Food Security Information Systems Supported by Save the Children UK

A review

Jeremy Shoham

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Abbreviations and acronyms

DFIS	Darfur food information system
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DMD	Disaster Management Department
DPPD	Ethiopian Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department
ECHO	Humanitarian Department of the European Commission
ENA	Emergency needs assessment
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FEAT	Food economy analysis team
FEG	Food Economy Group
FEWS-NET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FEZ	Food economy zone
FIVIMS	Food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping systems
FSAU	Food Security Assessment Unit
FSIS	Food security information system
FSIT	Food security information team
FSL	Food security and livelihoods
GIEWS	FAO's Global information and early warning system
HEA	Household economy approach
IDP	Internally displaced person
IHM	Individual household method
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KFSSG	Kenya Food Security Steering Group
LAF	Livelihoods Analysis Forum
NEWS	National early warning system
NEWU	National Early Warning Unit
NFSD	National Food Security Department
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NSCSE	New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation
NSP	Nutrition surveillance programme
NVAC	National Vulnerability Assessment Committee
OCHA	Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PRSP	Poverty reduction strategy programme
REWS	Regional early warning system
REWU	Regional Early Warning Unit
RVA	Rapid vulnerability assessment
RVAC	Regional Vulnerability Assessment Committee
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SADC-FANR	SADC - Food, Agriculture & Natural Resources
TSU	Technical Support Unit
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VA	Vulnerability assessment
VAC	Vulnerability assessment committee
VAM	WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping
WFP	World Food Programme

Summary

The overall goal of this review is to contribute to a strengthening of livelihoods-based Food Security Information Systems (FSIS) within governments, UN agencies and other institutions. It is hoped that by reviewing the extensive experience of Save the Children UK in supporting FSIS over the past 15–20 years that key lessons can be extracted to strengthen future FSIS activities. The paper is based largely on a number of case-study documents compiled by Save the Children UK practitioners. These deal with FSIS in south Sudan, Darfur, Somalia, Tanzania, Ethiopia and southern Africa. Two other source documents provide, respectively, an overview of Save the Children UK's experiences of secondment to strengthen FSIS and a synthesis of donors' views on FSIS. The paper also draws on recently published key documents (Levine and Chastre 2004; Darcy and Hofmann 2004), more general published literature, and the author's own experience and knowledge.

Save the Children UK has been involved in establishing and strengthening information systems since the early 1970s (initially in Ethiopia and the Sahel). In 1990 development of the household economy approach (HEA) began and throughout the 1990s, largely through a process of secondment of Save the Children UK staff, household economy analysis was gradually incorporated into information systems and systematic needs assessments in south Sudan, Somalia, Darfur, Burundi and Liberia (for one year only). In 2002 Save the Children UK seconded HEA specialists to the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Since 1994 it has seconded more than 16 people to either WFP or FAO as technical food security experts within Africa, and another 7 to national and regional Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) in southern Africa. Save the Children UK has also been involved in supporting nutrition information systems in Ethiopia and Darfur, as well as advocating for more effective information systems and methodologies concentrating on people's livelihoods. The development and adoption of the HEA approach throughout the 1990s has to be seen in the context of a shift of emphasis that occurred in the 1980s in the way that food emergencies were predicted. During this period, food security information systems gradually began to take in information about people's ability to gain access to food, as well as the availability of food.

The main conclusions and recommendations in this consolidation paper fall under the following headings:

- household economy assessment and other methodologies as a tool in FSIS
- factors that influence the use of FSIS information by decision-makers
- sustainability of FSIS
- linking FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis
- co-ordination of information systems
- decentralisation of information systems
- donor views and practice with regard to FSIS

HEA and other methodologies as a tool in FSIS

The methodology adopted for a FSIS plays a vital role in determining the acceptance or otherwise of the information produced. Institutional interests will inevitably influence choice of FSIS methodology. Compromises may be appropriate and necessary, but there is the risk of either over-diluting or over-stretching the approach in attempting to accommodate the

needs and interests of all stakeholders. There is a need for clarity and overview as to what type of FSIS methodology is needed for a given country or region. This should be based on a thorough gap analysis of existing information and analytical frameworks. Equally important is an analysis of the capacity to implement and sustain a specific methodological approach. The context in which the information system will operate should be examined in terms of, eg, security, geography and infrastructure. Once an optimal methodology has been identified, important decisions will have to be made about how to obtain institutional support and about the appropriate location for the system, to ensure, as far as possible, that the methodology can be successfully put into practice. At the same time it is necessary to accept that a degree of influence from all stakeholders is necessary in order for a methodology to receive broad approval.

Save the Children UK has promoted the use of the Household Economy Approach in systems it supports. While certain criticisms of HEA may be valid, many others are over-emphasised, they reflect unrealistic expectations of the methodology, or they have not taken into account recent developments and advances in HEA. Few attempts have been made to determine, in retrospect, the accuracy of predictions made through the employment of HEA. In order to strengthen and optimise the future role of HEA, scenario-based guidance material should be developed, to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the approach in different contexts. This would require more systematic review and documentation of the experiences of using HEA. In particular, the method should be examined in terms of its technical rigour, practicality in different contexts, proven value in advocacy work, and the accuracy of its predictions. In some contexts compromise types of HEA may be necessary in order to allow for factors relating to the institutions involved, staff capacity, security and infrastructure. There is nothing wrong with this, and in fact 'compromise measures' may become good practice for certain contexts. However, it is important to be aware of how adaptation of the methodology may lead to weaknesses; possible gains must be weighed against what may be lost.

HEA, together with the newly-developed individual household method (IHM), has the potential to provide a practicable approach to measuring the impact of food security interventions. Greater investment should be made in developing and promoting the role of HEA in this area.

HEA, with IHM, could also support FSIS in longer-term vulnerability analysis and poverty monitoring. Its key strengths as a methodology for this include the fact that it identifies structural constraints to food security; it quantifies changing components of the household economy; and that it can also be used to account for and predict the impact of different scenarios, such as changes in government policy. The approach also focuses on indicators at household level that are relevant to the programme implementation.. This is an area currently lacking in monitoring carried out under poverty reduction strategy programmes (PRSPs) and is often referred to as the 'missing middle'. However, so far there has been little experience of employing HEA in longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis.

Factors that influence use of information by decision-makers

Designers and implementers of FSIS need to have an understanding of the mandates, policies and politics of UN agencies and governments

and of how these may affect decision-making. They will then be able to tailor their information management and alliance-building strategies accordingly.

Political aspects of information may be critical at national government level. Consideration has to be given to whether governments are likely to be sensitive to information about food security. They may choose to ignore it or, at worst, suppress certain information. In such a situation, the particular government institution where the FSIS is located may be an important factor. It may also indicate that FSIS decision-making and implementation roles should be moved away from central government.

The information system's credibility is also critical to how the information is used. Experience has shown that credibility is greatest when there has been a process of multi-agency consultation over the development of the methodology. This has been the case in south Sudan, and also with the National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs) in southern Africa. Credibility is also enhanced when the agencies and staff involved with the FSIS are perceived by external decision-makers to be 'neutral' in the way they analyse information. Thus secondment of appropriate staff can be effective in ensuring 'buy-in' of the methodology. A related issue is the need to have a clear strategy for communicating with decision-makers so that they understand how the information is derived and how analysis is undertaken. Decision-makers who are not involved in the development of the system may require support and training.

FSIS information has rarely been used to promote or influence non-food aid responses in emergency contexts. While this reflects a number of political, institutional, and events-driven factors, it also reflects shortcomings in the methodologies, or in the way they are applied in emergency needs assessment, and the humanitarian sector's limited response capacity. There needs to be more experience of non-food aid responses in emergency situations, to get a better understanding of what types of information and analysis are required for determining the appropriateness and feasibility of non-food aid responses in a given context.

Within Save the Children UK country programmes, there has often been a disconnect between the work of secondees to national FSIS and the rest of their programming and advocacy. This appears to reflect the fact that terms of reference for secondees are not sufficiently explicit, as well as there being a number of management problems.

Sustainability

It is not possible to accurately test whether a FSIS is sustainable until after external donor funding ends. However, experiences described in this review do highlight the type of analysis and planning that may help underpin sustainability. The case studies have shown that where demand for the FSIS is high, eg, in emergencies (and in geopolitically important regions), there is likely to be consistent support from external donors. However, funding is likely to be less reliable for systems that are located in areas where emergencies are more sporadic and/or that are more firmly embedded in – and partially funded by – national government structures.

Critically, there is almost no publicly available data about the costs of FSIS. Without more standardised data on costs it will be impossible to engage in debates regarding the costs of establishing and sustaining FSIS, or different

components of the system. Neither will it be possible to discuss the potential for cost-sharing among a variety of stakeholders. Information on costs would make it easier to identify appropriate funding sources for different components of a system, eg, early warning, longer-term poverty monitoring, impact assessment, etc, as each component will be valued differently by the various stakeholders. The paucity of data on costs makes financial planning for sustainability very difficult.

Strategies to build and sustain capacity in FSIS need to be developed on a country-by-country basis. They must also take account of existing educational levels, capacity and skills, and the fact that staff frequently move within government departments and between government and international agencies. Consideration should be given to competing demands on government staff during capacity-building work and the need for refresher courses and training of trainers, etc. Expertise can all too easily be lost, especially where the institutions concerned do not have much of a stake in the FSIS or their enthusiasm for it is less than wholehearted. It is essential to understand how important it is to undertake a capacity analysis prior to implementing or supporting a FSIS and to anticipate scenarios where capacity might be eroded. Such an analysis, which should be applied to the system at all levels (central and decentralised) will influence the choice of methodology in terms of its complexity and the level of training needed.

It is vital to consider how to achieve maximum 'institutional ownership' of the approach, and how to maintain support and influence within the institution where the FSIS is located. This requires substantial stakeholder analysis. For example, it is essential to understand the organisational structures and where the decision-makers are, while ensuring that the most powerful stakeholders are 'on board'. There is a major gap in the literature with regard to understanding how institutional factors impinge on FSIS sustainability. This could be addressed through more systematic institutional analysis of the many FSIS currently operating either within or at the margins of national governments. Unfortunately, international and expatriate technicians who are called on to develop, support, and strengthen these FSIS are usually not equipped with the skills or background to undertake institutional or organisational analysis.

Integrating FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis

Save the Children UK has had very limited experience of linking or integrating FSIS with poverty and vulnerability monitoring. Most of its experience with FSIS has been in the emergency context, although that is beginning to change in, for example, south Sudan, Tanzania and much of southern Africa. There are many methodological, institutional and political issues to consider in terms of integrating FSIS with poverty and vulnerability monitoring. For example:

- What are the optimal ways of linking early warning, FSIS and poverty monitoring institutionally at central, regional and district level?
- How compatible are monitoring and survey procedures and sampling for these distinct forms of information system?
- Would governments that are sensitive to criticism adopt the HEA framework, which allows detailed analysis of process indicators, as an approach for national government PRSP monitoring?

In attempting to integrate FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis, agencies should consider a range of technical, institutional and political challenges. It may be best to begin on a small-scale (pilot) basis within a region of a country where it is less likely that there will be institutional and political challenges. This would allow focus on more technical areas, eg, sampling frames, units of analysis and mix of professional skills required.

Co-ordination

Co-ordination of FSIS is frequently overlooked. In the case-study countries it has been less of an issue in conflict-affected areas, where the main operational FSIS has been closely linked to a UN structure. In other situations, eg, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and north Sudan, lack of co-ordination has led to duplication and wastage, lack of standardisation of information and confusion for decision-makers. Formation of multi-agency bodies including technical institutions has helped to improve co-ordination. However, where the strategy for FSIS is to integrate these with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis, co-ordination is likely to become even more complex.

The experience in southern Africa shows that formation of a regional multi-agency body, including and chaired by regional technical institutions, lends credibility to regional leadership and builds consensus among participating institutions. It can also facilitate the development of appropriate capacity at national level, and training at regional level ensures a harmonised approach and understanding across the region.

Currently, within the humanitarian system it is not clear who has the overall mandate to strengthen co-ordination of FSIS at country or regional level. This needs to be addressed. It may be that lead INGOs take on this role within countries or that INGOs with a history of supporting FSIS may wish to independently develop this mandate and expertise.

Decentralisation

There has been limited experience of decentralising FSIS. Theoretically, decentralisation allows for local 'ownership' and enables local agencies to appraise and plan projects. However, there is little information on the cost, feasibility, sustainability and real value of such initiatives. There may be critical issues regarding capacity of local staff and financial sustainability within local-government funding mechanisms. There may also be political problems to do with empowering local government and disempowering central administrations. In general, donors are interested in FSIS that build up from a decentralised level, as long as these are effectively installed within government institutions.

Donors

Key actors in FSIS must invest time and effort in communicating to donors how FSIS and specific methodologies operate in practice. They must also inform them about how different methodologies can interlink and complement each other rather than operate in parallel. Continuous dialogue with donors is necessary with regard to evolving information systems as well as the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and lessons learned. Given the high turnover of donor staff, these lessons need to be captured in guidance material. There are currently no generic guidelines on FSIS, in spite of the enormous demand for FSIS data – although agency guidelines exist.

Donors should be encouraged and supported to carry out standardised monitoring of costs of FSIS and their different components. Donors should also be encouraged to invest in evaluating the performance of FSIS – especially from an institutional and decision-making perspective, where donors will have a comparative advantage because they are the institutional decision-makers. Donors at country level should as a matter of course be involved in FSIS design. This will ensure their greater understanding, trust and acceptance of findings. FSIS stakeholders (such as Save the Children UK) should attempt to monitor donor policies and priorities and 'internal thinking' with regard to FSIS. These can be done in relation to a specific donor across a range of countries or for a particular country, or else in relation to specific staff/individuals. This type of knowledge, perhaps kept in 'donor files', will allow agencies with a keen interest in FSIS to target educational messages and funding requests to specific donors. It will also assist in building strong partnerships in support of specific FSIS approaches.

Guidance material

There is an urgent need to develop comparative and scenario-based guidance material on FSIS. Guidance material should allow potential users to evaluate methodologies and systems to decide which is most appropriate for a given context. Clearly, any such guidance material should be a 'working' document. It is astonishing that currently there is no generic guidance material on FSIS, even though these information systems are a prerequisite for planning emergency and longer-term food security interventions.

Introduction

The overall goal of this review is to contribute to a strengthening of livelihoods-based food security information systems (FSIS) used by governments, UN agencies and other institutions. It is hoped that by reviewing the extensive experience of Save the Children UK in supporting FSIS over the past 15–20 years, key lessons can be extracted to strengthen future FSIS activities. The review is largely based on a number of case-study documents compiled by Save the Children UK staff and consultants (Harding 2003, Sharp 2004, Majid 2004, Majid 2004a, Lopez 2004, Marsland 2004, Nicholson 2005, Chapman 2005). The review will also draw upon two other highly significant and recently published documents (Levine and Chastre 2004, Darcy and Hofmann 2003), the wider published literature, and the author's own experience and knowledge.

This paper falls somewhere between a review and consolidation of case-study documents. It attempts to describe the main findings of the case studies but of necessity focuses on findings that are considered by the author to be most critical.

For the purposes of this paper a broad and widely encompassing definition of FSIS is used. Thus, FSIS includes all information systems that focus on elements of food security. These may include rapid emergency needs assessments, ongoing nutritional surveillance, ongoing food security monitoring, elements of poverty monitoring and periodic baseline surveys. It is worth noting that descriptions and perceptions of the FSIS reviewed in this paper come from Save the Children UK staff and consultants who inevitably employ some element of a 'Save the Children UK lens'.

The structure and sections of this paper are as follows:

1. background
2. description of information systems that Save the Children UK has supported over the past 15 years, including the evolution and mechanisms of these systems and the mode of Save the Children UK support
3. an overview of external perceptions of the household economy approach (HEA) as an operational tool to strengthen food crisis early warning and livelihoods analysis in post-emergency contexts as well as a more generalised critique of HEA
4. experiences of modifying the HEA tool within FSIS in order to accommodate different stakeholder needs
5. evidence of information from FSIS supported by Save the Children UK being used for decision-making and analysis of the factors that determine use and application of information
6. review of the experiences of creating sustainable FSIS and the factors that influence sustainability
7. experience of FSIS adapting to a longer-term vulnerability and poverty monitoring and analysis role
8. issues regarding co-ordination of FSIS
9. issues regarding decentralisation of FSIS
10. donor perspectives of FSIS and implications for information system design
11. recommendations for future practice based on lessons learned and gaps in experience, knowledge and analysis.

