



# SENAC Brief

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## Chronic or transitory hunger: how do you tell the difference?

### Distinguishing between chronic and transitory food insecurity in emergency needs assessments.

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#### Introduction

Distinguishing between transitory and chronic food insecurity is crucial for designing appropriate interventions which either address immediate needs or tackle the underlying structural causes of hunger.

In practice, making the distinction in emergency situations is not easy, because an increasing number of these crises have chronic underpinnings<sup>1</sup>. Emergency responses need to be adjusted to effectively address this problem.

Although needs assessments should seek to identify groups of people who are chronically and transitorily hungry, existing assessment methods are not fully satisfactory for this task. An in-depth study commissioned by the SENAC project<sup>2</sup> lays the groundwork for moving forward on this issue.

#### What is chronic? What is transitory?

The existing terminology characterizing chronic (long term or persistent) and transitory (short term or temporary) often leads to confusion. Transitory situations are often assumed to be severe, requiring an emergency response; the related assumption is that chronic situations are moderate and may not require an emergency response.

It is therefore important to focus on the severity of food insecurity, and not only on its duration. The study proposes a new classification into four categories of food insecurity to take this into

account: moderate chronic (chronic hunger), severe chronic (high infant mortality rates), moderate transitory (hungry season) and severe transitory (food crises).

Another issue is that chronic and transitory situations are linked and overlapping. Many people already on the edge find their ability to cope compromised by small shocks and can become chronically food insecure. Conversely, chronic food insecurity is often the result of repeated shocks such as recurrent droughts.

The study cautions against focusing exclusively on transitory changes. Emergency assessments and aid interventions are typically triggered by a sudden decline in people's food security status, but this poses the risk that a slow but steady deterioration of a chronic food insecurity situation could be overlooked because of a lack of dramatic changes in indicators.

#### Implications for humanitarian responses

The challenge is to design the right programme responses tailored to these specific situations. The study draws several conclusions, building on innovative programmes in Ethiopia and Palestine:

- monitor people who are most vulnerable to a deterioration in status after a shock;
- develop clear exit criteria that are needed to move from emergency operations to development programmes; and
- use social safety-nets to cushion chronically food insecure people by providing transfers (cash and food) to help them become more resilient to shocks.

<sup>1</sup> The 2005 Niger crisis has been cited as an example of how the line traditionally drawn between structural and short-term crises can become blurred.

<sup>2</sup> The study was funded by ECHO.

The Strengthening Emergency Needs Assessment Capacity (SENAC) project is a central element of a three year effort funded by donors to improve WFP's capacity to assess food needs through accurate and impartial assessments.

**Example: Ethiopia Productive Safety Net Programme**

In 2004, Ethiopia was the first country seeking to differentiate clearly between chronic and transitory groups and to address the problem of chronically food insecure people with an innovative instrument. Ethiopia has a large number of food insecure people. Even when the rains are good, five to six million Ethiopians require food aid. This situation is compounded by recurrent shocks (usually drought-triggered) that can raise the number of food aid beneficiaries to more than 12 million.

In 2004, the Government of Ethiopia launched the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) by building on the insight that food security in Ethiopia is partly transitory and short-term but largely structural and long-term. The PSNP distinguishes between two groups within the food insecure population: “unpredictable food insecure” people who face transitory food deficits because of erratic rains or other shocks and “predictably food insecure” people who face chronic food deficits because of poverty. The first group continue receiving food aid when required and the second receives cash or fund transfers on a regular, predictable basis. These transfers allow the households to meet their consumption needs but also to invest in farming and small enterprises and escape from chronic food insecurity.

**Implications for assessments**

At times of crisis, the assessments would have to distinguish between levels and types of food insecurity. The following elements need to be considered:

- examining the pre-crisis situation to identify changes between pre and post-crisis;
- analyzing vulnerability to understand what triggers a rapid deterioration in access to food;
- estimating recovery capacities.

**Next steps**

WFP has developed and is field testing provisional guidance on how to apply the proposed distinction between household food insecurity groups in emergency needs assessments.

Moreover, a wider dialogue will be required to standardize the definitions of chronic and transitory food insecurity and vulnerability, and to re-examine which interventions are most appropriate in response to moderate and severe chronic food insecurity.

For a copy of the study or to learn more about SENAC, go to: <http://www.wfp.org/ODAN>  
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