

Rome Data Champions meeting summary - February 2025

Understanding the differences in food security assessments and their impact on policy making

Food security remains one of the most pressing global challenges, impacting millions of people across different regions. Despite significant efforts to address food insecurity, the numbers reported by various organizations often seem contradictory, creating confusion for policymakers, stakeholders, and the public. This discrepancy is primarily due to the differences in the objectives, methodologies, and scopes of various food security assessments. Each type of assessment is tailored to measure distinct aspects of food insecurity, serving specific policy needs. Understanding these differences is critical for creating informed and effective policies that can genuinely address the root causes of food insecurity.

The numbers game: why do estimates vary?

Let's begin by examining a few figures that illustrate the confusion surrounding food security data:

- The World Food Programme (WFP) reported that 309 million people are facing acute levels of food insecurity in 2024.
- The Global Report on Food Crises noted that 281.6 million people or 21.5% of the analyzed population faced high levels of acute food insecurity in 2023.
- The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) indicated that between 691 to 783 million people were suffering from hunger globally in 2022.

These figures highlight different aspects of food insecurity, but they are often misinterpreted as being directly comparable. This misinterpretation can lead to ineffective or even counterproductive policy decisions. To fully grasp the significance of these numbers, it is essential to delve into the specific purposes and methodologies behind the various assessments.

Defining food security

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) provides a comprehensive definition of food security, which is often cited in global discussions: "A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

This definition is not merely academic; it underscores the complexity of food security, which is broken down into four key dimensions:

1. **Availability** - This refers to the supply side of food security, ensuring that sufficient quantities of food are consistently available. Availability is influenced by factors such as agricultural production, stock levels, and trade policies.
2. **Access** - Access is concerned with the ability of individuals and households to acquire the food they need. This dimension takes into account income levels, food prices, and access to markets.
3. **Utilization** - Utilization involves the proper biological use of food, necessitating adequate diets, clean water, sanitation, and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being. It also includes the knowledge of how to properly prepare food.
4. **Stability** - Stability concerns the temporal aspect of food security, emphasizing the need for food to be consistently available, accessible, and usable. This dimension considers the impact of adverse weather events, economic crises, and political instability.

While these four dimensions provide a holistic understanding of food security, different assessments focus on different aspects, leading to varied outcomes and implications.

Chronic vs. acute food insecurity: Different assessments for different needs

Food insecurity is not a monolithic issue; it varies greatly in severity, duration, and impact. Consequently, assessments of food insecurity can be broadly categorized into two types: chronic and acute, each serving distinct purposes in the realm of policy-making.

Chronic Food Insecurity is concerned with the long-term, structural aspects of food insecurity. It measures habitual food consumption patterns and the prevailing food insecurity experiences over an extended period, typically a year or more. Chronic food insecurity is closely linked to poverty, systemic issues in food systems, and long-term economic conditions. It is often used in the context of development planning and is integral to monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security, and promote sustainable agriculture.

Chronic food insecurity assessments cover entire national populations and are used to inform long-term development strategies. For example, the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) and the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) are key indicators used for SDG monitoring. These assessments help identify the structural causes of food insecurity and are instrumental in designing policies that promote agricultural productivity, improve income opportunities, and enhance access to education and healthcare.

Acute Food Insecurity, on the other hand, focuses on immediate, short-term food insecurity resulting from sudden shocks or crises. This type of food insecurity can arise from natural disasters, conflict, economic downturns, or pandemics. Acute food insecurity assessments are often conducted in specific, crisis-affected regions rather than at the national level. These

assessments are vital for planning and implementing emergency responses, including humanitarian aid and relief efforts.

Acute food insecurity assessments include indicators such as the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and the Cadre Harmonisé (CH). These tools classify the severity of food insecurity and provide a snapshot of the current situation, allowing humanitarian agencies to prioritize areas most in need of urgent assistance. However, because these assessments are context-specific and often subject to rapid changes, they may not be directly comparable to chronic food insecurity data.

Implications for policy making: the dangers of misinterpretation

The use of different food security assessments in policy-making can have profound implications. Policymakers often rely on these assessments to allocate resources, design interventions, and set priorities. However, the mismatch between chronic and acute food insecurity data can lead to significant challenges.

For instance, if policymakers use acute food insecurity data to shape long-term development strategies, they might prioritize short-term relief measures over sustainable solutions. This could result in a cycle of dependency on humanitarian aid without addressing the root causes of food insecurity. Conversely, using chronic food insecurity data to guide emergency response efforts might lead to a delayed or insufficient reaction to immediate crises, exacerbating the situation for those in urgent need.

The challenge is further compounded by the varying geographic scopes of these assessments. Chronic food insecurity assessments typically cover entire national populations, while acute assessments focus on specific crisis-affected areas. This difference in scope means that the numbers reported by these assessments are not directly comparable, yet they are often treated as such in public discourse.

Moreover, the methodologies and indicators used in different assessments are not always harmonized. For example, the indicators used in the Consolidated Approach to Reporting Indicators of Food Security (CARI), the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), and the IPC are developed by different agencies and may reflect varying definitions of food insecurity. These differences can lead to inconsistencies in the data, further complicating policy decisions.

Toward more coherent food security assessments

Recognizing the challenges posed by the diversity of food security assessments, there is a growing call within the international community for greater harmonization of methodologies and indicators. The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has recently recommended the

formation of a joint commission, involving relevant sectors and stakeholders, to promote the standardization, coherence, and interoperability of food security and nutrition (FSN) data.

This initiative aims to harmonize methods and indicators across different food security assessments, making it easier to compare and combine data from various sources. By improving consistency and comparability, this effort could enhance the accuracy of food security assessments and provide a more reliable basis for policy-making.

The CFS has also emphasized the importance of collaboration between international organizations, governments, and the humanitarian community. By working together, these entities can develop standardized indicators that are recognized and endorsed by official statistical bodies. Such collaboration could lead to the creation of a unified framework for food security assessments, reducing the confusion caused by conflicting data.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Global Support Unit, guided by the Technical Advisory Group, is also conducting research on ways to improve the use of outcome indicators in food security assessments. This research is focused on increasing the consistency and comparability of assessments, ensuring that policymakers have access to reliable and actionable data.

Conclusion: Navigating the complexity of food security data

Food security assessments are indispensable tools for understanding the scope and severity of food insecurity around the world. However, the differences in objectives, methodologies, and scopes of these assessments can lead to significant discrepancies in the reported numbers. These discrepancies, if not properly understood, can result in misguided policies that fail to address the real needs of food-insecure populations.

For policymakers, it is crucial to recognize the specific purposes of different food security assessments and to use the data appropriately. Acute and chronic food insecurity data serve different roles and should be used in conjunction to develop comprehensive strategies that address both immediate needs and long-term challenges.

As the international community moves towards greater harmonization of food security assessments, there is hope that the data will become more consistent, comparable, and reliable. This progress will not only improve the accuracy of food security assessments but also enhance the effectiveness of policies designed to combat food insecurity, ultimately contributing to a world where all people have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food.