

Rome Data Champions meeting summary - April 2024

An informal meeting of Rome Data Champions, hosted by the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data included guest speaker Professor Bhavani Shankar, Professorial Research Fellow in Food Systems, Nutrition and Sustainability at the University of Sheffield and HLPE-FSN drafting team leader for the CFS Inequalities workstream.

The HLPE report can be found [here](#).

Synopsis

The main subject of April's Rome Data Champions convening focused on "Reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition" CFS workstream negotiations, set to take place the first week of June, 2024. We have invited Professor Bhavani Shankar to provide insights into the data-driven aspects of the HLPE report, aiding the informal group members in formulating their positions for the initial round of negotiations.

Summary of HLPE Report

Professor Shankar initiated the discussion by presenting the key messages and the structural layout of the HLPE report, which is essentially divided into two main parts.

The first part addresses the "problem space" by highlighting the myriad inequalities prevalent within food systems, from pre-farm gate activities to the complexities of market participation and international trade challenges. Professor Shankar highlighted that the report critically examines the root causes of these inequalities, such as social norms and the increasing concentration of the food industry, which are exacerbated by the climate crisis among other factors. He emphasized that gender and socio-economic status of actors are the predominant dimensions of inequality affecting the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) system.

The second part of the report explores the "solution space" by looking at various national strategies aimed at mitigating these inequalities. It discusses enhancing access to food resources through land and livestock transfers, land registration, and promoting cooperative actions to balance power dynamics and gives examples of how these strategies can reduce inequalities. Professor Shankar also explained how these strategies exemplify governance over corporate actions in the food industry, potentially extending to broader systemic approaches like debt relief and inclusive growth to tackle foundational systemic issues in the FSN system.

Professor Shankar stressed that the HLPE report's recommendations focus on the essential trio of recognition, representation, and redistribution within the FSN system, underscoring that

addressing these elements simultaneously is crucial for achieving sustainable inequality reduction. He went on to explain that redistribution without recognition or representation does not do enough to reduce inequalities sustainably and gave examples of short-medium term approaches and tools that encapsulate the spirit of the recommendations including asset building and livelihood programs for the most disadvantaged, organizing most disadvantage actors into cooperatives, targeting policies for the most marginalized, or implementing an “equity audit” (similar to an environmental audit) to identify actors in the system before policies are put into place and ensure that no-one is left behind. He explained that strengthening monitoring and transparency of land/forest/water acquisitions, leveraging existing UN Frameworks and requiring high quality data to be collected and archived publicly would also allow for more transparency in the FSN system.

Data and Inequality

Professor Shankar pointed out that despite the abundance of data production today, significant gaps remain regarding the most disadvantaged groups, making robust analysis challenging. Statistical significance requires a large enough sample size, which can be a challenge when speaking about sub-groups of already marginalized groups, leading to oversimplified analysis and/or lack of visibility in demographics data and policy decisions. He discussed the need for oversampling and disaggregating data within households to better address intra-household inequalities. He also noted the tendency to over-rely on quantitative data, which often fails to capture the full spectrum of inequality, requiring additional qualitative data. The lack of harmonized qualitative datasets can contribute to problems in measuring inequalities.

Other data aspects contributing to inequality in the FSN system include poor data transparency, issues around data equity, and unclear standards around data ownership and private sector capture of peoples’ data, leading to disproportionately negative impacts for marginalized groups. Data around large scale land acquisitions is also notoriously opaque - which has been identified to have a clear negative impact on African food security and nutrition systems according to recent studies.

Issues discussed in previous OEWG meetings

Professor Shankar recapped earlier discussions, particularly addressing the oversimplified view of focusing solely on addressing poverty as a way to reduce inequality. He reaffirmed that inequality involves unequal power and rights, which is why SDG10, emphasizes the term inequality over mere poverty reduction. Reducing the complex factors that lead to inequalities to measurements of income thresholds does not do anything to address issues in representation and agency. Inequality is about unequal power and rights and the inability to have one's rights expressed.

