Facing a high turnover, the best strategy is to train as many people as possible for the same kind of activity envisaged to implement so as to make some kind of redundancy and replaceable of qualified experts in doing the same job (A. Asfaw)

• **Effectively link research and programme/project activities to policy making**

- Ensuring **FSN are among policy priorities** of decision-makers e.g. by support streamlining of FSN into the country reference policy frameworks, support advocacy activities, making explicit the relationships between FSN and country priority objectives, demonstrate the importance of hunger reduction for poverty alleviation and economic growth (S. Boetekees, C. Lopriore)
- Undertake **Users (or decision-making) Needs Assessments** to identify requirements in FSN information e.g. by carrying out a stakeholder analyses to analyze the different decision-making levels: who they are (power/influence), where (or at which level) they operate (central vs decentralized), what type of decisions they face, how they take them – including: extent of participation, (incl. what, why and how they use information (if at all) in these decisions (i.e. Who needs what information and why?) (C. Lopriore)
- The EXPRESSED NEED for information is to fill in information gaps at higher echelon level at the end of donors rather than a direct need requested by local government in terms of priority settings (E.F.A Ismail). Necessity of a policy dialogue to settle down the question of priorities and goal trade-offs among "donors".
- Research actually suggests a particular course of action, recommendations on the implementation processes; and challenges existing assumptions or institutional arrangements (D. Melvin, H. Tran, J.L. Vivero Pol)

- Politicians and decision makers get influenced by different channels, which implies that similar messages should be conveyed to different stakeholders (NGOS, Ministries, Universities, public media, internet, scientific papers), so as the ideas to reach the politicians by several means. E.g within the Latin America Hunger Free Initiative three components are supported:
A.- Awareness-raising to position hunger in national and regional agendas B.- Strengthening national capacities, through technical training, policy backstopping, and promotion of right to food and legal frameworks. C.- Applied research, systematization and Food Security Observatory (J.L. Vivero Pol)
- Importance of funds availability to maintain the system viable (E.F.A Ismail, F. Imakorit-Oumo)

Contribution by Charles Teller, from the Population Reference Bureau, USA

I have recently completed a **statistical and technical assessment on Malawi's Integrated Nutrition and Food Surveillance System (MINFSS)**, and would like to share some lessons learned related to three issues (in quotation marks below) provided in this topic introduction, and nicely summarized by Dominique Blariaux:

1. "Improve prevention mechanisms... to address the determinants and dynamic nature of food insecurity, at national and regional levels":

The MINFSS was designed in 2002-03 to track changes in acute child malnutrition and household food inaccess during an acute crisis period and trigger nutritional treatment and rehabilitation activities. Now, though, the main nutrition problem in terms of long term human and social development in Malawi, and according to the government's new National Nutrition Policy, is chronic maternal and young child stunting, and will focus on prevention and district and community level responses. While the system has continued to focus on acute wasting, it appears to be changing its focus towards prevention of long-term stunting. This will require a new focus on monitoring growth faltering and retardation in the first 18 months of life, instead of the current focus on the over-tuos.

2. "Harmonize donors' and governments' approaches, to strengthen links between food security/early warning systems and the development of effective response strategies"

A food and nutrition information system should be responsive to the data needs for all types of food security and nutrition actions, both seasonal and sustainable. An effective information system can help to develop the capacity and importance for nutrition planning, intervention, monitoring and evaluation of on-going, multisectoral policies, strategies, programmes and activities.

3. Consensus-building between concerned stakeholders...and the political interference; ...between technical consensus and decision-making... and the translation to a more political level; ...a lack of communication skills".

The political dimensions are at international, national and local. The international donors need data to plan and justify their requests of international assistance, and the government and local authorities to demonstrate their responsiveness to the needs of the food insecure and underserved. The three-years of consensus built for the 2008-2011 Malawi National Food and Nutrition Policy and Strategies should now guide the donors and national and regional stakeholders. However, the role of the technical consensus has been challenged on the basis of perceived unreliability and non-representativeness of the information system indicators. Unfortunately, not enough data quality control and local stakeholder engagement had taken place in the pilot surveillance since 2003 to foster confidence in using much of the data, and thus decision-makers were forced to pick and choose ("cherry-pick") the data that would best suit their

purposes. In sum, technical consensus cannot be achieved nor be expected to influence policy and strategy implementation if the monthly surveillance publications suffer from lack of understanding and credibility. Now that there is a growing consensus on improving the local ownership and data quality control of the system, the technical inputs and the political decision-making can be expected to be harmonized.

