

PART 1: FACT SHEET

The fact sheet is part one of four parts in this module. It provides an overview of assessing food security in emergency situations. Detailed technical information is covered in part two.

Key messages

1. Food security means access by all people at all times to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life.
2. Food *in*security is just *one* of the underlying causes of malnutrition.
3. Access to food is often disrupted during emergencies. It is therefore vital to understand how households access food to plan appropriate interventions to protect food security and ultimately nutritional status.
4. Food security assessments might be conducted: (i) as part of early warning and surveillance systems, for emergency preparedness or monitoring; (ii) to identify the main constraints that prevent households from meeting their food and other needs; and (iii) as part of studies to understand the causes of malnutrition. These situations are not mutually exclusive and may therefore overlap.
5. Food security cannot be measured through a single indicator so multiple measures have to be used and analysed together.
6. There is no standard method for assessing food security in emergencies and different agencies have developed approaches that suit their individual needs.
7. The various approaches to food security assessment have some similarities and some differences.
8. While there is no single 'best' way to conduct food security assessments in emergencies, certain elements from the approaches used by different agencies can be taken to form a 'hybrid' suitable for a particular working context, as long as technical and analytical rigour is maintained.
9. Major challenges exist in assessing food security, including: the need for agreement on minimum standards in methods; incorporation of market analysis; and difficulties in application in urban and insecure contexts.
10. Including nutrition information in a food security assessment (and vice versa) improves the quality of the results and helps to ensure an appropriate response

Importance of food security assessment

'Food security' refers to access by all people, at all times, to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life. The unit of measurement is usually 'the household'. There are three components to food security:

- **Availability** (sufficient quantities of appropriate food are physically available; from domestic production, commercial imports or food assistance).
- **Access** (households have enough income or other resources to obtain enough appropriate food through home production, buying, barter and can physically get to it).
- **Utilization** (food is properly used through appropriate food processing and storage practices; which may also include how food is shared within a household and how people's health status may alter their nutrient needs).

The concepts of 'availability' and 'access' are linked but even when there is plenty of food available on the market, some households may not be able to afford it.

Household food *in*security is just one of the underlying causes of malnutrition, along with inadequate care practices, unclean water, poor hygiene and sanitation, morbidity, and poor access to health care.

In emergencies, the way people obtain food is often disrupted. Results from food security assessments are used by organisations to understand the impact of the emergency on how households obtain food and to identify appropriate interventions that will protect future food security, prevent potentially related malnutrition and protect livelihoods.

Approaches to food security assessment

There are different emergency contexts and different reasons why a food security assessment may be conducted:

- To understand the 'pre-emergency' context as part of emergency preparedness by providing a baseline on how communities usually obtain their food, against which to compare any changes caused by the emergency.
- To monitor slow-onset or chronic emergencies through early warning and surveillance.
- Following a disaster; this could be economic, environmental or man-made.
- To understand the causes of already identified malnutrition and to provide the context for anthropometric data.

There is no single standard approach for assessing food security. In each context, different approaches to food security assessment might be more appropriate, and some approaches can be used in different contexts. Different agencies have developed their own food security assessment approaches, leading to variation in the indicators collected, the methods used, and the degree to which nutrition data are included. Very limited guidance material is available to provide a comprehensive overview of these different food security assessment approaches, their relative strengths and weaknesses and which are most appropriate for a given context. It is important to realise there is no single agreed 'best' way, and programme planners and managers could take elements from the different approaches and form a hybrid suitable for their particular working context. The different types of food security assessment have common concepts and frequently, one agency's approach may be modified to suit another.