1. Background

Save the Children UK has been involved in establishing and strengthening food security information systems since the early 1970s, initially in Ethiopia and the Sahel. In the 1980s it started nutritional surveillance activities in Ethiopia, culminating in the secondment of a nutritionist to the disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC) in 1990. The same year witnessed the development of the methodology for three major helicopter-assisted surveys in Ethiopia and the introduction of the term 'food economy'. This was also the year in which the household economy approach (HEA) began to be developed – a process which arguably took six years (up to 1996) and resulted from the collaboration between Save the Children UK and the FAO's global information early warning system (FAO-GIEWS). This was followed by the development of a specialised computer programme, RiskMap, with financial support from the EU. Throughout the 1990s and largely through a process of secondment of Save the Children UK staff, household economy analysis was gradually incorporated into information systems and systematic needs assessments in southern Sudan, Somalia (via the Food Security Assessment Unit – FSAU), the Darfur region of Sudan, Burundi and Liberia (for one year only). There were unsuccessful attempts to negotiate secondments in Sierra Leone, Uganda, Rwanda and Angola. In 2002 Save the Children UK seconded HEA specialists to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and, in 2002, to three national Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs); these appointments arguably had a significant impact on the international response to the southern Africa food crisis in 2002. Thus, since 1994 Save the Children UK has seconded more than 16 people to either WFP or FAO as technical food security experts within Africa, and 7 to Regional and National VACs in southern Africa. In addition, it has seconded individuals to UNICEF and UNHCR within the region.

Today HEA is used across much of Africa by Save the Children UK, and increasingly in parts of Asia, often in collaboration with governments, UN agencies and other NGOs. Save the Children UK has also been involved in supporting nutrition information systems (eg, in Ethiopia), and in advocating for more effective livelihoods-based information systems and methodologies (eg, in Tanzania, Ethiopia and southern Africa).

The development and adoption of the HEA approach throughout the 1990s has to be viewed against the background of the 'emergency prediction' paradigm shift that occurred in the 1980s. This shift followed publication of Amartya Sen's pivotal work on entitlement theory (Sen, 1981); it meant that the focus of information systems gradually widened to include food access as well as food availability information. Initiatives within major institutions responsible for early warning system development, such as FAO, reflected these changes. For example, the SADC food security programme was revised in 1987, with new emphasis placed on access to food by vulnerable population groups. Established global and national early warning systems in Africa, such as GIEWS and national early warning systems in Ethiopia, Sudan and Mozambique, began to incorporate food access data. From the mid-1990s onwards, various coalitions of agencies were being formed in some SADC countries to facilitate the generation and dissemination of vulnerability analysis information. In 1999 the role of the national early warning systems within the SADC region was formally expanded to include food access issues, although the nature of their food security surveillance remained firmly focused on availability issues and on reporting external threats to food security.

A key weakness of all the emerging FSIS/early warning information systems and emergency needs assessment (ENA) approaches at this time was the lack of a logical, user-friendly and practicable analytical framework that would allow increasingly diverse sets of data (on food availability and access) to be used, weighed and analysed in relation to response needs. The emergence of HEA in the early 1990s was therefore timely in the extreme. Moreover, it plugged a gap in analytical methodology which had led to situations where large amounts of data were collected at considerable cost, but were poorly used in the analysis of needs and response (eg, in Darfur, Kordofan, Red Sea Province, etc). It is no exaggeration to say that in some circles HEA took on the mantle of an ideology and was certainly as seductive. As a result, this new analytical tool was enthusiastically adopted in many African countries, while attracting enormous interest from key players in the response to food crisis, ie, WFP, FAO and numerous donors. In 2000 a new phase of USAID's Famine Early Warning Systems (FEWS) project was launched – FEWS-NET. Significantly, for the first time FEWS-NET adopted an HEA type of vulnerability analysis component as central to its early warning work. The expertise was provided by the Food Economy Group (FEG), a group consisting mainly of former Save the Children UK experts.

2. Description and evolution of food security information systems supported by Save the Children UK

In supporting the development of FSIS, Save the Children UK has paid particular attention to the adoption and use of HEA. However, it has also been involved in other aspects of FSIS, such as the nutritional surveillance programme (NSP) in Ethiopia, which was largely based on nutritional indicator monitoring, and the development of methodologies that only partly involve an HEA approach. For the purposes of this section it may be convenient to consider three different information system contexts in which Save the Children UK has been involved:

i) systems operating in conflict zones with weak or absent government structures where there were regular food crises, eg, south Sudan, Somalia and Burundi. In these contexts WFP has often been dominant in terms of driving information needs
ii) national systems in non-conflict situations, eg, Tanzania, Darfur (pre-2004) and Ethiopia
iii) national information systems that are co-ordinated at regional level, eg, in the southern Africa region.

Conflict zone systems

WFP has been the main agency utilising information systems supported by Save the Children UK in south Sudan (until 2003), Somalia (until 2002) and Burundi (until 2001). In all three countries the linkage with WFP eventually weakened as a result of altered user needs, with more developmental planning required following peace in south Sudan and greater stability in Somalia. In Burundi the departure of a Save the Children UK secondee in 2000 also contributed to a weakening of the relationship.

South Sudan

In 1997 in south Sudan the household food economy assessment (HFEA) unit was formalised within WFP offices in Nairobi and Lokichoggio, Kenya. By 1998 the unit had 15–20 trained HEA analysts and a strong internal training capacity; it was renamed Technical Support Unit (TSU) in 2000. By 2002 the size of the unit's assessment team had decreased as a result of high staff turnover and staff being allocated other duties. The in-house training capacity was lost. In 2003 the quality of analysis deteriorated because trained staff were not being replaced, and Save the Children UK withdrew its technical and managerial attachment to the TSU when WFP effectively disbanded the unit. In 2004 Save the Children UK appointed a food security and livelihoods (FSL) adviser to develop an independent (external to WFP) Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) in south Sudan and began transferring the institutional memory and analytical capacity to the New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (NSCSE). Currently, information from the unit is said to be highly sought after by planners developing policy and strategic thinking for the post-conflict period. HEA appears to be the only methodology in common usage, though the need for additional information has been recognised.

After several meetings at which the merits of different FSL units in the Horn of Africa and in the southern part of the continent were reviewed, the LAF unanimously accepted HEA as the standard framework for analysis and

identified seven components as essential for a successful and sustainable analytical unit.[1] Each step in the process was seen as vitally important; at the same time it was emphasised that no information or other approaches need be excluded, but that the contextual picture provided by HEA would add value to any other survey data or indicator-based information that might be brought to the table. In order to proceed after reaching this vital consensus, Save the Children UK and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) began to rebuild the lost monitoring capacity, and three HEA training workshops were conducted with LAF members in 2004. Later, quarterly analytical forums were held at the NSCSE headquarters in Rumbek. Analysis was supported by the use of Food Economy Group (FEG) spreadsheets – a simple tool to run scenarios and to enable a diverse range of participants to again reach consensus on longer-term livelihood recovery strategies as well as on emergency planning. The overall aim is for the LAF to eventually become the forum within the NSCSE's new FSL unit.

Somalia

The Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) was established in 1994 by WFP Somalia and USAID. The unit's objective was to provide information to operating agencies and donors regarding current and protracted food security issues in Somalia, and an early warning of potential food crises. During this phase, formal collaboration started with Action Contre la Faim (ACF) on nutrition surveillance, and with Save the Children UK on food security analysis. Save the Children UK seconded a full-time HEA adviser to the FSAU from 1995 until 2001. A perceived bias of the FSAU towards acute emergency interventions ultimately contributed to the EC's decision to move the FSAU from WFP's management to FAO's in 2000. The FSAU consists of 22 Somali professional field monitors and some 10–12 nutritionists funded separately under the Office for US Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Save the Children UK played an important advisory role during transition from WFP to FAO and supported the FSAU in the development of phase IV, emphasising the importance of a more decentralised unit and greater use of the unit's information by agencies and civil structures. During phase four and under new management by former Save the Children UK staff, the Somali field team gradually increased their use of, and familiarity with, HEA. This meant that the capacity of the FSAU's core analytical team, which was based in Nairobi, was extended to the field staff themselves. Existing HEA baseline profiles (qualitative narrative), which had been developed over many years for most livelihood population groups in the country, were strengthened and quantitative data was logged on to FEG spreadsheets. Capacity-building of the field team became a major focus of the FSAU, and within that period HEA was established as the standard framework for analysis. All field monitors were equipped with laptop computers and they are now capable of conducting not only assessments but full analysis in the field, using the HEA method and supported by the use of the FEG spreadsheet that logs and supports broader analysis (ie, offering the potential to provide a range of solutions, other than food, to any detected vulnerability).

Burundi

Since the civil war erupted in Burundi in 1993 WFP has been providing food aid to internally

[1] (1) A well-trained and motivated team; (2) an internal training capacity; (3) a standard framework for analysis;(4) an institutional memory; (5) an analytical forum; (6) adequate resources; (7) adequate field access.

displaced people living in 'sites' around the country. In order to help identify and prioritise their food needs, in 1995 an agreement was drawn up with Save the Children UK to second a food security adviser to WFP to assist with decision-making. The main result has been the application of HEA via permanent teams formed by WFP in the form of the food economy analysis (FEA) teams. Save the Children UK continued the secondments to WFP until September 2000. However, for a variety of reasons there has been less commitment on both sides to Save the Children UK's involvement in a WFP-managed information system since 2001 and Save the Children UK had closed its programme in Burundi by July 2003. Although FEA teams have continued to operate and maintain HEA as their key analytical framework, its influence within and outside WFP has diminished since the departure of the Save the Children UK secondee.

National systems in non-conflict situations

The experiences in Darfur and Tanzania show how information systems have evolved from those based on food availability models to those focusing more on food access and food security. A key difference between the two countries has been that while Save the Children UK has had relative autonomy in directing information system design in Darfur, the approach has been compromised significantly in Tanzania, where multi-stakeholder agreement has had to be negotiated.

Sudan – Darfur

Information gathering for Save the Children UK in Darfur has its roots in the famine of north Darfur in the mid-1980s. From then until late 2004, Save the Children UK had a substantial presence in the region and saw its work expand into south and west Darfur. In the early 1990s the information system was based on the common indicator approach (crop assessment, nutritional surveys and market monitoring). The HEA methodology was gradually introduced from 1995. The development of HEA baselines took place in two stages, with a cruder initial survey followed several years later by more detailed baselines. Links between nutrition, household economy and food security have developed over time. Nutrition surveys are conducted by food economy or livelihood zone. In particular food-insecure areas, as predicted by the Darfur food information system (DFIS) follow up, nutrition surveys are conducted at the time when nutrition status is expected to decline. Save the Children UK has largely retained control of the methodological and technical developments within the system and the DFIS has been managed and operated relatively successfully by a national team for several years.[2]

Tanzania

Sources of information for planning emergency operations in Tanzania have changed over time. There have been two distinct phases – that of the FAO/WFP crop assessment missions (before 2000) and that of the national multi-agency vulnerability assessments (from 2000). In 1999 Save the Children UK undertook household economy assessments in the central and northern part of Tanzania, including Arusha, Singida and Dodoma regions. This project was designed to establish baseline information on the livelihood patterns of rural households. A rapid crop and food security assessment carried out in February 2000 was the

[2] Save the Children UK pulled out of Darfur at the end of 2004 after a number of staff were killed.

first time national stakeholders from both government and agencies used a common methodological framework for needs assessment. It was largely based on the FAO/WFP assessment conceptual framework

A multi-agency group, the food security information team (FSIT), was formed in May 2000 in order to act as a technical and advisory body to all relevant parties involved in food security issues in the country. The FSIT aims to develop methodologies and approaches for co-ordinating collection of information, analysis and recommendations to inform decisions on the development of appropriate responses.

Save the Children UK encouraged the FSIT to use the newly established HEA baselines to assess the degree of vulnerability of households living in some of the drought-affected areas. However, within the FSIT task force there was some resistance to this proposal, which was perceived as "counter-productive towards the development of a standardised methodological framework" (Lopez 2004). Thus, Save the Children UK decided to support the FSIT task force in the design of the rapid vulnerability assessment (RVA) framework. The methodology for the first RVA was based on an adapted version of HEA. The RVA methodology borrows the key principles of the HEA, with information collection and analysis disaggregated by wealth groups and agro-economic zones. The method was adapted to facilitate data collection and analysis by non-specialists, to allow the assessment of large geographical areas in a limited timeframe and to meet the information requirements during drought episodes. Since the development of the RVA framework in 2000, FSIT has managed to carry out one round of assessments per year, targeting 30–50 districts.

Ethiopia

Save the Children UK began operations in Ethiopia in 1974 as a direct result of the massive famine in 1973/74. In 1978 the Wollo nutrition field worker programme was set up in the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS). In 1985 it expanded to some of the most drought-prone and food-insecure areas of the country and its name was changed to the nutritional surveillance programme (NSP). Nutritional surveillance was in the form of longitudinal monitoring of randomly selected villages stratified by agro-ecological zones. Following a decision to phase out the NSP over a three-year period (1998–2001) a consultant was employed to determine the best way to leave a sustainable system. The recommendation was to move to a form of rapid nutritional assessment capacity and to develop and support this capacity in the disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC) in the Amhara region during this three-year period. However, because of a lack of funding the recommendation was not implemented and there are ongoing efforts to find a feasible way of using nutrition information as part of early warning systems.

In 1996 a Save the Children UK technical expert was seconded to the early warning department of the DPPC at federal level, partly to ensure adoption of HEA principles and utilisation of RiskMap for calculating food aid requirements. Prior to this a great deal of work had been done to map the country into livelihood zones. However, the DPPC had already decided to adopt a more indicator-based methodology proposed by a UN Development Programme consultant. As a result, Save the Children UK decided to engage with this emerging early warning system with some reservations but at the same time to continue working with HEA in the Amhara region, in the hope that lessons

learned there could be fed back to improve the national early warning system at a later date.

From the mid-1990s, Save the Children UK was also involved in other initiatives related to FSIS in Ethiopia: support to the formal early warning system through the Institutional Support Programme (ISP) (largely in the form of capacity-building[3]); ongoing methodological development for the Ethiopia needs assessment; and support for the emerging FSIS in the Somali National Regional State (SNRS), which largely served pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities. In 2000 Save the Children UK began a project in the Somali region which aimed to strengthen the early warning system by the production of detailed baseline profiles of all food economy zones and by improving the capacity of the DPPC at regional level (the RDPPB) to monitor and analyse food security information. The main objective of phase two of the project (October 2002–September 2003) was to build an effective and sustainable food security monitoring system within regional capacity. In 2003 Save the Children UK contracted the Food Economy Group (FEG) to lead a pilot needs assessment in pastoral and agro-pastoral communities in two of the most accessible districts in the Somali region. This was later scaled up to cover all of the Somali region. On the basis of this success, the approach was then also piloted in agricultural-based livelihood areas in Amhara region. The end result was the consolidation of the Ethiopian needs assessment guidelines.

National systems co-ordinated at regional level

Southern Africa

Within SADC countries very little vulnerability analysis or household level analysis was incorporated in the national early warning systems (NEWS) and regional early warning system (REWS) food security monitoring before the early 1990s. Financed by an EU grant, Save the Children UK's efforts in the region from the mid-1990s onwards focused on undertaking HEA assessments in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe and analysing the results using the RiskMap software. This work was spearheaded initially by expatriate experts who would conduct rapid baseline exercises (eg, in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique) and later by a technical RiskMap adviser who split his time between the Save the Children UK and SADC offices in Harare, supported from London. Most of the effort went into the creation of HEA baselines in these countries. Efforts were made to engage National Early Warning Unit (NEWU) staff through training in the household food security and vulnerability concepts.

