

Symposium on Information Systems for Food Security (ISFS), 1-2 September 2010, Brussels

Summary of Discussions and Conclusions

The aims of the Symposium were:

- to draw lessons from ISFS experiences particularly with respect to institutional, organisational, financial and coordination issues;
- to examine the opportunities for ISFS capacity and institution building focused on food crisis prevention and risk management decision-making at national and regional level;
- to debate the merits and practical steps of a global initiative on ISFS.

Various international organisations, regional organisations, development partners, NGO's and academia with expertise in ISFS had been invited for the meeting. The following organisations took part:

International Organisations:

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI);
The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO);
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD);
The World Bank (WB);
The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

Regional organisations and initiatives:

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN);
The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP);
Le Comité permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel (CILSS);
The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA);
The Southern African Development Community (SADC);
El Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA).

Development Partners:

L'Agence Française de Développement (AFD);
The European Commission (EC);
The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ);
The United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

NGO's:

Save the Children.

Academia:

Cornell University and The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI);
The University of Pretoria;
The Stichting Onderzoek Wereldvoedsel-voorziening van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (SOW-VU, The Centre for World Food Studies).

1) Taking stock: progress and challenges in ISFS capacity building and sustainability

- Various organisations presented their views on progress and challenges in ISFS. It was acknowledged that progress has been made over the last years in the development of ISFS capacities, especially for early warning and emergency response. However, it was also noted that the efforts of donors and international organisation have failed to bring the intended sustainable improvements. When external funding ended the structures that had been set up in countries often proved to be unsustainable.
- There is a need to find a comprehensive ISFS model that will strengthen effective partnerships at national, regional and global levels. The importance of linking information to decision making and policy processes at the national level was noted. Demand-driven and needs-based approaches are needed, as well as a focus on institution and capacity building.
- ISFS should focus not only on early warning and short term emergency responses but also serve the needs for information that supports food crisis prevention, preparedness and disaster risk management. ISFS should also inform long term development actions, like poverty reduction strategies, climate change adaptation of farming systems and understanding the implications of increased food price volatility.
- Consensus based data that has been agreed by different stakeholders/organisations in a country is thought to be the most useful. A culture of data sharing, free access and transparency of data should be stimulated.
- In response to the joint FAO-WFP evaluation of ISFS support, both organisations are developing new corporate strategies for ISFS capacity building. A joint coordinated strategy will also be developed.

2) The role of ISFS at national and regional levels.

- There was consensus among participants on the basic roles to be played by ISFS institutions at the national and regional levels, although the great diversity of food security challenges means very different information needs in various at-risk regions and countries. The national level is crucial for the articulation of demand of information. Some of the elements driven at this level are: understanding the needs of citizens; developing different types of surveys; production of basic farm data; monitoring vulnerability and household nutrition; and support for national safety nets where they exist.
- At the regional level, organisations will look different depending on their mandate, their historical background, their geographical location, and other specifics. However, some of the functions at the regional level could include: remote sensing interpretation and analysis, harmonisation of data and methods; technical and institutional support to member states; setting quality standards for data and indicators; and knowledge and information sharing. Regional organisations can have a mandate in the countries they cover and play a role linked to the national systems that is stronger than the role played by international organisations.

- Participants coming from regional organisations explained the different approaches taken by their organisations. In **SADC**, data, statistics and other information produced by member states are considered official, and thus, the regional body has no mandate to change them. The role of SADC is not to collect data but to give support to member states in the areas mentioned before. **CILSS**, however, applies a stronger enforcement process. The publication of member states' data is subjected to peer review to see whether it meets or not the expected quality standards. There had been cases where country grain production estimates were not published by CILSS because they did not meet the standards. CILSS also has a specific mandate in supporting national level decision-making, in helping implement the *codex alimentarius* and in collecting data for shared resources. The point of view of **SICA** is that the collection of data is the responsibility of countries, since they ultimately have to be accountable to their citizens. Hence, SICA does not collect country data but conducts analysis of regional issues and sets standards. In the case of **ASEAN**, countries' statistical institutions provide the information required for policies by letting them learn from each others' experiences. The regional institution provides capacity building for ASEAN member countries and facilitates technical cooperation between countries.
- The collection and production of primary data are costly and time consuming processes. The importance of coordination of efforts was highlighted in order not to duplicate actions. Furthermore, it is crucial to count on political will and political weight to impose certain discipline to member states in order to meet the quality standards set at regional level.

