

Emergency Food Security Assessments (EFSAs) Technical guidance sheet n°. 5

Distinguishing between chronic and transitory food insecurity in emergency food security assessments (EFSA)¹

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¹ This Technical Guidance Sheet is based on the desk review conducted by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) for WFP in 2005–2006: *Identification of methods and tools for emergency assessments to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity, and to evaluate the effects of various types and combinations of shocks on these different livelihood groups*, S. Devereux, WFP Emergency Needs Assessment Service (now Food Security Analysis Service), February 2006.

Distinguishing between chronic and transitory food insecurity in emergency food security assessments (EFSA)

This Technical Guidance Sheet provides guidance on how to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity in an EFSA, to inform appropriate responses options. It complements the WFP *EFSA Handbook* guidance on this topic.²

1. Temporal dimension of chronic and transitory food insecurity

- **Chronic food insecurity is a long-term or persistent inability** to meet minimum food consumption requirements. As a rule of thumb, food insecurity **lasting for at least six months of the year** can be considered **chronic**.
- **Transitory food insecurity is a short-term or temporary inability** to meet minimum food consumption requirements, indicating a capacity to recover. As a rule of thumb, short periods of food insecurity related to sporadic crises can be considered transitory.
- **Cyclical food insecurity** occurs when there are **habitual seasonal variations** of the food security situation. As a rule of thumb, if seasonal food insecurity is present for a total of at least six months a year, it can be considered chronic; if it lasts for a total of less than six months a year, it can be considered transitory.

It is important to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity as they are likely to require different types of response, in terms of both content and duration. Typically, chronic food insecurity calls for interventions that address underlying and basic causes of food insecurity and that last for several years. Transitory food insecurity may require shorter-term interventions that address immediate and underlying causes, but interventions tackling basic causes of food insecurity may also be important to prevent repeated transitory food insecurity, which may lead to chronic food insecurity.

2. Severity dimension of chronic and transitory food insecurity

Chronic and transitory food insecurity can be **severe** or **moderate**. *Severity* can fluctuate over time, either seasonally or owing to a shock, so both chronic and transitory food insecurity can shift between severe and moderate states. The combination of the temporal and severity dimensions leads to a 2 x 2 classification illustrated in the following.

² See *EFSA Handbook*, Second Edition, Part IV Section 3, Conducting a situation analysis, WFP Food Security Analysis Service, 2009.

		Temporal dimension	
		Chronic ←	Transitory
Severity dimension	Moderate ↑	Moderate chronic food insecurity	Moderate transitory food insecurity
	Severe ↓	Severe chronic food insecurity	Severe transitory food insecurity

There are strong negative synergies between chronic and transitory food insecurity, and between moderate and severe food insecurity:

- **Transitory** → chronic: repeated shocks can provoke food insecurity ratchets, eventually forcing households into destitution and chronic poverty and food insecurity. Seasonal or cyclical food insecurity is a form of recurrent transitory food insecurity, which can eventually result in chronic food insecurity if households progressively deplete their assets.
- **Moderate** → severe: chronically food-insecure households are more vulnerable to such deterioration than the transitorily food-insecure.

3. Information required to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity³

When distinguishing between chronic and transitory food insecurity the following questions have to be answered:

- **Did food insecurity and/or malnutrition exist before the current crisis?**
- **If so, what were the nature, extent and severity of the food insecurity and/or malnutrition? How did these differ from the current situation?**
- **Which groups were affected, and how do they differ from the groups that are currently at risk to lives and/or livelihoods?**

For this, the EFSA needs to identify which factors are specific to the current crisis, and which are constant contributors to food insecurity. The **current** characteristics of the context and of food-insecure households must be compared with their characteristics in the **pre-crisis situation at the same time of year**, to distinguish between features that pre-date the current situation, and those that occurred as a result of the crisis or that have emerged only recently.

Such analysis requires:

- **pre-crisis** data: baseline;
- **averages for the past three to five years**, particularly for crop production, market supplies and prices; and
- data for the same period of previous years, to identify and take into account **seasonal factors**, particularly for malnutrition rates, prevalence of disease, food production and market characteristics.

³ See *EFSA Handbook*, Second Edition, Part I, Conceptual framework, objectives and types of EFSA, and Part III, Planning and implementing an EFSA, WFP Food Security Analysis Service, 2009.

Most of these data should come from pre-crisis and baseline studies and previous surveys, and they should be sought during the secondary data review preceding fieldwork. ***It is important to anticipate the need for these data and to review secondary data early in the EFSA process so that plans can be made to collect data that are not available.*** This type of primary information is best collected as qualitative data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews, possibly complemented by retrospective questions included in a formal household questionnaire.

4. Data analysis to distinguish between chronic and transitory food insecurity

4.1 Analysis of the nature of the crisis

Some information about the nature of the risks can help indicate whether the food insecurity and malnutrition are chronic or transitory. For example:

- stunting is a sign of long-term malnutrition and therefore indicates a chronic problem that could be caused by persistent food insecurity and/or a poor health environment;
- wasting is a sign of short-term malnutrition and therefore might indicate a transitory problem of food insecurity and/or infectious disease, but it can also be due to chronic, possibly seasonal, problems.

4.2 Analysis of structural and conjectural/dynamic factors

To analyse chronic and transitory food insecurity, it is useful to separate the data into two sets, corresponding to:

- a) **structural factors**; and
- b) **conjectural or dynamic factors**.

- **Structural factors** include characteristics of the context, individuals and households that are unlikely to change quickly. Depending on the type of crisis, they may include:
 - the location where people live;
 - heavy infrastructure, such as tarmac roads;
 - ownership of land;
 - main sources of income;
 - individual qualities such as sex, age, level of education and marital status.
- **Conjectural/dynamic factors** include contextual, individual and household factors that are likely to change rapidly in the event of a shock. Depending on the type of crisis, they may include:
 - ownership of assets;
 - degree of reliance on markets for income and food purchases;
 - migration patterns in search for work;
 - level of indebtedness.

Structural and conjectural factors depend on the type of crisis being assessed. For example, an earthquake may modify infrastructure such as roads – making this contextual factor conjectural – but may not change households' reliance on markets for their food purchases. Conversely, drought may not affect road access, but may change the amount of food that people need to buy when the harvest fails.

The data can be compiled in a format similar to the following table. Both quantitative data and qualitative narratives can be used. Narratives are useful for interpreting other data, for example to account for seasonal factors and historical patterns.

**Template for identifying structural and conjectural factors
associated with household food security**

Characteristic	Households <i>currently</i> food-insecure (numbers, %, opinions)	Households <i>currently</i> food-secure (numbers, %, opinions)	Previous surveys (numbers, %, opinions)
Structural factors (examples)			
Location: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area A • Area B • Area C 			
Displacement status: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resident • Resident hosting IDPs • IDPs in host families • IDPs in camps 			
Sex of head of household: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female • Male 			
Size of household: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer than 6 members • More than 6 members 			
Chronic illness: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of household chronically ill • Spouse of head of household chronically ill 			
Conjectural factors (examples)			
Crop cultivation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not cultivate • Cultivates sorghum • Cultivates millet • Planted less than 2 ha 			
Head of household's main occupation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmer • Agropastoralist • Wage labourer • Petty trader • Salaried worker 			
Household's main sources of food: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purchase • Own production • In-kind payment • Borrowing • Gifts • Food aid 			
Household assets ownership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No productive assets • 1 productive asset • 2 productive assets • More than 2 productive assets 			
etc...			

**These Technical Guidance Sheets, the EFSA Handbook and other related resources
available at: www.wfp.org/food-security.**