From the mid-1990s onwards, various coalitions of agencies were being formed in some SADC countries to facilitate the generation and dissemination of vulnerability assessment information. These formed the basis of what were later to become National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs). By the end of the decade there were inter-agency vulnerability assessment groupings in some of the countries (Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland) and the

[3] Under the ISP, Save the Children UK has been involved in revising the technical work of the UNDP secondee to the Ethiopian EW to make it more user-friendly. This included production of easy-to-read manuals and support to the DPPC in training government departments in EW theory and methodology at federal and regional, zonal and district levels in two regions (Amhara and Oromiya). The third phase (2002–06) of the ISP aims to improve the ability of *woreda* experts and development assistants to collect, analyse and write reports.

beginnings of such groupings in others (Malawi, Lesotho).

From 2000, the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) added an HEA-type livelihoods analysis component to its existing approach based on remote-sensing and indicator-based data, with technical support provided by the FEG. This development shifted the methodological emphasis in the region towards the HEA type of approach being advocated by Save the Children UK. In early 1999, the then director of the SADC Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Directorate (FANR) sector development unit (SDU) established a Regional VAC. The SADC-FANR-VAC (later simply called the RVAC) was initially composed of representatives from the FANR SDU, SADC's REWU, the SADC database project, FEWS-NET, FAO, WFP and Save the Children UK. The role of the NEWUs in the region was formally expanded in 1999 to include food access issues. The HEA work of both Save the Children UK and FEWS-NET/FEG was focused at the sub-national level. Key pieces of work were completed in Zambia (the Siavonga valley); in Zimbabwe (an urban assessment in Harare and assessments in commercial farming, informal mining and peri-urban settlements and in the Zambezi valley); in Mozambique (the Limpopo valley); in three regions in Tanzania (Singida, Dodoma and Arusha); and in three food economy zones (FEZs) in Malawi. Training of national staff was often carried out in conjunction with emergency assessments and also in dedicated training exercises. One large regional training event took place in Malawi in September 2001, in which Save the Children UK and FEG specialists trained NEWU staff from various SADC countries in livelihoods-based vulnerability assessments using HEA.

Following the declaration of the 2002 food crisis in the southern Africa region, three rounds of co-ordinated NVAC assessments were conducted. The methodology for these assessments was designed to look at both food access and food availability at household level. It borrowed some attributes from HEA but used an indicator-based approach involving questionnaires. In most cases, households were sampled within FEZs, and in some cases food aid need results were presented according to FEZ. Furthermore, the sampling framework was usually designed to allow disaggregation by wealth group.

In the second round of NVAC surveys, non-food humanitarian issues figured much more prominently in the analysis and outputs. The third round of assessments continued the movement away from the use of livelihoods-influenced questionnaires to calculate food aid needs to the use of HEA methods in order to gain a greater understanding of the depth and reasons for vulnerability to household food insecurity. The emphasis on examining 'multi-sectoral linkages', which started in the second round of surveys, was maintained.

3. Household economy approach and critiques of the method

While the household economy approach (HEA) has been enthusiastically adopted by many governments, UN agencies, INGOs and funding bodies, it has also drawn criticisms from a number of stakeholders. Some of these may derive partly from the fact that the approach is associated with an agency (Save the Children UK) and therefore provokes institutional competitiveness and territorialism. For example, in Tanzania some members of the food security information team (FSIT) argued that adoption of HEA in rapid vulnerability assessments (RVAs) would be "counter-productive towards the development of a standardised methodological framework which could be institutionally owned" (Lopez, 2004) (the implication being that it was a Save the Children UK approach). However, other criticisms are based on genuine shortcomings of the approach, which are acknowledged even by those who have developed the methodology, who support its adoption and are considered experts in HEA. At the same time there are also criticisms that can be partly discounted as misconceptions about HEA but nonetheless may contribute to lack of support for, or uptake of, the approach.

Objectively, it must be recognised that HEA has moved a long way since its inception. It was originally developed as a method of predicting the economic effect of crop failure, and other economic shocks, on the ability of households to acquire sufficient food. With increasing experience the approach has been extended to include an outcome in terms not only of the ability of households to acquire food, but also of their ability to get access to non-food items such as soap, clothing and education, and to show the possible trade-offs between food and non-food expenditures.[4] Extensive experience of implementing HEA has allowed many practical difficulties to be overcome, while the theoretical underpinning of HEA has expanded to address certain criticisms. These concern: too much concentration on emergency response and food aid requirements;[5] lack of statistical rigour; inappropriateness of HEA for application in either conflict or urban contexts; its limited usefulness for assessing impact of interventions; and the use of an inappropriate unit of analysis (wealth group as opposed to household).

While this review is neither intended nor able to provide a comprehensive technical critique of HEA, it is important to reflect on the case-study findings that relate to documented strengths and weaknesses (perceived and real) of the approach. These findings may then contribute to a strategy for improving understanding of the potential role of this approach in different types of information systems as well as improving ways of integrating the methodology with other approaches.

It is worth noting that there has only been one review of HEA to date (Archer 2001). This covered all 39 available reports covering HEA assessments conducted by Save the Children UK between 1998 and 2001. The review selected all applications in which a prediction was made and where information was available about the actual outcome for the population concerned. In the 14 reports that met the criteria for the review, the outcome was consistent with

[4] Strictly speaking this was part of the original purpose of HEA, although it did not feature explicitly.

[5] Many would argue that the original idea of HEA was to provide a method of moving away from food aid 'after the event'. However, it happened to be employed mainly in a period when food aid was the principal approach adopted.

the prediction in every case except one (Tanzania 1999), where the predictions had been based on assumptions that, in the event, did not occur.

Preconceptions, misconceptions and over-simplifications of HEA

There are a number of recurring criticisms of HEA described in the various case studies reviewed that are to some degree based on preconceptions and misconceptions about the approach, and they can be challenged.

Complexity of approach and need for baselines

A criticism frequently made of HEA is that it is a highly technical methodology, requiring well-trained implementing staff, and that establishing baselines is time-consuming and costly. In the Tanzania case this has been one of the justifications for adopting a compromise methodology (RVA). Prior to rolling out the Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) in southern Africa, WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) was concerned that the standard methodology of Save the Children UK and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET; the latter implemented through the Food Economy Group – FEG) was focused too much at the micro level and was too complicated to be accessible and quickly replicable by developing country technicians. It advocated a less demanding methodology that could derive rapid results on a wider level and be straightforward enough to be rapidly rolled-out to national staff. In the case of Darfur, the Darfur food information system (DFIS) was managed and operated relatively successfully by a national team for several years. However, expatriate-level support was required at various stages over the years, for large-scale training and baseline development (the latter in the early days) and for technical support in the areas of food security, health and nutrition integration, causal analysis and impact assessments.

An associated issue is the widely held belief that each assessment involving HEA entails a baseline survey, which takes both time and skilled human resources. Certainly, constructing baseline data in Amhara region, Ethiopia, proved to be unexpectedly time-consuming; this resulted in problems with survey completion and government staff being away from their duties for too long. Undertaking baseline surveys was also problematic in the first phase of the Somali region project, as this took much longer than envisaged.[6] However, HEA is predicated on the basis that although baseline data on livelihoods needs periodic updating (especially when there have been dramatic changes – due perhaps to conflict or unmet food crises and asset depletion), once a baseline has been established it is possible to send less well trained staff to undertake rapid monitoring assessments. This monitoring information is then fed back into the baseline to model likely outcomes. In south Sudan such a misconception prevailed in the early days of the Food Economy Analysis Unit (FEAU), ie, that baseline data needed to be constantly repeated. However, the south Sudan experience has now demonstrated that relative beginners can obtain very useful information by conducting simplified semi-structured interviews. Analysis using the FEG spreadsheets is then conducted by more experienced analysts back at base (until national staff are familiarised). It is now widely

[6] It did, however, take only one-third of the time and covered more livelihood zones than the work in Amhara region.

acknowledged that the use of the FEG spreadsheet has enhanced the quality of analysis significantly in both Somalia and south Sudan. It has helped in training staff and building their confidence. Furthermore, it is now believed that the combination of baseline livelihood profiles, the analytical spreadsheets and the recently developed simple quarterly monitoring system by Livelihood Analysis Forum (LAF) members has provided a FSIS that can be relatively easily transferred to the new emerging government in south Sudan.

HEA leads to estimates of food deficits only

A common criticism of HEA described in the case studies is that it is useful only for quantifying food aid needs. It is true that in the review countries HEA has been used mainly to quantify food aid needs, probably reflecting the history of food emergency events in the countries concerned. However, there is increasing evidence that HEA can be used effectively in conjunction with other information for determining both non-food aid responses and policies in emergencies and longer-term interventions related to food security, eg, in Amhara region, Ethiopia, and FSAU in Somalia.[7] The perception that it is used mainly to determine emergency food aid needs may also be partly due to the fact that HEA is better suited than many other methodologies to taking account of food access as well as food availability, while at the same time being logical and easy to understand. It has therefore been vigorously employed by agencies whose primary role is to determine food aid needs.

[7] See *HEA: What is it and what is it used for?* Michael O'Donnell, Save the Children UK 2005, for further examples from Save the Children UK's own experience.

Complex emergencies

Another criticism of HEA has been that for a variety of reasons it is not well adapted to complex emergency situations. For example, HEA focuses on economic aspects of food insecurity rather than the wider social and political determinants. In practice, although the approach itself does not include an explicit framework for analysing social and political causes of food insecurity, there is no reason why such analysis could not be added to the core economic analysis. Linked to this, assessment reports often give food deficits for different wealth groups, but do not give recommendations as to the feasibility of targeting assistance to these different groups, which may be particularly problematic in wars. It can be argued, however, that this highlights a need to be aware of any operational or other constraints affecting the ability to actually respond, rather than a flaw in the methodology used for identifying the needs.

At the same time, an advantage may be that in conflict situations, HEA, which employs a normative analysis, does not require extensive baseline survey activity. Equally, where good HEA baseline data has already been collected (prior to the conflict), it may be possible to translate trends in a few key indicators (without considerable survey time in insecure areas) into impact on food access and expenditure by livelihood groups. However, in some situations it is not possible to obtain in-depth information, eg, Burundi, because of the large number of internally displaced people (IDP) sites to be visited, combined with security constraints (but this probably would have applied to any assessment approach).

A further problem in complex emergencies may be that livelihood or wealth groups are not so relevant as categories for assessing vulnerability.

For example, it may be more appropriate to define group vulnerability in terms of political identity, or affiliation, phase of displacement, settlement type, risk of being attacked or nature of controlling authorities. Another issue is that social norms break down during conflict so that illegal or immoral activities may predominate among some groups. However, it may be extremely difficult to obtain such information from interviews with key informants.
Yet, in spite of these difficulties, HEA has been used effectively in many conflict situations, including Burundi, Somalia, south Sudan and Angola.

What is a normal year?

One criticism of HEA, which did not emerge in the case study reviews but is frequently expressed, is that it is based on the concept of comparing the current situation with a 'normal' period, but that in situations of chronic crises (eg, southern Sudan, Somalia and displaced and destitute pastoral populations) the concept of normality may no longer apply. As a result, unless respondents 'go back' many years, it is difficult to establish a good baseline year against which to judge the current situation. In such situations there can easily be difficulties with participant recall. Thus, where there is a structural food deficit, which may be reflected in high levels of stunting (and occasionally wasting, eg, in parts of Darfur or north-east Kenya) and 'unacceptable' coping strategies, the norm may itself be unacceptable. Published documentation on HEA does not fully deal with this conceptual issue, although current HEA guidelines do acknowledge this difficulty and in such situations HEA practitioners now take the most recent year as a baseline which should be updated as soon as the situation stabilises. Current good practice in HEA also addresses the question of the baseline not being 'normal' by defining a minimum basket of essential goods and services that households should be able to afford, setting that as the target for income, and discounting resources obtained through destructive coping strategies when calculating current needs.

Lack of statistical rigour

HEA is also often criticised on the grounds that it presents findings in a quantitative manner and that this is misleading, because the approach is only based on key informant interviews and wealth group discussions and is therefore not statistically rigorous.[8]

Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, FAO, WFP and FEWS were developing and implementing their own methods and systems for understanding vulnerability to food insecurity at the household level. Some of these approaches relied on increasingly sophisticated techniques to analyse secondary data and produce indicators of vulnerability that could be used to generate vulnerability indices. In the case of WFP the analysis was used to generate vulnerability maps. Criticisms of indicator-based approaches include: their coverage of households' internal coping capacity is poor; they are weak at identifying causes of vulnerability; indicator availability is often limited in areas of key concern; and data sources are not always updated on a regular basis. Advantages of these approaches are that they separate chronic from acute food insecurity, they can be quick and

[8] HEA specialists would argue that HEA is not used to make 'measurements' but rather as a way of forming a hypothesis that does not require probability sampling. Furthermore, in most places where HEA is conducted it is not possible to draw probability samples, so a means of overcoming this is required. The use of purposive sampling, combined with rigorous triangulation and cross-checking of data, has generally been found to provide quite robust data without formal statistical rigour.

cheap, and they allow the development of consistent and therefore easily comparable indices of relative vulnerability. In Burundi in 2003 WFP was questioning the appropriateness of HEA and, under the influence of the Kampala regional VAM office, proposed the integration of food economy analysis teams (FEAT) into a locally managed VAM unit, placing a heavy emphasis on a more statistically based questionnaire approach.

However, a recent methodological development of HEA has been the individual household method (IHM), which introduces greater statistical rigour to the method. This has been applied in Ethiopia, Uganda, Swaziland, Mozambique and Malawi to examine the impact of coffee price fluctuations and HIV on individual household economic status. The IHM differs from standard HEA in three ways:

- A random sample of individual households is used (usually obtained by village mapping/transect walks).
- Results are expressed in terms of household disposable income (rather than the ability of a household to acquire food).
- There is the possibility of extending the data set and model to include changes within the household.

Critiques where there is greater consensus

It can be seen that the above critiques are somewhat over simplistic and based to some degree on misconceptions and lack of knowledge and experience of HEA. However, there are a number of criticisms that are generally held to be fairer by those who are the most familiar with HEA and often employ it.

These criticisms were most strongly expressed in the FSAU and south Sudan case studies. The points they highlight include the following:

- HEA does not have an adequate framework for linking community-level and macro-level analysis.[9] For example, there is no formal framework for capturing the relationship between inflation or changes in foreign exchange rates and local prices and incomes.
- HEA does not adequately incorporate economic analysis of market prices and trade volumes – with a view to recommending market-based interventions.[10]
- It does not adequately integrate nutrition survey findings (this is specifically a criticism of the FSAU and VACs).[11]
- The unit of analysis, ie, livelihood/food economy zone, does not necessarily fit within administrative boundaries, which are generally used to define the geographic units for planning responses. This has presented practical difficulties in, for example, Tanzania[12] and the

[9] Early work did involve a market model although this proved too difficult for some practitioners and it was temporarily dropped. There are current initiatives to bridge the gap between the micro and macro level.

[10] This has also been a significant criticism concerning the third round of VAC assessments, which did not obtain information that would have allowed analysis of market-based responses.

[11] However, links between nutrition and household economy have developed over time in Darfur. Nutrition surveys are done by food economy or livelihood zone. In particular, food-insecure areas, as predicted by the DFIS as a result of, and soon after, the harvest, are followed up with nutrition surveys at the time when nutrition is expected to fall.

[12] Selection of regions and districts for RVA are based mainly on food availability data, while the RVA framework goes beyond district administrative boundaries and uses agro-economic zones within a

Amhara and Somali regions of Ethiopia,[13] though practitioners are working on ways of re-tabulating livelihood zone information.

- The analysis at the level of wealth group (as opposed to household) militates against being able to cross-tabulate and correlate data with household descriptors, eg, female-headed households, elderly-headed households. This may have important implications for linking FSIS with poverty monitoring systems (see Section 7). However, the development of the IHM addresses this issue to some extent, although the additional time required to conduct IHM compared with HEA may make this unworkable for a nationwide poverty monitoring system.