Intersectionality

Professor Shankar explained that when two or more dimensions of inequality compound

together and intersect (for example a smallholder producer + from a remote area + originating from a traditionally marginalized community) it is referred to as intersectionality. The term is significant because it conveys that the sum of compounding dimensions of inequality are often larger than their respective parts. He gave a hypothetical example of a disabled woman from a remote region suffering famine: If a policy maker were to create a program to provide aid to disabled people, it could be that disabled women would not be able to access the aid due to cultural gender norms. On the other hand, if a policy were enacted that provided aid to women, it could be that disabled women would not have the same access as able-bodied women. Intersectionality as a concept identifies people in these complex, compounded, situations and ensures that their problems are addressed in an explicit way to ensure they are not left behind. He argues that acknowledgment of intersectional populations is critical for achieving SDG 10, which aims to leave no one behind by prioritizing the most disadvantaged first.

Professor Shankar stressed to members that it is important that political disagreements around the use of specific terminology such as intersectionality not get in the way of progress. Alternative terminology such as “overlapping inequalities” could be used as an alternative, but argues that this could also lead to confusion as intersectionality is a commonly used term in literature. He gave members two online resources to explore intersectionality further and illustrate its mainstream use within the Rome Based Agencies (RBAs). The first is [FAO's Practical guide for the incorporation of the intersectionality approach in sustainable rural development programmes and projects](#). The second is [IFAD's Targeting toolkit](#) for focusing efforts to create opportunities for rural poor people that highlights poverty and intersecting inequality.

Engaging Questions

Professor Shankar left time for group members to ask questions. Each question is followed by a summary of Professor Shankar's intervention.

Question 1: Data collection methods that rely on oversampling and account for intra-household dynamics are historically very expensive, how do we overcome this hurdles?

Answer: Professor Shankar acknowledges the high costs associated with these methods, which often limit their use. However, he is optimistic that advancements in AI and machine learning will, over the next decade, significantly reduce these costs, making such methods more feasible. Meanwhile, he emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about the benefits of oversampling in the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) space to encourage more frequent adoption and investment.

Question 2: Beyond intersectionality, what aspects from the HLPE report should be emphasized in the Zero draft?

Answer: Professor Shankar points out the significant issue of food industry concentration. He highlights that it is a factor that exacerbates inequality, and one that governments find difficult to deal with as the private sector also plays an extremely important role in producing food. Concentration limits nutrition by reducing agency and representation to the majority of actors in the FSN system. He suggests that establishing monitoring mechanisms to oversee industry concentration and promoting collective action, such as forming cooperatives, are crucial steps toward empowering these actors and ensuring equitable representation.

Question 3: How do we address ethical concerns in data collection, especially regarding power asymmetries affecting vulnerable populations?

Answer: Ethics in data collection is crucial, particularly in ensuring that participants can opt out and maintain control over their information. Having agency is key. Professor Shankar stresses that ethical standards should be uniformly stringent, akin to those in academia, to protect data subjects, even in large-scale public data collection efforts. This approach could contribute to increased costs but he argues that safeguarding participant rights is paramount to creating a fair and equitable FSN system.

Question 4: You mentioned that altering social norms is key to reducing structural inequalities. Could you provide examples of social innovations that address these norms and the types of data that indicate progress?

Answer: Professor Shankar refers to a project in India aimed at changing dietary behaviors to combat malnutrition among children and pregnant women. The program initially targeted women to influence household diets, but had to adapt to local norms where men typically make market purchases. This adaptation highlights the importance of understanding and addressing local social dynamics to effect change. While he is not a specialist in social norms, he can direct inquiries to experts within the HLPE team who can provide deeper insights into long-term behavioral changes and their measurement.

Concluding Remarks by Professor Shankar

- Recognition, redistribution, and representation need to be present in every conversation during the negotiations and how they can be incorporated in any action or recommendation being proposed.
- Inequality is more than poverty. Often analyzing poverty only gets you so far when looking at inequalities as it limits the scope. Tackling inequality needs to be tailored to address underlying causes.
- Data gaps exist, and existing data collection can be much better. The technology exists, we have the tools, and costs are going down. Leveraging AI and incorporating new technologies is absolutely necessary to reducing inequality.

- Political disagreements around the use of specific terminology such as intersectionality should not get in the way of progress. Alternative terminology such as "overlapping inequalities" could be used as an alternative.