

The Way Forward: Key Actions for the Next Five Years

Rome, January 2012

In January 2012 FAO hosted the International Scientific Symposium on Food and Nutrition Security Information: From valid measurement to effective decision making, in which a variety of topics were discussed and key actions for going forward agreed upon. This brief highlights the key actions necessary for moving forward. Beginning with a short review of the Symposium's main themes this brief looks at how those themes were addressed by the panel and audience during the third day. It then outlines the key priority actions - based on the themes - as proposed by the panel and discussed by the audience. A full version of the discussion will be available in the complete Proceedings.

I. Symposium Themes: Review and Response

Most of the Symposium's dialogue centered around three main themes:

- measuring food and nutrition security;
- generating more and better evidence; and
- linking information to decision making.

Key points which emerged from the Symposium are outlined below:

Measuring food and nutrition security: Repeated calls for a gold standard were countered with the argument that the multi-dimensional nature of food security makes reaching consensus on a single set of indicators difficult. The counter proposal was to acknowledge the complexity of the subject and move towards a distillation of best practices, where indicators are mapped according to when and how they should be used. There was also a general consensus that *suites* of indicators, as opposed to a single suite, might be the best solution. For example, incorporating a set of common food security indicators into nutrition surveys such as Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) could be extremely useful both in terms of assessing links between food security and nutrition across time and space, and in terms of capitalizing on existing methodologies. In addition to nutrition surveys, large-scale household consumption and expenditure surveys (HCES) were presented as having great potential for capturing information on food and nutrition security at country level. Again, however, the challenge is to identify which information for a suite of indicators could best be collected in existing Living Standard Measurement Study surveys (LSMS) and other types of HCES surveys.

Generating better evidence: The consensus was that much progress has been made since the 2002 Symposium. In addition to more sophisticated methods of data analysis, more surveys are being conducted and a stronger focus is being placed on the household and in some cases, the individual. Data are also moving beyond averages, which can mask important variations and increasingly towards



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disaggregation (e.g. gender, shocks, and seasonality). However, opportunities for improvement exist. This is most evident in the area of impact evaluation, which remains an afterthought in many projects, brought in *ex post* or neglected altogether. Impact evaluation should be included in project design from the very beginning, as collecting the proper information at baseline not only allows for assessment at the close of a project, but also creates feedback loops which allow for adjustments mid-course.

Linking information to decision making: It was noted repeatedly that there are not enough examples of successful linking of food and nutrition security information to decision making. Closing the gap between assessment and policy continues to be a major challenge and represents a formidable task for moving forward. A number of sub-themes on this subject emerged by the third day, including:

- (1) the tendency to identify policy makers as a homogenous group rather than recognizing the range of different actors and situations that contribute to policy making;
- (2) the observation that policy decisions are more often political than technical, and that analysts need to take this political-economy perspective into account when seeking government collaboration and commitment;
- (3) capacity in many countries is so low that policy formulation and consequent implementation is severely constrained, regardless of evidence; and
- (4) currently not enough evidence is demand driven, nor is the related information presented in a way that is accessible and attractive to policy makers.

II. Key Actions for the Next Five Years

Key actions for the coming five years, discussed during the final day of the Symposium, aim to address various constraints in order to ensure a causal chain which begins with accurate measurement and ends with better informed and more effective policy and programming:

Objective 1: Advance the measurement of food and nutrition security in large scale surveys

Improve the quality and relevance of food consumption and nutrition data collected in surveys, namely HCES but also possibly MICS and DHS. These surveys have great potential to increase the sheer volume of food and nutrition (FNS) data that are collected and to improve those data's comparability across time and space.

Objective 2: Develop a technical framework for assessing FNS in a variety of contexts

Create an accessible "best practices" technical framework which captures and organizes the current proliferation of FNS indicators. The framework will provide guidelines regarding which indicators and instruments to use given a specific context and purpose. It will also include guidelines on how to assess "21st century" issues such as climate change, urbanization, nutrition transition, social context, persistent food price volatility, and gender inequities. This will require shifting away from conventional and



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existing assessment paradigms towards others, for example, disaggregating data collection and analysis to better understand individual vulnerability to and consequences of food and nutrition insecurity.

Objective 3: Improve the link between information generation and policy making

Determining the needs of policy makers and finding mechanisms for the better translation of information is an essential step for increasing the use of demand driven data for evidence-based policy formulation and implementation. Activities under this objective include facilitating South-South knowledge exchanges to share positive experiences and lessons learned and engaging the media systematically so as to improve information translation into policy change.

III. Implementation Plan for Key Actions

Mechanisms for the implementation of the key actions were identified and discussed during the Symposium. Two principles were underlined: (1) use existing coordinating mechanisms and platforms; and (2) design the implementing global governance structure in a way that assures accountability.

The Symposium identified the nascent Food Security Information Network (FSIN)¹ as a possible host for the different technical consultations foreseen in order to carry out the key actions presented above. Other coordinating mechanisms, namely the UN Statistical Commission's Inter-Agency Working Group on Food Security, Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development, were proposed to address specific issues. Progress made on the three objectives will be reported by the Expert Committee on FNS Measurement (see below for further details) to the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the UN Statistical Commission, which will serve as accountability mechanisms.

It was agreed that an Expert Committee on FNS Measurement, , would be established to follow up on the implementation of the objectives determined at the Symposium. The Expert Committee could be hosted by the FSIN with links to the UN Statistical Commission's Inter-Agency Working Group. The latter will be responsible for developing the methodological framework (Objective 1), while the Expert Committee on FNS Measurement will be responsible for its operationalization. The Expert Committee on FNS Measurement will also be responsible for developing the Technical Framework (Objective 2). Sub-Committee Working Groups will be formed to address specific topics to inform the Technical Framework. Some of these groups will provide guidelines on assessing the "21st century" issues cited above, while others will focus on cataloguing and distinguishing between existing tools. The Expert Committee on FNS Measurement, through the FSIN, is also expected to lead the work in Objective 3.

¹ The FSIN was first conceived in 2010 through consultation with the EC at a Symposium on Information Systems. The FSIN has three main objectives which are to a) strengthen country and regional food security information; b) help propose and establish food security information standards, harmonize methods, share best practices; and c) advocate and raise awareness about food security information. The FSIN has been formed through joint partnership between FAO, IFPRI, and the WFP with support from a variety of stakeholders including donors, regional organizations and national food security information systems.