An important 'new' role for HEA in impact assessment

Early criticisms of HEA included lack of utility in impact assessment. However, in the mid-1990s Save the Children UK began using the HEA framework to assess the impact of food aid interventions with pilots in south Sudan and Ethiopia. WFP and the EU have been very supportive and interested in this development. There has also been substantial work looking at the strength of combining HEA impact analysis with nutritional analysis. Given the current climate of consensus regarding the need for greater evidence of the impact of humanitarian interventions (Duffield, A, 2005) these initiatives may place Save the Children UK in a position of comparative advantage. There is currently an enormous gap in the literature and within humanitarian agency understanding regarding the impact of many emergency interventions relating to food and nutrition (Duffield et al, ENN 2004). For example, there are unanswered questions regarding the relative cost-effectiveness of different modes of general ration programme delivery, with or without emergency supplementary feeding. There are also significant questions over the effectiveness of emergency general rations versus other modes of food security support, eg, cash, vouchers or livelihood support.

Similarly, as agencies increasingly programme across the sectors of HIV, nutrition and food security, there is a need to evaluate the impact on food security of these rapidly emerging and relatively new types of programme (especially those employing food aid). Yet, as agencies pilot new forms of interventions based on food security and livelihoods, there is as yet no agreed framework for assessing their impact on food security. The use of nutrition and mortality data in isolation has methodological and conceptual limitations in terms of measuring impact. HEA/IHM has the potential to provide a unique and highly practicable approach to measuring food security impact, thereby complementing and corroborating nutrition and mortality data.

Conclusions

While some of the criticisms of HEA have a degree of validity, others are often over-

given district. Thus, data generated by national early warning or by district routine data systems is of limited use for further analysis at the level of agro-economic zone.

[13] An independent evaluation of phase one of the Somali region project stressed the need for greater links between project and the federal disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC), specifically related to baselines and monitoring activities along food economic zone versus district boundaries.

emphasised, reflect unrealistic expectations of the methodology or have not taken into account recent developments and advances in the approach that have still to be adequately documented. Yet the consequence of these criticisms may be that credibility is on occasion undermined or that compromise methodologies are invoked, with potentially negative consequences (see Section 4). There have been few retrospective determinations of the accuracy of predictions made through employing HEA. To some degree this may reflect the success of HEA in mobilising resources, in that once resources have been mobilised it will be impossible to test the accuracy of prediction.

One possible initiative which might be useful with regard to strengthening and optimising the future role of HEA is to develop guidance material on its use that is more scenario-based and that recognises the strengths and weaknesses of this approach in different contexts. In other words, which variants of HEA are the most appropriate to use in different circumstances, and what additional information or approach would be needed to address shortcomings? This would require more systematic documentation and review of the experiences of using HEA, particularly with regard to technical rigour, practicality in different contexts, accuracy of prediction and proven value in advocacy.

Since its inception almost ten years ago HEA has survived remarkably well, in spite of two basic difficulties:

1. the high turnover of staff with an understanding of HEA, and the resulting need to re-educate/convince people with regard to the value of HEA
2. crude agency politics, which have led to HEA being challenged.

On balance, HEA has played a significant role in changing FSIS from a supply-side to a demand-side approach, while involving nationals in a way that offers the potential for sustainability. This is a substantial achievement. Advances in the approach and developments in practice, ie, IHM and impact assessment, augur well for a continuing role of HEA in FSIS in both emergency and non-emergency (see Section 7) contexts.

4. Hybrid methodologies

In three of the case studies HEA was adopted in the FSIS in a modified form. In the cases of Tanzania and the southern Africa Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) this was as a result of institutional and resource factors as well as preconceptions about HEA. In the case of Burundi it was more a reflection of lack of technical support for the implementing teams within food economy analysis teams (FEAT) in the early years, in addition to security factors around the internally deplaced people (IDP) camps and the need to adopt an approach that could be implemented within this context. The adoption of a modified hybrid approach in Tanzania and the VACs undoubtedly conferred both advantages and disadvantages.

Development of hybrid methodologies

The rapid vulnerability assessment (RVA) method in Tanzania borrowed key principles of HEA, with information collection and analysis disaggregated by wealth groups and agro-economic zones. However, this data is not analysed in the same way as in the HEA approach. The method was adapted to facilitate data collection and analysis by non-specialists, accommodate the assessment of large geographical areas in a limited timeframe and meet the information requirements during drought episodes. The approach is livelihoods-based and is well understood by all food security information team (FSIT) members and endorsed by the Disaster Management Department (DMD) and National Food Security Department (NFSD). A major achievement of the approach is that vulnerability information can be compared from one year to the next. However, a major limitation has been that the lack of baseline data has undermined the accuracy of quantification carried out in the RVAs, while the lack of human and financial resources has meant that the RVA can be carried out only in districts with a severe food deficit, and not in those with marginal deficits. The lack of baseline livelihoods data has also led to an over-emphasis on food aid, as it has not been possible to fully differentiate between acute and chronic food deficits underpinned by structural household constraints. Furthermore, lack of a livelihood baseline for the most affected areas has meant that quantification of potential food deficits is not derived from a quantified analysis of existing sources of food and income with reference to actual expenditure patterns. This has direct consequences for the degree of sensitivity of the approach.

A key lesson from this experience has been that development of a genuine livelihoods- based methodology is subject to existing capacity and expertise, at both local and national level, to collect and analyse data. However, compromise over the analytical depth of an approach can be a necessary intermediate stage for the development of a common approach and its institutionalisation. One other important lesson from the Tanzania experience has been that the development of new methodological frameworks by multi-agency bodies, which has occurred with the RVA, should be done with a view to strengthening existing methodologies as opposed to creating parallel systems.

In the case of southern Africa there were disagreements in the regional VAC as to the choice or mixture of methodologies. Initially, Save the Children UK argued in favour of updating HEA baselines in four countries. However, WFP and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) were against this, because of disagreements about the quality of baselines themselves and concerns over the use of the RiskMap computer program to make predictions of food needs. (Similar reservations

over the RiskMap program have been evident in the disaster prevention and preparedness commission – DPPC – in Ethiopia.)

There were also concerns over the limited time available for training people in HEA. Therefore a compromise, hybrid method, was adopted. In the first round of VAC assessments, households were sampled within food economy zones (FEZ) or 'livelihood zones', and in some cases food aid need results were presented according to FEZ. Furthermore, the sampling framework was usually designed to allow disaggregation by wealth group. A key departure from HEA was that the VACs used a questionnaire-based approach, which resulted in a number of challenges:

- Food need calculations were based on respondents' views about ability to earn income or food later in the season. Yet there was no way of knowing how accurate this was (this would apply to any method that did not use a baseline).
- The definition of food was narrow – based on cereal consumption.
- Undertaking the assessment was a huge logistical task, involving large numbers of enumerators, some with little experience, assembled and trained at short notice. Errors and a degree of confusion were inevitable.

However, in spite of these challenges, the FAO/WFP crop and food supply assessment missions (CFSAMs) and VAC assessments were generally in close agreement (except in the case of Lesotho). At the same time there was some consensus that the VACs probably overestimated emergency needs, as there was a lack of clarity about what was 'normal' for southern Africa as well as the fact that the analysis accounted for the effect of shock on livelihoods as well as on lives. There was also considerable confusion about the objectives of the assessment.

In Burundi, the HEA approach evolved gradually. The first Save the Children UK secondee had little expertise in the HEA approach, and the methodology was incorrectly applied. A new HEA-trained food security adviser arrived in 1997 and set about modifying the approach so as to be more in keeping with emerging HEA practice. However, the approach still had to be adapted to the specific situation in Burundi. Key adaptations were as follows:

- Sampling was at site level rather than FEZ level.
- Key informants were used to identify geographical areas and sites where there might be a problem.
- In addition to wealth groups other groups were identified, eg, those with no access to land because they came from insecure collines, (local administrative units) or recently arrived displaced people.
- No scenario predictions of harvest failure were made; instead, predictions were made of how families would meet needs in the immediate future (for those without land during the next six months, and for those with land up to the next harvest).

HEA proved an adaptable methodology for the IDP site situation in Burundi. As sites had more or less homogeneous populations, it was possible to identify typical households that represented a large proportion of each site. However, the large number of sites to be dealt with, as well as the insecurity that cut the amount of time available for assessment, meant that the analysis was limited in scope and depth.

Conclusions

In some contexts hybrid approaches may be necessary in order to account for factors relating to institutional issues, staff capacity, security and infrastructure. There is nothing wrong with this and in fact 'compromise measures' may become good practice for certain contexts. However, there needs to be an awareness of how methodological adaptation may lead to weaknesses, so that it is possible to balance what may be gained with what may be lost. If the risk of methodological weakness can be highlighted, by documenting experiences and making it explicit in guidance material, then those involved in making decisions regarding methodologies can at least attempt to critically assess various possible approaches and identify the optimal one for a given context. There is no need for a purist attitude when adopting and promoting HEA.

Institutional factors in the development of methodology and resulting analysis

The case studies have shown how institutional factors (ie, institutional location of the FSIS, mix of institutions involved nationally and regionally, and institutions funding the system) have had a significant impact on the development of the FSIS methodology and the way in which it has been used.

In the case of the Technical Support Unit (TSU) in south Sudan and that of the Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) in Somalia, the methodology was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the close institutional linkages with WFP. Thus the system was initially almost exclusively geared towards quantifying emergency food aid needs and identifying target groups. In the case of south Sudan, it was difficult to establish the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) when the FSIS was located within WFP. When the FSAU moved to FAO, very much at the behest of the EC, which was concerned about the over-focus on quantifying emergency food aid needs, the method and analytical focus gradually changed. However, it appears that FAO and the EC have not always been clear as to how to develop the methodology further in order to incorporate longer-term developmental planning needs.

This highlights a key constraint which has been recognised as decision-makers' limited ability to process information and a lack of analytical skills. The FSAU often encouraged EC and FAO representatives to attend training and awareness-raising sessions but this was not taken up. When analysis offered alternatives to food aid responses, donors and agencies were often reluctant, or lacked the capacity, to engage with or support those options. FEWS-NET, as a long-term partner of the FSAU, generally supported the methodology as the Food Economy Group (FEG) provided their technical back-up. However, the USAID-funded nutrition component also had an important, though more limited, influence on the methodology. Tensions sometimes arose when, for example, nutritional surveys revealed high malnutrition rates but the HEA analysis revealed that food access was not the key contributing factor. In addition, nutritional information was often seen to highlight problems that had passed (trailing indicator), whereas the HEA analysis was picking up on the current contributing factors and was able to suggest the key factors needed to bring about possible recovery. So when analysis might present problems in terms of an appropriate response there is a risk that some parties might try to influence the methodology for the wrong reasons. Similar

issues arose with the EC livestock policy, which at that time supported the 'collapse and recovery' option (ie, wait until collapse has occurred before intervening to bring about recovery) rather than seeking to intervene earlier when analysis revealed that livestock off-take or some other mitigatory action might be considered.

In summary, the utility of any approach might only be acknowledged to the degree that it matches the donor's capacity (and partner capacity or volition) to respond.To some extent these experiences contrast with that of the Darfur food information system (DFIS) in north Sudan where, largely funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), Save the Children UK has been allowed to have a free hand in developing the methodology. In the case of the National VACs in southern Africa, the engagement of UNICEF and UNDP/Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) with the Regional VAC (RVAC) led to a situation where the second round of assessments became multi-sectoral and arguably placed too great a strain on the nascent system; this led to delays and unclear findings. Furthermore, membership of the national VACs expanded rapidly as various INGOs and UN agencies joined as the food crisis developed. With expansion came new interests and institutional mandates that had to be accommodated in some way. In the case of the FSIT in Tanzania, although certain members of the FSIT task force recognised the analytical strengths of HEA, it was perceived as counter-productive for the development of a "standardised methodological framework", so that institutional factors were ultimately crucial to the decision on which methodology to adopt.

Institutional partnerships have been vital in the development of a livelihoods-based methodology and information systems in southern Africa. Between September 2001 and June 2002 strong links were formed between the RVAC and the DFID regional office for southern Africa. These links were critical for continued development of the proposal for a longer-term vulnerability assessment (VA) system and also for funding of the rolling assessments. In August 2001 Southern African Development Community (SADC) ministers of agriculture encouraged member states to establish cross-sectoral and inter-agency VA groups. By the end of 2001 there had been considerable progress in the establishment of a regional VA system with a strengthened mandate to provide leadership in VA in the SADC region. Formation of the regional multi-agency body, including regional technical institutions and chaired by SADC's food, agriculture and natural resources directorate (FANR), lent credibility to regional leadership and built consensus among participating institutions. The eventual partnership between the RVAC and WFP was seen as mutually beneficial.

However, the institutional partnerships and collaborations were not without their tensions. At a regional level SADC-FANR and the UN's Regional Inter-Agency Co-ordination and Support Office (RIACSO) were seen to be pulling in opposite directions, with one supporting a long-term food security and livelihoods-focused system, and the other supporting a more multi-sectoral and shorter-term focused system. Strong links between both institutions and the RVAC meant a degree of tension and debate at regional level. At certain points the assessment process was said to lack clarity and decisiveness as to direction of assessments. Tensions also arose with regard to the FSIT in Tanzania which encroached on National Food Security Department (NFSD) roles and responsibilities. These were effectively resolved in 2002 when the NFSD retrieved its

leading role in producing preliminary forecasts while the FSIT concentrated on regional vulnerability assessments. The conclusion to be drawn from the Tanzania experiences is that although developing multi-agency structures clearly improves the buy-in to findings on the part of external partners, special attention should be given to avoid duplication of roles and responsibilities between new structures and government departments. The southern Africa case shows how an institutional analysis can clearly demonstrate where the RVAC and NVACs were placed relative to other key stakeholders and their differing conceptions of vulnerability. Institutional analysis helps identify potential sources of collaboration, tension or duplication.

In Ethiopia the disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC) was initially unwilling to change its approach to emergency needs assessment (ENA) and to incorporate HEA baselines and analysis. It was only willing to support pilot work as it felt HEA would have undermined the methodology the government had hitherto invested in. Save the Children UK played a significant role in ENA methodological development over this period. In contrast there was very little competition around methodologies in phase one of the project in the Somali region , where HEA baselines were constructed at the outset. Most stakeholders were open to the idea of pooling resources and trying to achieve something collectively on a wider scale. Donors helped to ensure that the information projects they were already supporting in the region understood the need to co-ordinate and work together.

Conclusions

Institutional interests will inevitably influence FSIS methodologies and focus. Compromises may be appropriate and necessary but there is the risk of either 'over-diluting' or 'over-stretching' the approach in attempting to accommodate all stakeholder needs and interests. Partnerships can be crucial in promoting the adoption of a specific approach. However, there is a need for clarity as to what type of FSIS methodology is required for a given country or region. This should be based on a thorough gap analysis of existing information and analytical frameworks (what exists and what is missing, and the quality of the information and analysis), carried out collectively by the stakeholders involved. Equally important is an analysis of the capacity to implement and sustain a specific methodological approach, and the information system context in terms of security, geography and infrastructure, etc. Once an optimal methodology has been identified, optimal institutional support and location will have to be determined, in order to ensure that the methodology is not compromised too much. At the same time it is necessary to accept that a degree of multi-stakeholder influence is necessary to get buy-in to a methodology (Gladwin 2002). In short, identify the most suitable methodology based on a gap analysis in conjunction with assessment of resource and context factors, and then consider optimal partnerships and institutional location for the FSIS, to ensure buy-in and support for the methodology.

5. Influence of FSIS information on decision-making

This section examines evidence for how FSIS information has influenced decision-making and the factors which may impinge on use of information. The analysis considers information in relation to types of response (food aid versus non-food aid), context (emergency versus non-emergency), and different stakeholders (government, donor, UN, Save the Children UK), including their level of decentralisation. The main users of information considered in this section are international donor governments, national governments, UN agencies (mainly WFP and FAO) and Save the Children UK.

Evidence for use of information in planning emergency food aid

The information systems supported by Save the Children UK have influenced decision-making mainly with regard to early warning and food aid analysis in emergency contexts, especially where the information unit has been directly linked to WFP. The food aid analysis has in turn related mainly to quantification and targeting of emergency food aid. For example, in Burundi donors have been able to justify the continuation of food aid largely on the basis of the data from the food economy analysis team (FEAT). WFP has judged that about 65 per cent of its food aid was programmed as a direct result of the work of the FEAT. In the case of south Sudan, the Humanitarian Department of the European Commission (ECHO) refers to the WFP's annual needs assessment (ANA) more than any other information provided by the Technical Support Unit (TSU) for planning and funding purposes. In the first two phases of the Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) in Somalia, WFP and other donors have repeatedly responded positively to food aid requests by the unit. A review of the food security information team (FSIT) structure and achievements in Tanzania in early 2003 revealed that 80 per cent of stakeholders considered the rapid vulnerability assessment (RVA) reports to be of high quality. Furthermore, the 2000 and 2003 RVA reports were reviewed and approved by the national disaster management commission (NDMC), and resulting appeals that the prime minister made to international donors were based strictly on estimates of total food aid requirements and on assistance strategies recommended by FSIT RVAs. In the Somali region of Ethiopia, the HEA baselines were used to assess food and non-food aid requirements. However, the findings resulted in downward adjustments of food needs at regional level and consequently an unwillingness to use the methodology in the subsequent *gu* (rainy season) needs assessment.