Implementing a food security assessment

Though the various approaches to food security assessment use different methods, a number of generic steps can be applied to most situations as listed below:

Step 1: Preparation

This includes developing hypotheses on the impact of the crisis on food security and nutrition, setting clear survey objectives, selecting and training assessment teams and organising logistics. It is also important to check whether other assessments have been done in the area to avoid duplication and to draw on information from those surveys. Most food security assessments are carried out to address four broad objectives:

- To estimate the severity of food security
- To forecast future food security.
- To identify groups more affected by or vulnerable to food insecurity
- To identify appropriate interventions to improve households' access to food

Step 2: Secondary information collection

This involves collating relevant government and agency reports.

Step 3: Primary information collection

This involves collecting original data. Data collection methods include questionnaires, measurement, observation, interviews and focus group discussions. Food security, unlike malnutrition, cannot be measured through a single indicator. There are many indicators of food security, as shown below. Note that, alone, these indicators do not explain the food security situation; they must be analysed together, often with other information.

Categories of indicators	Examples of indicators
<i>Food availability / general context</i>	Rainfall and expected effect on harvest Crop production (types of crops, yields, methods of production) Livestock holdings and status Land area cultivated and systems of land access
<i>Food access</i>	Livelihood strategies Income, food sources and essential expenditures Household food consumption patterns Household food stocks Productive household assets Market prices of key staples and productive assets (e.g. livestock) and terms of trade Coping strategies
<i>Food utilisation</i>	Nutritional status and health status Water sources and sanitation facilities Food consumption patterns

Step 4: Analysis

In an emergency, it is important to analyse the findings quickly so that timely decisions can be made. This includes identifying which group(s) of people are affected and why, which months they are most affected and why, causes of the problem, and which information is missing or unclear. Recommendations for interventions should clearly link to the analysis and should specify which groups of people are to be targeted and how the intervention will enable them to access food.

Step 5: Report writing and dissemination of results

- Any report is more useful and more likely to be read if it is clearly written and highlights the information readers need the most. Ideally, findings should be shared with all those involved in the fieldwork including the assessed community and local authorities.

Food Security Analysis, interpretation and types of response

There is currently no standardisation or international consensus on what constitutes a 'food security emergency' and therefore when an emergency response is appropriate. Possible responses can be grouped as follows:

- Life-saving, where access to food and food consumption are affected to such an extent that people are at risk of malnutrition, starvation and eventually death.
- Protecting and strengthening livelihoods. These may be implemented either with or without life-saving interventions, depending on the context and they may have to occur equally urgently as their timing may be critical to prevent livelihood losses.

Linking food security with nutrition information

Every effort should be made to incorporate nutrition information within a food security assessment. There are benefits to analysing nutrition and food security data together to get a better understanding of the causes of malnutrition, but it is very difficult to demonstrate a direct link between food insecurity and malnutrition because there are other possible causal factors such as illness and the care and sanitary environment.

Nutrition surveys and food security assessments are usually carried out independently of one another. This is partly because of different sampling procedures, partly because individuals tend to have expertise and experience in either one or the other area, and within agencies these individuals are situated in different units. Some agencies have developed approaches to include analysis of the quality of the diet within or alongside food security assessments.

The role of markets

Food and labour markets have a major impact on household food security in both rural and urban areas and especially for the poorest households, which are usually heavily dependent on the market for their food and income. During emergencies, markets disruption occurs due to losses in production and income, and access to markets is reduced. At worst, markets collapse completely leaving rural and urban populations unable to access food. Market analysis is particularly important for agencies involved in the procurement of food or other items for distribution as they need to assess the impact of local purchase on local prices against the impact of importing these items.

The need for standardisation and minimum standards

There are three key areas where greater standardisation and development of minimum standards are needed:

1. **Baseline and assessment information.** Agreement on what constitutes a baseline and the minimum set of baseline and assessment information that needs to be collected on food security and nutrition.
2. **Sampling.** Agreement on acceptable sampling procedures for both types of surveys.
3. **Interpretation and analysis.** Agreement on how to interpret data and decide on response options. This could mean developing thresholds for certain types of food security and/or nutrition response. It also includes how to analyse food security and livelihoods information with nutrition, health and care environment data.