Policy Brief

November 2006
Issue 4

Assessment of Food Security Early Warning Systems in sub-Saharan Africa

A synthesis of key findings and recommendations

Background

The crippling famines of the 1970s and 1980s in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) prompted the development of national and regional early warning systems (EWS) across the continent. Over the past three decades, governments, regional institutions and development partners invested extensively in establishing EWS as a critical element of the emergency response system. Evidence suggests that these systems have been generally been effective in alerting countries and donors to impending food crises. However, there have been cases where inadequate analysis, together with poor communication and ineffective coordination and response mechanisms, have contributed to acute food security emergencies that might have been prevented.

EWS continue to be challenged by several issues, such as the persistent susceptibility of African agriculture to climatic variability and other hazards as well as the vulnerability of millions of chronically impoverished and malnourished households to a diversity of threats, from HIV/AIDS to prolonged violent conflict.

Strengthening EWS was identified in the Cairo Plan of Action of April 2000 as one of the priority areas for cooperation between the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) to improve food security in Africa. In this context the AU and EU agreed with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to conduct an assessment of existing EWS on food security in SSA. The assessment reviewed their strengths and weaknesses and provided recommendations on actions for strengthening these systems for improved decision-making at national and regional levels.[1]

The assessment was undertaken in three case study countries in three regions in sub-Saharan Africa **(Table 1).**

Table 1

West	Southern	Greater Horn
CILSS	*SADC*	*IGAD*
Burkina Faso	Angola	Eritrea
Mauritania	Namibia	Ethiopia
Niger	Zambia	Kenya

[1] 2006. Planning for the Future: An Assessment of Food Security Early Warning Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. Synthesis report prepared by FAO for the African Union and funded by the European Commission.
The paper is available on-line at:
ftp://ftp.fao.org/es/esa/ews_synthesis.pdf

Findings

EWS in sub-Saharan Africa focus mainly on monitoring agro-climatic shocks and their impact on food production.

One primary use of EWS information is to produce national cereal balance sheets that include an estimate of aggregate food aid requirements. Some EWS are also involved in geographic targeting of food-insecure zones or conducting periodic livelihood or food needs assessments. However, many EWS are confronted by insufficient and low quality data produced by the national systems and the high opportunity cost of obtaining and managing their own data.

EWS that perform best are characterized by the government's recognition of their importance in the decision-making process. This includes:

- the **political and financial commitment** to EWS development;
- a greater willingness to maintain a **transparent system** and accord analytical autonomy to the EWS;
- **closer collaboration** between national governments and development partners; and
- **innovative partnerships** with universities and NGO's and collaboration with technical partners in early warning analysis to help overcome human resource capacity limitations.

The way in which information is collected, analysed and disseminated is critical for its use in decision-making and its role in supporting timely national responses to transitory food and nutrition crises.

A more transparent and participatory approach helps stakeholders reach consensus on the food situation and facilitates prompt action for mitigating the impact of food deficits and reducing threats to livelihoods. External technical support that is provided in a longer-term, collaborative and integrated manner has a greater positive impact on system performance than independent projects of limited duration.

Published by FAO's Agriculture and Development Economics Division (ESA) with support from the EC-FAO Food Security Programme

FAO Agricultural and Development Economics Division: http://www.fao.org/es/esa/
EC-FAO Food Security Programme: http://www.foodsecinfoaction.org/

While each type of institutional setting has advantages and disadvantages, several factors exert a positive influence on EWS performance and ability to carry out their mission. These factors include:

- an **institutional home** conducive to the reciprocal flow of information among the primary decision-making bodies involved in emergency actions and longer term food security analysis and programming;
- **administrative ease** for accessing primary and secondary data from decentralized offices and line ministries;
- **managerial independence** and **analytical autonomy**: and
- the ability to **recruit** and **train** a diverse group of food security analysts who can address the multi-sector dimensions of food security.

A demand-driven system is critical to EWS effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Almost all EWS need to clarify their mandate and terms of reference. This should be done in collaboration with their consultative bodies and in the context of available financial resources and human capacity. Too often, decisions on content and methods have been based on assumptions of what is needed rather than on a clear articulation of what users want and will use.

Bringing the demand side to the forefront of system development will require strong commitment and support from governments and technical partners to develop the processes and critical institutional mechanisms for:

- articulating user demand for information and analysis;
- translating demand into a well-defined mandate using appropriate methods; and
- ensuring that the requisite financial and human resources required for long-term sustainability are developed.

Continual reliance on donor funding may present certain risks to many EWS, particularly in terms of long-term sustainability.

Early warning activities can stop or be severely downscaled when external funding is withdrawn. The ability to leverage effective national budgetary support of EWS may require a priori that they meet government decision-making needs using the most cost effective technical methods.

Regional economic communities (RECs) have played an important role in providing support to national systems in numerous areas. This includes:

- providing methodological support;
- serving as a neutral instrument for validating national crop survey and cereal balance sheet results;
- assuring comparability of analyses across time and space; and perhaps most importantly
- providing a forum for governments, donors and technical partners to discuss and collaborate on early warning issues.

The future role of RECs will depend on the needs of their member states as well as their comparative advantage, capacity and constraints.

Implications

One core recommendation emerging from this assessment is that countries, regional organizations, development partners and the African Union should focus their collaborative efforts on creating and strengthening institutional mechanisms that guide the development of the EWS. This will enable EWS to more effectively meet the decision-making needs of their primary users and evolve in a dynamic and sustainable manner.

EWS also should become part of an expanded food security information and analysis system that can produce viable, relevant and credible information necessary for responding to short- term emergencies as well as contributing to longer-term development programming.

Achieving these goals will require an improved strategy centred on:

- ownership and commitment to developing a national process;
- strengthened national and regional capacity;
- responsiveness to user needs;
- use of the most cost-effective methods;
- partnerships for improved analysis;
- consensus-building in analysis of the food situation;
- tools to systematically integrate food security indicators into a clear statement about the severity of a crisis and implications for response options;
- links to long-term development programming; and
- financial sustainability.

To this end, the FAO is committed to working in partnership with all actors in sub-Saharan Africa.