The influence of FSIS information at more decentralised levels of government has been more variable. Thus, in Tanzania there has not been much buy-in from the local government authorities (LGAs) at district level. In this case it has been suggested that a lack of understanding and ownership of assessment and geographical targeting procedures has resulted in limited adhesion to response planning and implementation. In contrast, the Darfur food information system (DFIS) has been at the centre of information sharing, joint analysis and joint planning within the region, while using the information to influence government and donor policy on response and the raising of the DFIS's profile outside of El Fasher have been more limited.

In southern Africa it has been argued that as there was no systematic and ongoing vulnerability assessment (VA) using HEA-type methods at country level prior to the creation of the Vulnerability Assessment committees (VACs), existing early warning systems failed to detect a looming food crisis in Malawi in 2001. Thus, the potential magnitude of the crisis was detected only by chance as Save the Children UK used HEA in a badly affected district of Malawi. In Malawi and Zimbabwe, in spite of similar availability of HEA-type VA information, the translation of that information into immediate action varied significantly, with responses being considerably slower in Malawi. This was due partly to confusion arising from different analyses by Save the Children UK, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS-NET) and WFP in Malawi, and partly to donor inertia induced by disapproval of government action. In the event, the Save the Children UK presentation in early 2002 to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC – which brings together UN agencies and NGOs to discuss humanitarian issues) in Geneva, was probably the most important element in triggering a UN response. In Zimbabwe the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) was more disposed to act quickly to support HEA findings, despite concerns about governance. Since this period there has been a strong correlation between the VAC results and revisions of WFP's emergency operations (EMOPs) in the southern Africa region. In addition the VAC assessments were used to varying degrees by WFP offices to guide temporal and sub-national targeting.

A criticism reflected in a number of the case studies has been that the information from Save the Children UK-supported FSIS has been used only weakly for advocacy purposes, particularly beyond the immediate allocation of emergency food aid (eg, in Burundi and outside of Darfur). Explanations for this may partly relate to the weak management and support of secondees and limitations in the terms of reference. For example, in the FSAU in Somalia there were limited opportunities for effective advocacy from within the unit, as secondees were briefed to take on a purely technical role. In Burundi advocacy elements of the secondee post were taken up only in relation to specific technical factors, and only within the confines of WFP, so that the Save the Children UK programme did not use the information to sustain any planned food security advocacy position during the secondment period. Generally, advocacy objectives have not been stated consistently – and in some secondment contexts not at all – despite Save the Children UK's clear recognition of the unique opportunities provided through having a secondment in place. Furthermore, in some cases advocacy may have compromised a Save the Children UK secondee's position within the UN, and the individual may have lacked an advocacy profile. Thus, any advocacy has been opportunistic and inconsistent, and dependent on the individual secondee. A notable exception in terms of advocacy success has been in Malawi, where advocacy was effectively undertaken on the basis of the HEA findings, thereby alerting many agencies to the imminent crisis.

It has also been noted that information from the FSIS has been inconsistently used for Save the Children UK programming purposes, eg, in Burundi and Somalia. Despite the overall aim of the FSIS to inform agency programming decisions, this does not appear to have been an explicitly stated objective of Save the Children UK's secondment approach.
In the event that Save the Children UK considers future secondment initiatives, or that other interested stakeholders consider a similar approach, there are a number of strategic recommendations relating to advocacy and

influence on the seconding agency's programming which may remedy some of the problems described above. For example:

- Save the Children UK should outline a food security strategy for each of its programmes in Africa and consider whether and how the secondment approach could play a role in achieving the aims of the strategy.
- The secondee's access to national-level information as well as his/her overall technical knowledge and experience should feed directly into Save the Children UK programme decision-making.
- Any decision to second a food security adviser to a UN agency or national institution should be dependent on the in-country context and should be linked to Save the Children UK organisational goals.
- Regular reviews of the value of the secondment approach should be carried out within the context of the country strategy papers (CSPs) and regional strategies.

Non-food aid responses in emergencies

The information systems have generally had limited impact on non-food aid responses in emergencies, even where this has been an explicit intended use, as in the third round of VAC assessments. In this case the possibility and desirability of alternatives to food aid was raised by the VACs in Lesotho, Swaziland and to some extent Malawi. However, there was limited reflection of this in decision-making. To some degree this was due to methodological shortcomings, and in particular, that none of the existing methods used in FSIS – including HEA – contain a robust market analysis. In addition, such analysis was not encouraged by the main technical agencies, apart from Save the Children UK, and there was often considerable pressure from WFP to promote food aid. However, the humanitarian department of the European Commission (ECHO) has used information to plan non-food aid food security measures in south Sudan , while various stakeholders in Somalia have used data from FSAU (especially since its relocation to FAO) for non-food aid responses, both within the forum of the Somalia aid co-ordination body and at decentralised level. In Somali and Amhara regions in Ethiopia, the baseline HEA surveys assessed both food and non-food aid requirements.

These findings mirror those of a recent Save the Children UK review of seven emergency responses between 1996 and 2003 in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda (Levine and Chastre 2004).[14] The case studies were chosen on the basis of their representing the full range of crises and the range of interventions used in the Great Lakes region as well as the existence of good information available on people's livelihoods and food security constraints. The study identified a number of weaknesses in the aid effort:

- Agencies used the same narrow range of responses in nearly all circumstances. These short-term responses were repeated each year in the region's chronic crises while

[14] In Burundi, the responses during 2000–01 to the lengthy drought in Kirundo Province, and to the forced displacement of the civilian population of Bujumbura Rural Province, 1999–2001. In the DRC, responses to two urban crises: the volcanic eruption in Goma in January 2002 and to the ethnic war in Bunia town in 2003, and interventions as displaced people returned home to the Masisis plateau in 1999–2003. In Uganda, responses to the displacement in Kasese District in 1996–2000, caused by armed conflict, and to the situation in Gulu District in 2001–03, where war with the Lord's Resistance Army has led to the displacement of almost the entire rural population.

longer-term efforts to tackle the causes of food insecurity remained too small-scale.

- Because of various pressures, agencies were unable to think through appropriateness of response. Food was given out where it was known to be plentiful and seeds were given to people who did not need them.
- Seed distributions, and nutrition interventions in particular, were implemented widely, even though they were based on a series of questionable assumptions that remained largely untested.
- Responses focused narrowly on food production.
- Assessments were not done to determine the real constraints to food security and livelihoods.

Use of information in non-emergency contexts

The role information from Save the Children UK-supported FSIS in longer-term non-emergency and non-food aid planning has been limited, although as peace unfolds in Darfur, Somalia and south Sudan, this situation is likely to change. In Darfur FAO has shown increasing interest in Save the Children UK's information experience. It is worth noting, however, that the funding environment has always been difficult, which has affected the range of response options to the recommendations provided by DFIS. Funding for interventions has generally been limited to a narrow emergency-relief type and even such funding has been difficult to get at times due, partly because of the weak commitments of donors to northern Darfur.

In contrast, in Ethiopia the HEA baseline surveys from Amhara region have been discussed at regional council meetings, and the HEA project team was asked by the Amhara regional poverty reduction strategy programme (PRSP) to present findings from one of the baseline assessments, which was recognised to have important implications for monitoring poverty. HEA baselines in Amhara region have also been used on several occasions in seasonal assessments and by projects addressing poverty at household level.

Factors that have affected the impact of information on decision-makers

Credibility of FSIS

One of the most significant factors with regard to the ability of information to influence decision-makers is credibility of the information system. The case studies indicate how credibility can be enhanced or engendered by a number of factors such as involvement of decision-makers in developing the FSIS and analytical framework, and involvement of 'impartial' agencies and staff in developing and implementing the system. Thus, in south Sudan involvement of agencies in the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) has been instrumental in acceptance of the HEA methodology in the newly emerging peacetime environment in south Sudan. In Tanzania, the multi-agency involvement in development of the regional vulnerability assessment (RVA) has also lent credibility to findings within government. Prior to development of the RVA, repeated international appeals for food assistance in Tanzania in a relatively short period accentuated the donor community's scepticism about the validity of the information on which requests for international support were based.

Donors (some more than others) may have an instinctive mistrust of both emergency- affected

governments and WFP, perceiving both as likely to inflate emergency needs. Thus, donors have been highly supportive of the DFIS, especially as the information often offers the opportunity to rationalise food aid needs.[15] The secondees to the FEA teams in Burundi have added to the credibility of the findings among donors, while the link between the Food Economy Group (FEG) and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET – which uses the same approach) has similarly enhanced the credibility of the FSIS in south Sudan. One of the stated aims of Save the Children UK staff secondment initiatives has been to enhance credibility of information. In Amhara region in Ethiopia the regional disaster prevention and preparedness commission (RDPPC) is believed to have benefited in terms of its credibility as a source of early warning information through the Save the Children UK secondment. This in turn has improved its ability to make decisions regionally and influence decision-making at other levels. The presence of a reputable NGO within the WFP unit in south Sudan and Burundi and in the early phases of the FSAU in Somalia has given the impression of independence and impartiality. This has been reinforced by Save the Children UK's non-involvement in food aid programmes and has also ensured that WFP is, to some degree, accountable to the aid community. At the same time, the close institutional and geographical links between the information units in Burundi, south Sudan and Somalia (all based in Nairobi) and WFP gave the latter confidence in the information system and ensured that it utilised the information substantially for targeting purposes. Partnerships are also important for promoting confidence in information systems and output. Thus, the partnership between WFP, the regional VAC and DFID has been instrumental in the acceptance of the national VAC system and findings.

In Somali region in Ethiopia multiple donor funding and partnerships, as well as the involvement of NGOs and UN bodies regionally and nationally in baselines, steering committees and methodological development, has been positive for the emerging early warning system in that there has been widespread utilisation of the information produced.

Credibility and trust can also be enhanced between local and national government by virtue of an independent agency involvement in the system. Thus, in Darfur, Save the Children UK's involvement allows for independent expression of sometimes controversial views which local government actors may otherwise have been unable to express.

Promoting understanding of the FSIS methodology

Information is more likely to be used if the FSIS methodology and analytical framework is clear, logical and easily understood by decision-makers. Thus, in Tanzania, owing to their involvement in its development, decision-makers in government understood the RVA methodology and were able to compare findings across geographic areas and over time.[16] In contrast, an early review of the DFIS indicated that the technical nature of HEA and food security as well as the turnover of staff in agencies has led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation in early warning and food security analysis and response decision-making. It has been argued that this relates to a lack of professionalism among decision-makers with

[15] However, these systems can also at times highlight needs that would otherwise have been overlooked.

[16] However, the link between the information collected and recommendations is still considered by some to be rather subjective.

resulting failure to understand methodology. This in turn suggests the need for more effective communication strategies regarding methodologies. In Ethiopia, while the nutrition surveillance programme (NSP) data has generally been trusted, because of the 'unusual' methodology (longitudinal monitoring resulting in mean weight-for-height data), decision-makers found it difficult to use the findings to make comparisons across countries. Also, with other agencies also carrying out different types of nutrition surveys in the country, stakeholders were confused as to why there were different nutritional methodologies in use in Ethiopia. As a result, Save the Children UK approached the DPPC and suggested the secondment of nutritionists to lead a consultative process which would result in the production of revised guidelines on nutrition assessment. In the event the approach of working through a multi-agency technical committee took much time but was ultimately beneficial as it resulted in ownership and increased understanding by all stakeholders including the emergency nutrition co-ordination unit (ENCU) and DPPC. Guidelines were eventually produced in 2002.

In Amhara and Somali regions in Ethiopia there has been a long-standing need for more detailed training to build the capacity of relevant stakeholders (particularly the RDPPC) to practically analyse and use the HEA data. There has also been a consistent failure to provide feedback to, and discussions with, decision-makers at all levels, particularly the RDPPC commissioner.

Timeliness of information and analysis

Timeliness of information and analysis is another key factor in ensuring influence on decision-making. For example, the second round of national VACs was supposed to include non-food security aspects. However, limited practical support for incorporating these elements into the surveys led to the survey teams and analysts being over-stretched. As a result, the second round of VAC assessments missed deadlines for the UN's revised consolidated appeals process (CAP), thereby reducing the impact of the reports and their influence on decision-makers.

The role of political factors in influencing decision-making

It is often assumed that political factors are crucial in influencing decision-making in the food security sector. Yet it is not always easy to demonstrate whether, and how, political factors have affected decision-making. In most situations identification of political influence can be attempted only by examining FSIS data produced and by asking questions as to why responses were absent, late or less than required, where there had been overwhelming evidence of need for response. This type of analysis may be complemented by anecdotal information based on discussions and interviews (and occasionally memos) regarding the political considerations of decision-makers. However, the bottom line is that political influence on decision-making can generally only be inferred rather than proven.

Thus, the late donor responses to FSIS evidence for crisis in Malawi and Zimbabwe have generally been attributed to political considerations. In northern Darfur, it is 'understood' that the funding environment and therefore the response options to the information provided by the DFIS have always been 'difficult'. Certain donors such as USAID have generally responded only to emergency needs in Somalia while the EC and DFID have traditionally been far more interested in rehabilitation and development initiatives. The EC therefore fully supported the move from

WFP to FAO as an institutional home for the FSAU. In Kenya, prior to 2000 and the work of the Kenya Food Security Steering Group (KFSSG) in developing a more transparent methodology for emergency needs assessment, decision-making regarding food aid allocations from the government system have appeared to be politically influenced to a substantial degree at central and decentralised level. This has been supported by an analysis showing poor correlation between district-level crop estimates and food aid distributions (Shoham 2001).

Clearly, recognition of political factors is essential to understanding how information from FSIS influences decision-making. These factors may operate at donor, national government and humanitarian agency level. Yet there will rarely (if ever) be explicitly articulated policies that link politics with decision-making within FSIS stakeholder agencies. It is therefore incumbent upon agencies supporting the development of FSIS to understand the implicit policies of key decision-makers and their resulting strategic positioning. In essence, planners and implementers of FSIS need to have an understanding of the politics of donor and government decision-making and tailor their information-management and alliance-building strategies accordingly. Furthermore, it may well be argued that in the interest of maximising the relevence of FSIS information to government and donor policy as well as rapidly securing institutional buy-in, the balance of emphasis between detailed micro-level work and more general macro-level analysis (national level coverage) should be tipped towards the latter. This clearly has implications for the HEA framework, and in the case of agencies working at community level, this bias towards the macro-level may not be entirely appropriate.

Institutional location of FSIS

The institutional location of the FSIS is linked to both credibility and politics around information use.

One factor determining the functioning of the national VACs in southern Africa was their relationship to the various government ministries and decision-makers in their respective countries. Results of VAC food aid targeting were generally accepted (although not without debate) and made use of by national governments in all countries. However, in Zimbabwe, the VAC reported to a cabinet committee – a direct line of communication with the most senior decision-makers in government. In another country, this might have speeded up the decision-making process and resulted in good translation of VAC findings into interventions and policy. Unfortunately, the Zimbabwean authorities used this link more as a way of slowing down the process and challenging the findings of the VAC. This illustrates the fact that when states are failing, food insecurity and vulnerability assessment systems may be more effective if they are de-coupled from government, as this may allow them to report more freely.

In south Sudan there has been much recent consideration of how the institutional location of the FSIS might influence the use of information once it has been transferred from WFP. Thus, the New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (NSCSE) has been identified as the most suitable institutional location for the new FSIS, as it is an autonomous body with a board of trustees that includes representatives of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and of civil society. This means that technically it can challenge the government of Sudan. When the Technical Support Unit (TSU) was within WFP it was difficult to establish the

Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) as WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) unit wanted to secure control. LAF aims to provide a platform for broader analysis and decision-making by all.

