



FAO in Action

Early warning, better help FAO provides information to prevent hunger

How much food is the world producing? What is happening to world food prices? Which countries have the highest number of hungry people? Will there be a drought in southern Africa this year? What are the food security implications of civil war, economic crisis or other man-made disasters? Where are food interventions most needed?

Questions like these have been answered by FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) since its inception in 1975. The system's goal is to provide policy-makers and policy analysts with the most up-to-date information available on all aspects of food supply and demand. In doing so, it releases regular bulletins on food production and markets at the global level and food situation and outlook reports on a regional and country-by-country basis. More than 100 governments, numerous trade and research groups, four regional organizations and over 60 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) use and contribute to the GIEWS information system.

GIEWS plays an essential role in warning of emerging food shortages. Using different tools, including specialized software and rapid assessment missions, GIEWS warns of imminent food crises.

Specialized software developed by GIEWS allows analysts to display satellite images of vegetation and cloud cover, to compare them with earlier years and create composite maps with data on geography, population and agriculture. This makes it possible to locate areas where crop growing conditions are unfavourable. It also links to a database containing a wealth of national and global crop statistics, population data and detailed crop calendars for planting and harvesting. On-

the-ground assessments are also carried out. In collaboration with the World Food Programme, FAO sends out teams to assess food shortfalls in countries facing exceptional food emergencies, usually because of natural or war-related disasters.

By examining crops and interviewing farmers, FAO estimates a country's food import needs and the World Food Programme determines how much emergency food a country requires, as well as the logistics required to make sure people won't starve. This is critical information for the international community, aid organizations and policy-makers who have to mobilize food resources and relief assistance. Since the early 1990s, the number of rapid assessment missions has almost doubled, to more than 30 each year, reflecting a sharp increase in the number of disasters.

"Having an effective early warning system is no guarantee that interventions will follow," says FAO's Director General Jacques Diouf. "Food resources are not always mobilized in sufficient volume, or they arrive too late to save lives. War or civil strife often hamper logistics operations so much that relief programmes fail to reach the most needy. However, objective information and early warning continue to have a crucial role in ensuring that timely and appropriate action can be taken to avoid suffering."

GIEWS gets the word out through its distribution both over the Internet and in three main publications that are issued throughout the year: *Food Outlook*, *Foodcrops and Shortages* and *Food Supply Situation and Crop Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa*. In addition, special alerts and reports are published every year.



Facts and figures

About FAO and emergencies

FAO is a key player in emergencies. Its focus is on food production and agriculture, reflecting its specialization and responsibility within the United Nations system. Assisting in preventing disaster-related emergencies, providing early warning of food emergencies and helping in rehabilitation of food production systems are FAO's roles in humanitarian aid. FAO undertakes needs assessment mission, and provides agricultural inputs and technical assistance for the planning and management of sustainable recovery and rehabilitation of rural production systems.

Monitoring and early warning: FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture (GIEWS) monitors food supply and demand around the world. It provides policy-makers and analysts with the most up-to-date and accurate information on crop prospects and gives early warning on imminent food crises, so that timely intervention can be planned.

GIEWS' analysts draw on more than twenty years of time-series data on food production, trade, food aid, stocks, and consumption. Current year data is constantly being up-dated as new information becomes available. Real-time satellite images are used as part of GIEWS drought monitoring activities. Economic, political and agricultural information comes in from a variety of sources, ranging from official government releases, NGO evaluations and local and international media.

GIEWS also compiles information and analysis of global production, stocks, trade and food aid and monitors export prices and conditions on the main grain exchanges.

Assessment of impact and needs: To provide the right kind of help in an emergency, it is essential to know the nature and extent of the disaster, how many people are affected and what help is needed. In the immediate aftermath of an emergency involving food and agriculture, FAO works closely with the World Food Programme (WFP) to assess the situation and outlook for crops, food supplies and agricultural inputs and to estimate immediate needs for food and agricultural relief.

In 2001, FAO issued 21 special reports and alerts on countries or sub-regions experiencing particular agricultural and food supply difficulties.

Relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction:

FAO's Division for Emergency Operations and Rehabilitation responds to needs for emergency assistance in the agricultural, livestock and fisheries sectors in developing countries affected by exceptional natural or human-induced calamities. Once emergency relief operations are under way, FAO, upon request, helps governments and financing institutions prepare national rehabilitation and reconstruction plans aimed at restoring agricultural support services and rebuilding essential infrastructure.

In 2001, FAO was involved in over 175 emergency agricultural relief projects around the world. At present, it is implementing over 230 emergency projects, with a total value of more than US\$90 million.

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<http://www.fao.org/WAICENT/faoinfo/economic/giews/english/giews.htm>