3) Linking information more effectively to national decision making and policy processes.

- ISFS currently do not provide adequate analysis for ready-made policy follow-up (in a social, economic, agricultural and other sense) at the country level. Therefore, the data generated by ISFS need more policy related analysis according to the context of each country before feeding into decision making and political processes.
- There is a need for more and better information to identify appropriate policies and perhaps come with a tool box of validated and tested policies. Better models of data should be used to communicate understandable outputs for policy makers. Meanwhile policy and decision makers need to communicate to ISFS institutions what kinds of information and analysis they need.
- Limited information and analysis is still a critical constraint to objective decision making on humanitarian responses. Many gaps exist at international as well as country and regional levels. For instance, better tools to measure grain and energy price volatility and transmission are needed. At the same time, there is a need to use ISFS data and analysis output for longer term development and poverty reduction questions.
- The need for good quality, reliable, updated and transparent data has not only a technical dimension but also a political one. It is important to verify the political commitment at the national level. Moreover, it is crucial to stimulate the demand side for quality of information at the country level to ensure ISFS institution building is country driven and sustainable. Quality controls at the international and regional levels are important and peer reviews should also take place.

4) Incorporating current nutritional information in ISFS reporting.

- There is a need to treat food security and nutrition security jointly. The challenge remains on how to best integrate nutrition into ISFS.
- It is important to count on local knowledge and work with local communities, since each community and each household are different and have different nutrition needs.
- An interesting approach on reporting nutritional information is the Household Economy Approach, which is a long-term approach to food and nutrition security¹

5) Conclusions: Towards more coordinated approaches to assisting ISFS capacities at national, regional and global levels.

- Institutions at the global level have not fully fulfilled their tasks of assisting ISFS institutions at the regional and national levels. The global institutions should play a strong role in certain instances where that role cannot be played by countries. An example is handling information and analysis on global markets and trade analysis that will support decision making at regional and country levels.
- There is a need to define more precisely the required products and roles of ISFS at all levels: the global, the regional and the national level. At the same time, the creation of a system that links the three levels of information would be useful. This could be done through a network of ISFS stakeholders that could act as a clearinghouse, which could also set the standards and provide for certification of data.
- The ISFS community has a unique opportunity to move forward and find a common and coordinated direction for ISFS capacity and institutional support. Resources in ISFS are currently scattered and there are multiple initiatives. Different stakeholders, sources and demands have lead at times to lack of coordination and understanding of needs. At the same time, there is a wealth of experience in ISFS that needs to be captured, shared and built upon (e.g. harmonized approaches).
- It was acknowledged that a useful approach would be the establishment of a network of ISFS stakeholders that will provide a common understanding of ISFS. This network could act as a community of practice to guide ISFS support, build on the lessons and ISFS successes of the past, work to support country and regional ISFS institution building while helping to close some of the global ISFS information gaps. Such a network, or multi-stakeholder working group, as some called it, could move ISFS issues and advocacy to a higher policy level.
- Regarding the practicalities of this network, it should not lead to the creation of a bureaucratic or formalistic institution and therefore it should start as an informal process with a small group of ISFS stakeholders supported by the ISFS expert Roy Stacy. This small 'task force' will consist of people coming from the international organisations most closely involved in food security: FAO, WFP and IFPRI. The

¹ The Household Economy Approach describes how different households live, what risks they are vulnerable to and how they cope in a "shock". It describes the assets and resources accessible for different types of households, and how these resources are exploited in the daily, seasonal and long-term process of making ends meet (Save the Children).

group will develop a T.o.R. that will reflect the tasks the network should perform, as part of a short “road map” paper that would be circulated to all Symposium participants after the group completed its draft. The 'task force' will also come up with ideas on how the network may link up with an existing body that could host the network and offer secretariat support. This institution could be the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) but the pros and cons of this need to be examined by the group in their paper. The paper should also explore how to involve a wider range of stakeholders besides the ones present in Brussels.