In Somali region in Ethiopia, although the intention has been for the information from the relatively new early warning system (EWS) to be used at government level for livelihoods analysis and development planning, the main focus has continued to be on emergency food aid needs. This has been attributed primarily to where the project has been located, ie, within the DPPC, which has the mandate for emergency preparedness and response, as well to the general food aid focus of recent humanitarian activities in the region. With restructuring at regional level, it is hoped that Save the Children UK will have more of an opportunity to work in co-ordination with the Livestock Development Co-ordination Bureau instead of working solely with the DPPC.

Conclusions

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from this section.

Different FSIS users are looking for different things. Thus, within the UN system, WFP is more concerned with planning emergency food aid tonnages and targeting than FAO which has a longer-term agricultural agenda. UNICEF focuses more on health-related information, while OCHA has multi-sectoral information needs. Similarly, donor government agencies have different food security agendas and information requirements which may be either generic or country-specific. In the case of donors, some of these agendas may be informed by food security policies and strategies that are based on experience and that have been developed over a number of years, eg, greater investment in poverty and safety-net initiatives rather than food aid. Others may be more politically influenced, eg, USAID in Darfur. It is clear that designers and implementers of FSIS need to have an understanding of the mandates, policies and politics of UN agencies and donor governments and of how these may affect decision-making, in order to tailor information-management and alliance-building strategies accordingly.

Politicisation of information at national government level is also of critical importance. Consideration has to be given to whether governments are likely to be sensitive to information and therefore not react or, at worst, suppress information. Recent humanitarian history is littered with such examples, eg, Sudan and Zimbabwe. The institutional location of the FSIS within government may be key here. In south Sudan there has been extensive consideration of how to ensure FSIS autonomy through institutional location. Similar issues may arise with respect to decentralised government decision-making. We have seen how in Darfur the FSIS has allowed the state to speak out. Recent experiences in Kenya have shown how an entrenched politicised information system can easily take hold but that empowerment at decentralised level can be encouraged through strengthening the technical basis of decision-making, ie, training in HEA. Where government is unstable and sensitive to information, decoupling the FSIS may be politically prudent.

Overall, analysis of the political leanings of various decision-makers is crucial when designing FSIS, to maximise the likelihood of resulting information eliciting an 'objective' response.

The information system's credibility is also crucially important with regard to information use. Experience has shown that credibility is greatest when there has been a process of multi-agency consultation regarding methodological development, eg, in south Sudan and national VACs in southern Africa. Credibility is also enhanced through involvement of agencies or staff perceived by external decision-makers as 'neutral' in terms of information analysis. Thus secondment can be effective in ensuring buy-in. A related issue is the need to have a clear communication strategy for decision-makers so that they understand how the information is derived and analysis undertaken. Decision-makers who are not involved in the development of the system may require support and training. Another related issue is that donors may be more amenable to FSIS findings where there has been past evidence of accuracy and resulting impact. However, this may be difficult, as where responses are elicited, evidence regarding accuracy of prediction cannot be demonstrated. Evidence can only be furnished where responses are late or do not occur. As such events unfortunately occur with depressing regularity, opportunities for demonstrating predictive accuracy can be found. If experiences of such situations are collated both within country and across countries, then donor support for relevant FSIS methodologies and country systems is likely to grow.

Another very important issue regarding FSIS use is the finding that little information has been used to promote or influence non-food aid responses in emergency contexts. While this reflects a number of political, institutional and events-driven factors, it also reflects methodological shortcomings in emergency needs assessment (ENA) and FSIS and the limited response capacity of the emergency humanitarian sector. It has been argued that this is a 'chicken-and-egg' scenario, as there is clear need for greater experience of non-food aid responses in emergency situations. This would increase understanding of the types of information and analysis required for determining the appropriateness and feasibility of non-food aid responses in a given context. To break this cycle there needs to be a greater commitment to engage in the process of strengthening ENA and FSIS methodologies, through continuing to pilot and roll-out non-food aid interventions in emergency contexts and subsequently evaluating their effectiveness in different contexts.

Within Save the Children UK country programmes, there has often been a disconnect between the work of secondees to national FSIS and the rest of their programming and advocacy. This appears to reflect the fact that terms of reference for secondees are not sufficiently explicit, as well as there being a number of management problems.

6. Sustainability

Sustainability of an information system can be understood in terms of three main interlinked components:

1. financial sustainability
2. sustainability of capacity to implement the FSIS
3. sustainability within an institution (or set of institutions).

One factor which affects all three components is how various stakeholders perceive the value of the system. This will ultimately depend on the demand for the information, its credibility and proven application. As the FSIS reviewed here have mainly been used to provide emergency-related information, the recurrence and frequency of emergency events has undoubtedly contributed to the political will to ensure their continuity. Their role in longer-term food security planning has not been sufficiently tested to determine whether they can generate the political will necessary for continued support and sustainability (although the Food Security Assessment Unit – FSAU in Somalia – and Vulnerability Assessment Committees – VACs – have been moving in this direction, and the Livelihoods Analysis Forum – LAF – in south Sudan may soon take on this role). The Darfur food information system (DFIS), TSU, FSAU and food economy analysis teams (FEATs) have been repeatedly called on to generate information for emergency food-aid planning. This means that donors have been willing to continue support and have seen this as a cost-effective means of ensuring credible information and rationalising emergency food-aid provision and therefore potentially saving donor resources. There has been a greater element of uncertainty, however, regarding the financial, institutional and capacity-related sustainability of the Save the Children UK-supported FSIS in Ethiopia, Tanzania and southern Africa.

Financial sustainability

Ideally FSIS will be embedded in local and national government structures and supported through government resources. However, the reality for most of the information systems reviewed has been that external donor support has been essential in developing the FSIS and ensuring their continuity. Many of these systems would collapse without this support and cannot therefore be described as sustainable systems. The only systems to have developed a degree of financial autonomy and therefore sustainability without donor support are the National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs) and national early warning systems (NEWS) in southern Africa, and the NEWS in Tanzania and Ethiopia. However, none of these systems can be described as adequately financially sustainable. For example, it has been recognised that in order to embed the Tanzania FSIS at a more decentralised level, with capacity for livelihood profiling and assessment, extra external funds will be needed. Also, the lack of funding for activities other than rapid vulnerability assessments (RVAs), in particular during non-emergency periods, makes part of FSIT's strategic vision difficult to achieve.

It has also been argued that had there been no food crisis in southern Africa in 2001/2002, the development of a vulnerability assessment (VA) information system involving NVACs and the Regional VAC (RVAC) would have depended heavily on the latter's efforts to get support for its funding proposal. In retrospect, it is likely that this would have been problematic, largely because donors were concerned about putting money into Southern African Development Community (SADC) institutions at a time when SADC was being restructured. Furthermore, between 1987 and 1996 a large problem for the Regional Early Warning Unit (REWU) and

National Early Warning Units (NEWUs) was funding constraints caused by erratic government financing and high turnover of staff from NEWUs. By the end of phase 2 of the 'Regional Early Warning System for Food Security' project, eight out of eleven SADC countries were in arrears in their payments to REWU. The NEWUs were poorly funded in most countries and there were concerns about the timeliness and credibility of early warning information in several of them. Thus it has been the emergency, and the ensuing donor interest and resources, that have led to the strengthening of these information systems.

In the case of DFIS, the government does not have the resources to run the system. In fact the resources of the government of north Darfur have been steadily contracting, eg, the agricultural planning unit (APU) now has only one staff member. However, the cost to donors of continuing to support DFIS is relatively small compared with a major relief operation. The 1999 intervention in north Darfur, when 3,200 tonnes of locally purchased food (a relatively small intervention) were distributed, cost €765,003 – rather more than the DFIS budget for the whole three-year period (€567,717). It seems as if external donor support for DFIS must be seen as finite; however, the ongoing vulnerability to food insecurity in north Darfur, the collaborative nature of the project as well as the credibility of the information and analysis coming from DFIS (in comparison with other regions in north Sudan) has contributed to the continued funding of DFIS. This success has allowed funding to be obtained for extending the information system to parts of south and west Darfur.

These experiences and those of other systems such as the arid lands resource management programme (ALRMP) in Kenya – which, although embedded in government and decentralised in 12 districts is still largely supported by the World Bank – raise legitimate questions about the financial long-term sustainability of FSIS. In the case of ALRMP some of the largely arid areas it covers are not of great political concern to the Kenyan Government, so there is little likelihood that the system could endure if World Bank funding ceased. Indeed, there are many examples of information systems collapsing when external support dwindles, especially when national governments are not politically supportive of a specific emergency-prone area. For example, in north Darfur, the Red Cross drought monitoring programme – active for many years and supported through external resources – more or less collapsed when there were no droughts. Also, the Oxfam-supported early warning system in Red Sea Province has been dependent upon Oxfam technical and financial support over many years and has often suffered financially as well as managerially as a result of changing Oxfam priorities.

Capacity-building

Save the Children UK has invested substantially in capacity-building – especially with regard to the HEA methodology – for FSIS implementation. Through secondees and training workshops HEA appears to have been institutionalised at a local level within the FSAU, TSU and the Burundi FEAT. Similarly, Save the Children UK and, later on, the Food Economy Group (FEG), invested considerable resources in HEA training in the southern Africa region during the 1990s. However, it appears that the capacity to implement and analyse HEA has diminished when secondees have left; in Burundi, for example, diminished capacity allegedly led to an inappropriate response in 2000/01. In the TSU Save the Children UK

built a strong capacity between 1994 and 2001/02 but this capacity was lost within WFP as the team of professionally trained members gradually left. An often-heard criticism is that capacity to implement HEA – particularly the analysis and modelling elements – is still mainly in the hands of northern-based experts (exceptions being the FSAU and WFP senior local staff in, for example, south Sudan) and that capacity therefore diminishes when these staff leave. It may indeed be the case that lack of local capacity encourages 'importation of northern experts'. This is not to say that Save the Children UK has not made considerable efforts to train local staff. In south Sudan, staff involved in the annual needs assessment (ANA), Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Organisation (SRRA) and local NGOs have been trained. Since 1993, Save the Children UK has worked with line ministries and NGO partners to build up a cadre of local skilled technicians in Darfur. Trained government officers then participate in annual harvest assessments. In addition to pre-survey technical training, DFIS has also run a number of other state-level and community-level workshops. A success in terms of sustainable capacity is the FSAU, which now has its own internal training capacity and is no longer dependent on outside technical support. Furthermore, the field team have moved forward in terms of their analytical skills. All field monitors are now equipped with laptop computers and are capable of conducting not only assessments but full analysis in the field, using the HEA method and supported by the use of the FEG spreadsheet. This spreadsheet logs all analysis, allowing it to be openly shared and discussed with implementing partners. Several FSAU monitors have reached the level where they are used as trainers in neighbouring countries, as part of larger-scale training and research activities.

A related issue is that where local staff are adequately trained to undertake HEA and more sophisticated forms of survey and analysis, it may be difficult to retain them, as many will attract better job offers and promotion. There is always a risk of losing the wealth of knowledge and experience built up following years of investment. In south Sudan key individuals who had a high level of knowledge have either left or been assigned other responsibilities. Many have argued how crucial it is that this extremely valuable resource be banked in such a way that it can be transferred to the New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (NSCSE). Much of the extensive staff experience and capacity in the drought monitoring programme and the community surveillance indicator system in Darfur and regional response programme (RSP) respectively has been lost, owing to dwindling donor support and movement of staff to other posts within government or international agencies. In Amhara region in Ethiopia, there has been a high turnover of staff who had received basic training in HEA; for example, the regional early warning (EW) expert seconded to the project left the disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC). In Ethiopia staff turnover within Save the Children UK has also been problematic. HEA-trained staff have either moved to other parts of the programme, owing to the HEA project having ended, or have left the organisation. A similar situation arose in the Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe, where Save the Children tried to support the district administration in planning for a World Bank-funded poverty alleviation action programme using HEA, but suffered setbacks as local government staff moved elsewhere or were promoted.

Another issue is the degree to which there is the capacity to absorb more sophisticated training within local staffing. For example, while trained staff in DFIS have capacity to maintain the

standard set of routine activities, it has not been strong enough to take on board new technical developments or develop a critical self-awareness of problem areas.

This challenge can be magnified as systems strive to decentralise (eg, in Tanzania and the Somali region in Ethiopia), and/or move into longer-term programming needs (eg, in south Sudan and Somalia). Here consideration must be given to how to build capacity at lower levels and in newly emerging civilian structures. In south Sudan there is a need to train local civilian agency staff under the newly emerging government. In Tanzania, capacity constraints are encountered at local and central level, which means that the early warning system (EWS) does not have the capacity to develop more detailed information for food security monitoring purposes. The timely collection and transmission of information as part of the routine system is said to be constrained currently by a lack of capacity and of means of communication.

Another problem relates to demands on government staff and level of commitment to the FSIS project. In the secondment project in Amhara region, Ethiopia in 2001, regional DPPC staff were not always able to attend training courses and there was a general lack of availability of EW department staff to work with the EW adviser secondee, because of other demands on them. Also, the terms of reference were seen as pertaining more to the EW adviser than to the EW department. Similar problems occurred in the Somali region, with staff turnover at DPPC board level, and also the fact that staff had to juggle competing responsibilities. In Somali region there was the assumption that the DPPD board would provide sufficient qualified personnel at regional and zonal levels as counterparts to Save the Children UK staff; however, this has been difficult to realise and therefore capacity-building has suffered. This project was supposed to be handed over after three years (many thought this unrealistic from the start) but it has become clear that the DPPC will need more support before this can take place. In view of this, a joint proposal has been drawn up by Save the Children UK and DPPD board for continued partnership for another 2–3 years so that institutionalisation of the FSIS can be strengthened.

Institutional sustainability

The institutional connections and location of the FSIS as well as institutional ownership of the overall system and methodology are crucial for its sustainability.

Institutional ownership

Experience in Malawi, where none of Save the Children UK's earlier risk-mapping work had been taken up or institutionalised, even within the Save the Children UK country office, demonstrates the importance of ownership. Despite efforts by Save the Children UK to create a risk map in Malawi for use in precisely the circumstances which applied in 1996–97, it was not used as there was no institutional buy-in to the approach in-country. In retrospect, Save the Children UK believed that it should have put more effort into building capacity in, and ownership of, HEA and RiskMap methods in southern Africa in the 1990s. Another relevant experience concerns the third Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) assessment in Mozambique. HEA baselines had previously been completed in 134 out of 138 districts, mainly by Ministry of Health staff who had been

trained.[17] Over the period of the third assessment rounds, however, there was a move away from HEA tools, illustrating that institutionalisation of HEA methods at one point does not guarantee that they will be used in future when a crisis occurs. Sustained support should have been provided in the interim, in order to ensure continued use of HEA. In Lesotho and Malawi, the take-up of the approach by local institutions was non-existent. This was partly due to a heavily expatriate-led approach, with short-term consultancies to carry out assessments. There was little emphasis on building local capacity and ownership and this in turn was related to constraints imposed by the nature of the funding for the work. In addition, there were the inherent complexities of administering the method compared with the simpler indicator-based approaches, coupled with high turnover of government staff.

Achieving institutional ownership may be particularly difficult at district level. For example, in Tanzania it is recognised that much effort needs to be placed on capacity-building and promoting ownership. This led to the district-level workshops involving FSIT. A similar initiative was carried out in Kenya with a simplified form of HEA training at district level. However, it remains to be seen how effective these initiatives are, or how effective they can become, at promoting institutional ownership. In Amhara region in Ethiopia the HEA project has faced continual problems trying to get zonal- and *woreda*-level staff to participate in the baseline surveys. Lack of ownership at zonal level was repeatedly raised as a difficulty throughout the project period but there has been little success in remedying this, owing to limited time and funding for the work.

[17] This important initiative was funded by a grant of only $50,000 per year from FAO.

We have seen how institutional ownership of a methodology or approach can easily be eroded – eg, in Burundi and south Sudan – so that other methodological approaches have become more prominent following the loss of the Save the Children UK secondee. Also, as systems move into more developmental domains it will be critical to invest in building up institutional ownership in other forums, such as the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) in south Sudan and the Somalia aid co-ordination body (SACB). Strengthening institutional ownership within governments or emerging civil structures will be most effective in the context of clearly articulated policy frameworks that support transparent, logically derived methodologies.