Charles Teller,

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Contribution by Francoise Trine, from the FAO's Agricultural Development Economics Division (ESA).

Sorry for this late contribution to the interesting debate initiated by Dominique but I was away in July.

I have been working for many years in a number of countries on food security information and it is clear that the information which is being collected, analyzed and disseminated, often at high cost, is not much used to support decision-making, even in countries where the prevalence of food insecurity is very high. This should be addressed as it limits the effectiveness and efficiency of our efforts to reduce food insecurity.

Why is information not being used to its full potential?

Several contributions have focused on the low quality of food security information to explain the fact that it is not being much used for decision-making. Major shortcomings are effectively often observed and all efforts should be made to improve information which is essential for effective response strategies [see Cristina Lopriore's contribution on information shortcomings].

However, there is no guarantee that improving the quality of information will automatically lead to more rational decisions. Experience shows that there is not necessarily a correlation between the quality of information and its use. I have seen the results of excellent surveys being completely ignored in some countries, while unreliable analyses were fully exploited in other countries.

Based on experience, **several factors of a more structural nature affect the extent to which information is used for decision-making.**

- Extent to which decision-makers have to justify the rationality of their decision by using objective information: determined e.g. by cultural habits, level of democracy and transparency, pressure of civil society organizations, etc.;
- Coordination of decision-makers (harmonization of policies, alignment on government's policies; Ref: Paris Declaration);
- Priority given to food security in the development agenda and "competition" with other priorities;
- Institutional setting for food security: the existence of a multisectoral institution responsible for coordinating food security stakeholders and initiatives is key to success; the institution should have sufficient capacity to carry out its mandate (depends on location within government institutions, hierarchical level, human and financial resources available, etc.);

- Capacity of decision-makers to use information to take their decisions in general; decision-makers' knowledge and skills in food security in particular.

What can be done to better link food security information with decision-making?

In many countries, there is much scope to improve the quality of food security information and there is not enough space here to list them. I wish to mention the positive results we had from a five-day participative training workshop we conducted in five countries to improve the quality of food security information products (reports, website, maps, etc.). This activity was supported by the EC/FAO Food Security "Information for Action" Programme. Good results were achieved in terms of:

- Raising participants' awareness of the importance of producing FSIPs that support decision-making and the factors that affect the use of the information for decision-making;
- Building consensus and ownership on priorities to be addressed for improving information products;
- Fostering collaboration and networking between institutions at central and decentralized levels;
- Promoting dialogue and networking among and between decision-makers and food security analysts.

The evaluation of the results several months after the training showed a significant impact e.g. in terms of the quality of information being produced, communication between food security analysts and decision-makers, change of attitude of food security analysts who have become more action oriented (More information on the course is available on: http://www.foodsec.org/tr_fsip.htm). Follow-up actions have been identified to build on achievements and can be shared on request.

Factors of a more structural nature require commitment and sustained and durable efforts from government and development partners. Not much can be done in the context of development projects with short term horizons where there factors tend to be considered as external constraints [to be noted however the successful efforts to ensure that food security is a priority on the development agenda, under the FAO Netherlands Partnership Programme – FNPP].

Is lack of communication skills the missing link between technical consensus and decision-making?

Lack of communication between food security analysts and decision-makers is one important reason for which food security information is not taken up by decision-makers. Strengthening dialogue between them can increase the impact of information on response strategies. **However, it is important to recognise that food security information is only one of the factors influencing decision-makers. Decision-making processes are necessarily influenced by other legitimate factors.** And this would be true even if the information provided was "perfect" and answered key questions in a fully reliable and timely manner with the consensus of all stakeholders.

Governments, even in situations where food security is considered a high priority, have to take into account a number of other priorities when making decisions, related e.g. to economic growth, social equity, budget constraints, political pressures of different social groups, etc. These factors affect the impact that food security information might have on resource allocation. The literature on decision-making shows the complexity of decision-making processes. Many of the factors influencing decision-making have nothing to do with food security information per se and there is little we can do to address them. This should be recognized when we analyse the impact of information on decision-making.

Francoise Trine