

SUMMARY OF THE FSN FORUM DISCUSSION
CLOSING THE GAP – LINKING FOOD SECURITY INFORMATION TO EFFECTIVE DECISION
MAKING
FROM 09TH JULY TO 15TH AUGUST 2008

Proceedings available at
http://km.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/PROCEEDINGS_Linking_FS_InfotoEffectiveDecisionMaking.doc

I. ISSUES RAISED

- **Prevention and response mechanisms to food crises need to be improved** in order to address the determinants and the dynamic nature of food insecurity and avoid any repeated mobilisation of emergency assistance and food aid (D. Blariaux)
- **Building consensus between concerned stakeholders is a very difficult task**, often hindered by political interference and, when achieved, does not always lead to decision making (D. Blariaux)
- **FS information** 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. **Improving the quality of information will not automatically lead to more rational decisions** (F.Trine)

II. CRITICAL FACTORS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **Factors affecting the food security information systems** (J. Opio-Odongo)
 - **Non-existent or insufficient** food security information system;
 - Information from the food security information systems is provided either **too late** or in a **form that cannot be effectively used** by decision makers;
 - 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;
 - Information system lacks a **learning module** that provides access to **lessons learnt from the various food insecurity initiatives**.

Suggestions:

- **General elements to improve the architecture of the information system** (J. Opio-Odongo)
 - ✓ 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;

- ✓ It is necessary to ensure adequate interaction between information providers and information user.
- **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 chain). (R.A. Best)
- **Factors affecting the generation and communication of information**
 - 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**. (R. Verduijn)
 - 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**. (J. Opio-Odongo)
 - As another important audience could also be the media and CSO's, the analysis needs to be presented in a way that is easy to understand, though based on solid evidence (D. Melvin)
 - **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 (F.Trine)

Suggestions:

- **Information providers should carry out a preparatory work** studying the regional and national policy environment in detail, building scenarios, testing what effects policy changes would have on different socio-economic groups. This will allow **conducting a cost-benefit analysis of the most feasible policy options**, which can then be presented to the Government. (R. Verduijn)
- **Information providers should 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. (E.A. Ismail)
- Making sure the **information reaches decision-makers** in a way which is appropriate for their needs, by **Institutional mapping**: 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. (D. Melvin)
- Some **basic rules of good communications** to apply (D. Melvin):
 1. Identify your primary audience in a very specific way
(who the key stakeholders and decision makers are; the decision making processes around food security actions)
 2. Identify how they will use this information
(if and how information is used for making those decisions)
 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.
(to what extent the information provided is demand-driven, which is an essential aspect for the sustainability of the FSIS)

- **Factors affecting the use of information in decision-making**

- 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.(El fadil Ahmed Ismail)
- 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 (D.Melvin)
- On several occasions, **policy makers** 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**. (R. Verduijn)
- **Factors of a more structural nature** (F. Trine)
 - 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 with sufficient capacity which is responsible for coordinating food security stakeholders and initiatives is key to success;
 - Capacity of decision-makers to use information to take their decisions in general; decision-makers' knowledge and skills in food security in particular.

Suggestions:

- 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** (R. Verduijn)
- The impact of information on decision-making requires (F.Trine)
 - ✓ Commitment and sustained and durable efforts from government and development partners;
 - ✓ **Recognition** that food security information is only one of the factors influencing decision-makers. **Decision-making processes are necessarily influenced by other legitimate factors**
- Some measures for mitigating the information gap in effective decision making can be (E:A Ismail)
 - ✓ **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**
- Information providers should promote (J. Opio-Odongo):
 - ✓ **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;

- ✓ **The development of civic competence**, especially in the rural sector by using the local system as platform for dialogue with decision makers.
- Further actions: (E.A. Ismail):
 - ✓ **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).
 - ✓ Capitalize on initial investment in **decision support methods** such as economic valuation and impact assessment
- **Factors affecting the consensus-building and harmonization processes**
 - A critical aspect of the harmonization 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 (J. Opio-Odongo)
 - Messages to decision makers could be weak and unclear without the technical consensus on the diagnostic and response levels between all actors involved (Government, donors and civil society). (D. Blariaux)
 - 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. (R. Verduijn)

Suggestions

- 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. (J. Opio-Odongo)
- 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** (D. Blariaux)
- The consensus could be achieved indirectly by **injecting marketing information** and current and anticipated political decision in the food aid assessment. (E. Elamin)
- Some measures to improve the quality of decisions and its effectiveness (E.A. Ismail)
 - ✓ **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 (E.A. Ismail)
 - ✓ **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

III. RELEVANT INITIATIVES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- **Statistical and technical assessment on Malawi's Integrated Nutrition and Food Surveillance System (MINFSS)** (Charles Teller): 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. Nowadays, 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
 - **Improve prevention mechanisms:** The system has adapted the focus towards prevention of long-term stunting.
 - **Harmonize donors' and governments' approaches:** The 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.
 - **Consensus-building between concerned stakeholders:**
 - ✓ 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;
 - ✓ 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.
- **EC-FAO "Information for Action" Programme: five-day participative training workshop in 7 countries** to improve the quality of food security information products (reports, website, maps, etc.).
 - **Results achieved soon after the training:**
 - ✓ 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
 - **Follow-up actions** have been identified to build on achievements and can be shared on request.

IV. REFERENCES

- CARICOM, "An assessment of the agri-food distribution services industry in Caricom", **Recommendations for CARICOM Participation in services trade negotiations**, Chapter 8, http://www.crnw.org/documents/studies/Assessment_of_CARICOM_Agri-food_Distribution_Services.pdf

- EC-FAO “Information for Action” Programme - **Free food security related e-learning courses aimed at building capacity in national Food Security Information System**. All the Courses are available at: www.foodsec.org/dl , in particular the e-learning courses on:
 - **Food Security Information Systems and Networks**
 - **Reporting Food Security Information**
- EC-FAO “Information for Action” Programme - **Training on Producing Food Security Information Products that Result in Action** at http://www.foodsec.org/tr_fsip.htm
- Summary of the Forum's discussion on “**Drawing Lessons from Food Security and Nutrition research. Analysis and information for improved decision making and response**” at: http://km.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fsn/docs/Final_summary_16Oct-16Nov_drawing_lessons_FSN_info.doc