In the case of southern Africa, methodological compromises were made, partly to get greater institutional ownership. Guidance given to NVACs focused more on achieving a common and comparable output than on the process by which this was achieved. The strength of the approach was that NVACs were encouraged to use their own initiative and this had an empowering effect and strengthened them at national level. The weakness of the approach was that although in broad terms NVACs used a questionnaire and/or HEA, there was quite a degree of variation in definition of terms, sampling and other issues. Thus, findings were not easily comparable, while at times the RVAC had trouble controlling quality.

In Amhara region, Ethiopia, full integration of the HEA project within the regional disaster prevention and preparedness commission (RDPPC) did not happen and institutionalisation remains unlikely in the near future. There has been little integration of HEA baselines into DPPC EW monitoring. In the second phase, the secondee attempted to increase ownership through engagement in participatory planning and decision-making,

getting RDPPC staff to visit zones for monitoring and evaluation, and locating the EW adviser near the EW DPPC team. Similar problems occurred in the first phase of the Somali region project, where lack of ownership by the DPPC has contributed to lack of sustainability and difficulties in handing over to government partners.

Institutional location and sustainability

The case studies have shown how institutional location of the FSIS is another key factor underpinning sustainability.

Experiences from the Kenya Food Security Steering Group (KFSSG) and the Tanzania FSIT have shown how ad hoc groups only loosely integrated within government are not really sustainable and are dependent upon the goodwill of staff from international agencies. There have been concerns about the lack of institutionalisation of the FSIT, which lacks a clear mandate delivered by relevant authorities. As a result, its roles and responsibilities are not adequately defined – and this is particularly true of the FSIT task force which serves as a steering committee. This situation is mirrored by the KFSSG in Kenya where those who participate are unpaid and take on roles in addition to their agency responsibilities. Unfortunately, there are many experiences of expatriate-led information systems and co-ordinating bodies falling by the wayside as international staff change and agencies alter strategic priorities.

Concerns have also been expressed about the relatively new rolling assessments in southern Africa, ie, how best to establish the VACs as permanent analytical structures at national level. Without an institutional anchor, the NVACs could simply cease to exist outside of the emergency situation. As experiences of longer-term FSIS in non-emergency contexts are limited, there is little empirical evidence to inform decisions on where to locate FSIS in order to maximise impact and ensure sustainability (the two are obviously interlinked). There are clearly tensions in such systems having on the one hand an early warning role and, on the other, a longer-term developmental planning mandate in terms of institutional location and linkages. The key must be, however, for the system to provide information which is useful and used by a cross-section of sectoral stakeholders within national government. The process of moving the VACs into institutional homes with a longer-term focus has been taken furthest in Malawi, Swaziland and Lesotho. In these countries, since early 2004 relationships have been developed with their respective ministries of finance and development planning – in particular the units or departments mandated to work on poverty issues.

Conclusions

It is self-evident that sustainability of FSIS cannot be accurately tested until external donor funding is withdrawn. However, the experiences from this review do highlight some areas of knowledge and experience and also indicate the type of analysis and planning that may help underpin sustainability when establishing FSIS. The case studies have shown that where demand for the FSIS is high, eg, in emergencies (and geo-politically important regions), there is likely to be consistent external donor support. However, for systems where emergencies are more sporadic and/or systems that are more embedded in – and partially funded by – national government structures, funding is likely to be less reliable.

Critically, there is almost no data in the public domain on the costs of FSIS. At a recent UNICEF-hosted workshop on food security information systems in Kenya (2003) none of the stakeholder agencies was able to provide cost information on monitoring or periodic surveys. Although some such information undoubtedly exists at agency level, most of it is likely to be relevant to emergency data-gathering and analysis (funded by external donors) rather than to longer-term information systems. Furthermore, costs will be highly context-specific and dependent on certain key factors such as security, infrastructure, level of government and international staffing, and professional grade of national staff, etc. Without more standardised data on costs it will be impossible to engage in debates about the costs of establishing and sustaining FSIS or different components of the system, and about the potential for cost-sharing in connection with, for example, capacity-building, regular surveys, ongoing monitoring, analysis, data storage, institutionalisation within government, and dissemination of findings. Greater information on costs would allow identification of potentially sustainable funding sources for individual components of a system, such as EWS, longer-term poverty monitoring, and impact assessment. The various components will have different values for different stakeholders.

The paucity of data on costs of FSIS and their various components in relation to utility makes it extremely difficult to undertake financial planning with a view to ensuring sustainability. This deficiency needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Training staff in the mechanics of collecting statistics is more straightforward than a participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) or HEA-type approach. The latter depends on staff who are suitably trained. Extensive field-based training is therefore normally required. There has generally been a dependency on international staff to conduct this training, which has often focused more on NGO personnel than it has on government personnel. This is one reason why HEA has not been as easy to institutionalise in FSIS as other methodologies.

Strategies to build and sustain capacity in FSIS need to be developed on a country-by-country basis and to take account of existing educational levels, capacity, skills, and movement of staff within government departments and between government and international agencies. Consideration should also be given to competing demands on government staff during capacity-building work (for example, by having shorter modular courses, as proposed in southern Africa) and to the need for refresher courses and training of trainers, etc. Expertise can all too easily be lost, especially where there is limited institutional ownership and buy-in. A critical recommendation is to be aware of how important it is to undertake a capacity analysis prior to implementing or supporting a FSIS and to anticipate scenarios where capacity can be eroded. This is essential for ensuring that implementation capacity can be sustained in the absence of external funding and international human resources. Such an analysis, which should be applied at all levels (central and decentralised) of the system, will influence choice of methodology in terms of complexity and level of training needed. There is also a need to be more objective about the 'realities of capacity-building' at project design stage so that mechanisms for dealing with constraints can be established. For example, Save the Children UK has recently had to argue strongly with donors that the project in Somali region, Ethiopia, is not currently sustainable in terms of capacity and that handover as proposed within a three-year period is completely unrealistic. Capacity analysis was undertaken in the second phase of

the secondment project in Amhara region and it was deemed to have been successful in developing mechanisms to identify human resources and skills available for early warning at different DPPC levels.

A final consideration is the means for obtaining maximum institutional ownership of the approach as well as ensuring that the FSIS is well located institutionally so that it has maximum support from, and impact on, national governments and external donors. This requires substantial stakeholder analysis. The conclusions from an analysis of institutionalisation of the emergency nutrition co-ordination unit (ENCU) in the DPPC in Ethiopia is highly relevant here (Gladwin 2002).

- Understand the organisational stuctures and where the decision-makers are.
- Identify who the stakeholders are at an early stage and realise that there will be more than one stakeholder in each organisation.
- Ensure that the most powerful stakeholders are 'on board' in order to make progress.
- Assess the organisational ability to use information, as this could be inhibited by a lack of training, management expertise and inappropriate management procedures and tools.
- Take into consideration fundamental policy approaches and frameworks at a very early stage.

There is a major gap in the literature with regard to understanding how institutional factors impinge on FSIS sustainability. This could be addressed through more systematic institutional analysis of the many FSIS currently operating within or at the margins of national governments. Unfortunately, international technicians who are called upon to develop, support or strengthen these FSIS are not equipped with the skills to undertake institutional or organisational analysis. This may be an area to invest in so that lessons can be distilled from the many experiences available. At the very least, evaluations and reviews of FSIS should address and document institutional factors so that a body of information can be collated with a view to distilling generic principles.

7. Longer-term planning and poverty analysis

Save the Children UK has had relatively limited experience of supporting FSIS that have integrated with longer-term development planning and poverty monitoring and analysis. Therefore there are as yet few concrete lessons learned regarding how to establish an integrated information system in terms of methodology and institutional linkages. This situation will gradually change, however, as the country contexts in which Save the Children UK has been supporting information systems alter, and the need for a focus on emergencies diminishes. Furthermore, on a theoretical level HEA offers the methodological potential to strengthen longer-term development and poverty monitoring (including poverty reduction strategy programme – PRSP – monitoring), especially in light of recent developments in the approach.

Changing country contexts

In south Sudan there is now a wide range of information-users for both early warning (EW) and longer-term development planning information, with the post-conflict environment ushering in increasingly multi-sectoral involvement and a growing appetite for broader livelihoods analysis. The executive director of the New Sudan Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (NSCSE) has requested the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) to enable his office to be adequately prepared for further joint assessment mission (JAM) team surveys and other types of development initiatives. The LAF intends to provide a platform for broader analysis and decision-making by all stakeholders and partners to ensure that all sectors are able to participate in efforts to reach consensus on appropriate responses when required. In Somalia, where the EU has given authority for its national office to manage the Lomu/Cotonou development funds, phase four objectives of the Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) include reducing chronic livelihood insecurity through addressing its underlying causes. Indeed the FSAU already provides valued and credible information to operating partners and donors within the Somalia aid co-ordination body (SACB) in relation to current and protracted food security and livelihood issues in Somalia.

In Tanzania, policies are now in place whereby the agricultural sector is prioritised in the poverty-reduction strategy and the Disaster Management Department (DMD) has policies to support safe livelihoods so that interruptions to social and economic development are minimised.

Many donors (especially the UK's Department for International Development – DFID) see the southern Africa Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) as offering the best potential links with poverty monitoring and analysis. Nevertheless it is recognised that current levels of engagement with the PRSP process and wider government planning are not well established in the region. There is also a question mark over government commitment to link VACs with other national data systems (regarding nutrition, for example), although links with poverty monitoring units are being developed in Lesotho, Malawi and Swaziland. The VAC reports in Lesotho and Swaziland in 2004 specifically mentioned the need to develop centrally led, integrated social safety nets for the most vulnerable, using cash deficits as well as food deficits to illustrate livelihood gaps. New work in Malawi being funded by DFID will also link early warning systems and FSIS with vulnerability, poverty and social protection.

In Ethiopia, as part of the government's new coalition on food security, a safety net programme has been implemented (with difficulties) in several regions of the country since January 2005. In Somali region the pastoral development bureau, which will be managing the programme, has already recognised the value of the HEA baselines in looking at targeting and the required division between chronically and acutely food-insecure households.

Donors appear to have identifiable stances with regard to integrating poverty analysis with food security information systems. Generally, EU, USAID and DFID are positive about the linkage that FSIS potentially provide between early warning and poverty monitoring and analysis, although there are nuanced differences about how this might be achieved. However, other agencies – ie, FAO and World Bank – have concerns about making information systems too unwieldy and highlight the need to disaggregate and keep separate FSIS and poverty mapping and welfare monitoring.

Linking FSIS to longer-term vulnerability and poverty-reduction monitoring

In spite of Save the Children UK's considerable experience in supporting FSIS, there is relatively little experience of supporting systems to shift from an early warning and emergency focus to one with longer-term development and poverty-monitoring roles. Thus there has been limited practical experience of planning the best ways of working collaboratively between institutions, although there has been considerable theoretical discussion about this within Save the Children UK country programmes and head office.

In Burundi Save the Children was involved in developing effective co-ordination in collaboration with a range of agencies and government as a first step towards moving livelihoods information systems into the hands of government. In south Sudan, following the collapse of the Technical Support Unit (TSU) within WFP, the NSCSE now has official recognition with the new government of the south, and works along side the northern Bureau of Statistics. As the new custodian of information and statistics for policy and planning, the NSCSE, in collaboration with the LAF, has presented a proposal to donors to establish its own food security and livelihoods (FSL) unit. The new unit would use the HEA methodology to provide the contextual picture that adds value to other multi-sectoral analysis.

There have also been theoretical discussions within Save the Children UK concerning the longer-term role of the system of Regional VAC (RVAC) and National VACs (NVACs). It has been recognised that if the NVACs were only concerned with early warning then an obvious home would be the respective country's ministry of agriculture or disaster management authority, while at the regional level the current arrangement in which the Regional Early Warning Unit (REWU) is chairing the RVAC is fine. However, if the ambit of VAC is broadened, then it needs to be closer to the centre of government decision-making power, and specifically where there is a high level of executive power, such as the ministry of finance or the vice-president's office. This is what has been happening in Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. However, the VAC would still need strong links with National Early Warning Units (NEWUs) and the ministry of agriculture in order to fulfil an early warning role (although the experience of Zimbabwe runs counter to this – see Section 5 on information use).

There are also issues about chair and location of the RVAC if it moves from an early warning to a longer-term development and poverty role. If NVACs are located in a central planning ministry, would an RVAC based within a food and natural resource directorate (FANR) be able to co-ordinate? The REWU's authority in the RVAC would be questioned. It has been suggested that the RVAC be placed under the office of the chief director of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) so that it could make important linkages with policy-formulation processes. Discussions are also under way to expand membership of the RVAC to include SADC bodies that cover social issues, health, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

In Tanzania there is a recognised need for more collaboration between lead agricultural ministries and the President's Office in developing the FSIS. It is also recognised that the lead institutions in the routine data system working group that monitors poverty, eg, the Disaster Management Department (DMD), the food security information team (FSIT), National Food Security Division and the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG), need to initiate discussions on strengthening the integration of early warning and poverty-related data. Part of this will involve a review of existing early warning system (EWS) information with a view to identifying current gaps and constraints.

Clearly the policy environment and framework is important for this type of initiative. In Tanzania the agricultural sector constitutes a priority sector in phase two of the PRSP. The agricultural sector development strategy (ASDS) identifies the need to strengthen availability and timeliness of agricultural data. The formulation of a comprehensive national food security policy (NFSP) under this strategy states that there is a need to strengthen the DMD and the crop monitoring and EWS. The DMD of the Prime Minister's Office recently developed a disaster management policy and operational guidelines.

HEA in poverty monitoring and analysis

Save the Children UK has explored the potential role of HEA in poverty monitoring and analysis in specific countries and regions.

Thus in relation to the NVACs and also in Ethiopia, two possibilities have been considered:

1. Once HEA baselines have been constructed, indicators based on livelihood patterns can be selected for monitoring so that these have an early warning function and serve to indicate more gradual changes in entitlements that imply changes in poverty levels. It should be theoretically possible to compare progress in poverty reduction by livelihood zones.
2. At the micro level, calculating incomes and assets and quantification of wealth and poverty should be feasible.

Theoretically the NVACs could link with existing poverty information systems under the PRSP. However, it has been recognised that care must be taken not to duplicate these systems and that the focus should therefore be on the added value of VAC information. A first step would be a good stakeholder analysis of existing providers and consumers of poverty data and analysis.

There also has to be consideration of the methodological mix of NVACs. Relying on HEA as the only method may restrict links between NVACs and poverty and social-sector

monitoring. Additional tools are likely to be useful at times for specific purposes. However, an 'HEA-only' route could be less complicated to implement and manage than a hybrid. One lesson already learned from the VAC experience is that it is difficult to forge strong links between monitoring of non-food vulnerabilities, poverty monitoring and development policy decision-making from an early warning perspective.
The newly developed individual household method (IHM), based on the established HEA, has been designed to assess the effects of policy changes and other defined shocks on disposable income and living standards. The aim of four pilot studies carried out during 2003 in Uganda (Seaman, 2004), Ethiopia (Petty, 2004), Swaziland (Seaman, 2004) and Mozambique (Petty, 2004), and of a fifth in Malawi in 2004 (Seaman, 2005), was to test whether the approach was a practical methodology for field use, and whether output would provide a more rigorous basis for policy analysis, programme implementation and impact monitoring.

The focus of the pilot studies was on (a) the household impact of falling coffee prices and (b) the impact of HIV/AIDS on household economy. The effect of falling coffee prices was selected for the pilot studies because the relationship between household poverty and internationally traded commodities is poorly understood and has attracted wider public interest. The impact of HIV/AIDS on household economy was selected as this subject presents major methodological problems (eg, the difficulty of establishing control groups) which household methods are well suited to deal with. The debate around HIV/AIDS and food security also remains highly controversial. The research provided a measure of the distribution of poverty in the study communities, and cast doubt over the feasibility of deriving 'simple' HIV/AIDS-related poverty indicators. The study showed that by providing analysis based on representative samples of individual households, IHM allows decision-makers to model the potential impact on living standards of different policy alternatives and, ultimately, to measure actual impact against objectives.

Linking HEA/FSIS with longer-term vulnerability analysis and PRSP monitoring: opportunities and challenges

Opportunities

HEA and IHM clearly have the methodological potential to strengthen FSIS with regard to longer-term vulnerability analysis and poverty monitoring. Its key strengths as a methodology for this are as follows.

HEA identifies structural constraints to food security and quantifies changing components of the household economy. It can also be used to model different scenarios, such as policy changes. The approach can also focus on process- and implementation-oriented indicators at household level. Currently, a significant gap in PRSP monitoring is what is often referred to as the 'missing middle', ie, the focus is on budget allocations and end-point impact. The utility of HEA for impact assessment at household and community level is a significant strength and could bolster PRSP monitoring, which is highly criticised for lack of impact assessment of policies and strategies (although certain types of study, such as poverty and social impact analysis (PSIA), have recently been implemented to address this).

The current climate around PRSP monitoring is such that agencies such as the World Bank believe that NGOs have a key role to play in the design

of monitoring and evaluation systems of PRSP in terms of lending credibility to findings. PRSP monitoring, which normally takes place within the ministry of finance or planning, could focus on a number of core indicators while sector programmes focused on more in-depth and implementation-oriented indicators. Routine data monitoring could easily be analysed with regard to food economy zones while HEA baselines could be integrated into the larger surveys currently taking place for PRSP monitoring, ie, living standard management surveys (LSMS) and demographic and health surveys (DHS). There may also be an opportunity to integrate HEA into newly emerging rapid surveys as part of PRSP monitoring, ie, core welfare indicator questionnaires (CWIQ), quantitative service delivery surveys (QSDS) and public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS). An involvement of Save the Children UK in supporting integration of HEA into PRSP monitoring devices can only strengthen the credibility of findings and, given that these initiatives are largely donor-driven, it may be possible to encourage donors to support this process.

Challenges

A key challenge is national government sensitivity about PRSP monitoring, ie, negative findings may lead to donor penalties. Governments may therefore be very resistant to civil society involvement – would governments share potentially sensitive findings with stakeholders who might be critical of policies? Currently, NGOs and academic institutions are mentioned as PRSP monitoring partners in just three countries (Zambia, Honduras and Albania). Fundamentally, monitoring remains in the hands of government structures and institutions, with little external assistance or input. Conversely, partnership with government may compromise the independence of NGOs and civil society actors. There is an intrinsic contradiction between national ownership of PRSP and the fact that monitoring is seen as principally to report to external agencies.

Other difficulties concerning PRSP monitoring are that poverty-monitoring technical committees tend to be in the ministry of finance or planning, and that these agencies are accustomed to a technical and bureaucratic approach to monitoring, which is appropriate for implementation projects rather than a shift to a more strategic and learning-oriented approach. Furthermore, PRSP monitoring involves use of information from a variety of sources – eg, finance, education, health and agriculture – and there are concerns that sharing responsibility between different government agencies may lead to a lack of clarity as to who does what. Also, there is not a strong culture of sharing information between ministries. Confusion can easily prevail, with widely differing interpretations of tasks of sector groups, high costs of meetings and heterogeneity of participants. There can also be rivalry between ministries. There is a real risk of duplication of efforts within government and adoption of contradictory indicators. It is probably true to say that national governments' work methods are not yet adapted to the requirements of PRSP monitoring. There are other difficulties concerning current PRSP monitoring which are similar to those that affect FSIS, ie, severe capacity constraints regarding the range of skills required – especially at decentralised level – and lack of sustainability as high-level technicians are usually funded by external donors on finite contracts.

Conclusions

Clearly, there are many methodological and institutional issues to consider with regard to integrating FSIS with poverty and vulnerability

monitoring. This is relatively uncharted territory. There are many questions to be answered about the feasibility of integration. For example:

- What are the optimal ways of linking early warning and FSIS and poverty monitoring institutionally at central, regional and district level?
- What skill transfers are necessary and feasible?
- How compatible are monitoring and survey procedures and sampling (especially if HEA is involved) for these distinct forms of information system and in what form should findings be presented?
- Would governments sensitive to criticism adopt the HEA framework, which shows detailed analysis of process indicators, as an approach for national government PRSP monitoring?

Once again there is a need to document emerging experience in this area with a view to ensuring that lessons learned are properly institutionalised.

8. Issues regarding co-ordination of FSIS

Co-ordination of disparate information systems relating to food security has been an issue for Save the Children UK mainly in non-conflict situations. Lack of co-ordination of systems in the case-study countries has meant duplication of information (in some cases resulting in institutional conflict), over-abundance of information and lack of standardisation, leading to confusion for decision-makers.

In Sudan, food security co-ordination at national level has been weak. No agency has been willing or able to take a lead in terms of harmonising information systems, analysis and methodologies. Owing to the success of the Darfur food information system (DFIS), Save the Children UK has been encouraged by the EC to play a stronger technical and co-ordinating role in food security information systems and analysis. As a result, it conducted a four-week training programme for Oxfam's 'Community Situation Indicators' programme in Red Sea State and explored the possibility of seconding a food security/economy adviser to WFP. Save the Children UK has also developed relations with the Humanitarian Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture's food security department in connection with information systems and has held various workshops and presentations raising awareness on food security and related issues. However, it is acknowledged that there has been only limited success in improving national-level co-ordination and that this partly reflects in-country capacity constraints of Save the Children UK.

In Tanzania, prior to 2000 when the main type of national food security assessments were based on FAO/WFP crop and food supply assessment missions (CFSAMs), there were multiple sources of food security information and unco-ordinated assessments of food security and needs, carried out by various actors in government and outside. Methodologies and standards for data collection varied considerably. Consequently, there was patchy and inconsistent information at national level, and this was said to be confusing to decision-makers. Establishment of the food security and information team (FSIT) and production of preliminary crop production forecasts encroached upon National Food Security Department (NFSD) roles and responsibilities. Moreover, the data set used by FSIT was different from that used by NFSD and also used a different sampling frame and level of aggregation. The findings showed discrepancies. Institutional tensions were resolved after 2002 when NFSD retrieved its leading role in producing the preliminary forecasts, whereas FSIT concentrated its efforts on the implementation of rapid vulnerability assessments (RVAs).

In Amhara region in Ethiopia, there were a number of baseline information projects in addition to Save the Children UK's HEA work, so considerable time was spent trying to identify ways the Save the Children UK projects could complement these activities. Donors have not been interested in co-ordinating activities. In 2001 a Save the Children UK secondee to the Amhara region disaster prevention and preparedness commission (DPPC) reviewed monitoring data and baselines in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the system in respect of early warning. Although it was originally thought possible to integrate different early warning systems (EWS) and FSIS in the region it was soon realised that this was not practicable, ie, it was not possible to convert qualitative ratings used by the EWS monitoring to quantitative changes that could be used with HEA baselines. In addition there were differences in reference years as well as limited coverage of vulnerability profiles developed under the government's USAID-funded strengthening emergency response ability (SERA) programme. This resulted in the

recommendation to co-ordinate the systems rather than integrate them.

In southern Africa, the establishment of the Regional Vulnerability Assessment Committee (RVAC) was critical for regional co-ordination. It provided a platform for better co-ordination between key technical agencies: Save the Children UK, WFP, Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) and FAO. The inclusion of the Regional Early Warning Unit (REWU) as chair of the RVAC was highly significant. It was fully funded by Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states themselves. In the first round of assessments the RVAC played a very direct role in shaping the assessments and ownership of results. In the second round it relaxed its control, which arguably led to a slippage in timing. A defining characteristic of the Vulnerability Assessment Committee (VAC) process was the existence of multi-agency committees. A strength was that it encouraged consensus and collaboration and reduced duplication of effort and lack of uniformity of approach at country level. It encouraged a mutually agreed division of responsibility between different institutions under the technical chairmanship of a government agency and lent credibility and wide institutional buy-in to results.

In Somali region in Ethiopia, one of the key mechanisms to support inter-agency co-ordination was the formation of a regional-level steering committee. This was chaired by DPPC with Save the Children UK as secretary.

Donors interviewed as part of this review supported the idea of regional information systems, as these allow a more analytical and comparative view across a number of countries. Furthermore, information exchange between different countries in a region can add significantly to an assessment in one of those countries, eg, identifying and assessing where border controls and trade barriers are exacerbating a situation of food insecurity or poverty, or where there are regional transhumance populations whose livelihoods can be understood only from a regional perspective.

Conclusions

Co-ordination of FSIS is frequently overlooked. In the case-study countries it has been less of an issue in conflict-affected areas where the main operational FSIS has been closely linked to a UN structure. In other situations, eg, Tanzania, Ethiopia and north Sudan, lack of co-ordination has led to duplication and wastage, lack of standardisation of information and confusion for decision-makers. Formation of multi-agency bodies including technical institutions is clearly the way forward with regard to better co-ordination. However, where the strategy for FSIS is to integrate these with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis, then the likelihood is that co-ordination will become even more complex.

The formation of a regional multi-agency body, including and chaired by regional technical institutions, lends credibility to regional leadership and builds consensus among participating institutions. It can also facilitate the development of appropriate capacity at national level while training at regional level ensures a harmonised approach and understanding across the region.[18]

[18] FSAU field monitors visited Ethiopia to support training since it was felt that Ethiopia could benefit from the FSAU's experience of applying HEA in pastoral areas.

Currently, within the humanitarian system it is not clear who has the overall mandate to strengthen co-ordination of FSIS at country or regional level. Although the mandate of FAO's food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping systems (FIVIMS) project included strengthening co-ordination of FSIS, it is generally acknowledged that the FIVIMS 'experiment' has not been a success. There is a need to appoint an agency with this overall mandate to ensure co-ordination of FSIS within countries and regions. The failure of FIVIMS needs to be analysed and lessons learned before similar initiatives are revitalised. It may be that lead INGOs take on this role within countries. Furthermore, specific INGOs with a history of supporting FSIS may wish to develop this mandate and expertise.

9. Issues regarding decentralisation of FSIS

Two notable FSIS decentralisation[19] initiatives have taken place in the case-study countries: within the Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) structure in Somalia, and in Tanzania.

The 2002 mid-term evaluation of the FSAU for phase four stated that field-based NGOs and local authorities will need disaggregated information to be able to identify ways of supporting local communities to reduce vulnerability to food and nutritional insecurity. Since then, the FSAU has appointed 'focal points' in five areas that are responsible for cluster groups of field monitors. Members of the field team have been involved in leading joint assessment and analysis with partners, and on occasion have supported cross-border activities as leaders and trainers themselves. This new structuring of the field team has established the required platform to further expand forums with implementing partners, thus facilitating the wider application of FSAU information. The gradual increased ability of partners to utilise FSAU analysis is said to be resulting in an increased demand to use this valuable resource in medium-term rehabilitation as well as in strategic planning with communities to promote their sense of ownership in joint development interventions.

In Tanzania, with a view to further promote ownership and better understanding, the WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) office developed a project proposal aimed at building capacity of local governments to appraise the food security status of their areas through enhanced skills and knowledge of technical staff to carry out vulnerability assessments. The project consisted of a series of four-day training workshops organised between late 2003 and early 2004 in selected regional towns. They were attended by local government technicians and

NGO staff from 40 districts known for their high vulnerability to food insecurity. The project was implemented by the food security information team (FSIT) task force. The need to bolster district-level information capacity is reflected in the situation analysis of the disaster management policy. This analysis highlights the fact that the district and village disaster management committees face inadequate capacity, training and support to collect, transmit and analyse food security and vulnerability information.

In spite of the recognised need to decentralise the relatively new FSIS in Somali Region in Ethiopia, the process is expected to take a few years. There are a number of reasons for this; for example, there is currently no counterpart for handing over to the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Department (DPPD) zonal level, while, because of the government re-organisation and decentralisation, the majority of early warning officers within the DPPD board and structures will be almost all new and will need orientation and training. However, both Save the Children UK and the DPPD are optimistic that the new district-based DPPD structure, if staffed as planned, will be more efficient in discharging early warning roles as they will be closer to communities.

Conclusions

There has been only limited experience of decentralising FSIS. Although the theoretical value of decentralisation cannot be challenged (it

[19] For the purpose of this paper, decentralisation is defined as moving the capacity to collect, analyse and utilise FSIS information away from a centralised (usually nationally but perhaps regionally) administered system.

allows for local ownership and provides a vehicle through which local agencies can appraise and plan projects), there is too little information on the cost, feasibility, sustainability and real value of such initiatives. Clearly, there may be critical issues regarding capacity of local staff and financial sustainability within local-government funding mechanisms. There may also be political issues regarding the empowering of local government and disempowering of central administrations. In general, donors are interested in FSIS that build up from a decentralised level as long as these are effectively institutionalised in government, eg, as has occurred within the arid lands resource management programme (ALRMP) in Kenya.

10. Donors

Donors do not have explicitly stated policies with respect to FSIS. However, certain donor-specific characterisations may be possible, based largely on consideration of individual donor modalities and project implementation strategies for the food security sector. For example, USAID requires FSIS that provide information on the need for food aid as well as on how effective USAID food aid resources are in addressing food insecurity, although they also support the Famine Early Warning Systems Network's (FEWS-NET's) livelihood profiling work. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) is more interested in poverty and social protection agendas. It also wants to integrate vulnerability analysis into early warning systems (EWS), and to rationalise systems so as to ensure institutionalisation in government. The humanitarian department of the European Commission (ECHO) wants information that allows rapid emergency response. WFP wants information that is timely, accurate and relevant to WFP operations. The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as overall co-ordinator of emergency responses, is more interested in standardised information systems that allow comparative analysis of the most appropriate responses.

An analysis of recent donor history of involvement with different FSIS can also strengthen understanding of implicit policies and 'internal' donor thinking with regard to FSIS. For example, DFID has recently supported a number of governments in their capacity to generate and analyse livelihood information, eg, the Office of the President in Kenya and National Vulnerability Assessment Committees (NVACs) in southern Africa. The EC has also funded a number of FSIS in its vulnerability and livelihoods analysis. ECHO has supported WFP and a number of external agencies to strengthen the WFP emergency needs assessment (ENA) methodology. The World Bank is now investing more in FSIS and EWS, particularly for pastoral and agro-pastoral populations, eg, ALRMP in Kenya, and the Ethiopia pastoral community development project. In a number of countries, the different agendas of donors result in different stakeholders supporting separate, independent, parallel FSISs in the same country, eg, in Ethiopia and Kenya.

It may also be possible to make certain generalisations across the board with regard to donors. For example, in the past donors have shown a preference for macro data and clear, simple FEWS-NET-type information and presentation. FSIS that deal less with process and focus more on timely outputs, results and presentation tend to have been better supported than those that have a longer-term objective of providing contextual and analytical information. Donors have been critical of FSIS that do not incorporate information on structural or macro issues such as land tenure, land prices, trade or impact of policies at national level.

Other insights into donor thinking may be gleaned from the Save the Children UK case studies, but many of these are probably no more than perceptions (or in some cases misconceptions), which do not represent the stance of a particular donor but rather that of the individual interviewed.

These include the following:

- HEA should be combined with the indicator approach, as the two information sets provide a check on each other and build on each other.
- FSIS and nutrition information are often not integrated or linked because of sectoral proprietorial attitudes

- FSIS are not always adequately owned by governments and may be driven by other stakeholders, particularly donors or technical agencies.
- Some FSIS do not adequately disconnect the humanitarian response from longer-term poverty reduction and social protection programming.
- Data credibility is crucial. The range of credibility starts at the top with information systems implemented by the World Bank, passes through UN and NGOs and ends with national government.

It is probably true to say that many donors now feel that they a have better understanding of what different FSIS methodologies offer and how they can benefit from each other. Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) have contributed a great deal towards this improved understanding and have helped build consensus on FSIS. At the same time donors tend to be familiar with those systems that provide information they require and that they support. This may partly explain faltering patterns of donor support towards FSIS because donors' confidence and trust in a system is to a large extent based on their understanding of how that system operates. Thus if a system changes to reflect a changing context, donors may withdraw funding. The battle to achieve credible FSIS depends on building consensus on the purpose and objectives of the system. However, this does require that donors are explicit about policy strategy and information requirements.

Conclusions

Key actors in FSIS must invest time and effort into communicating to donors how FSIS and specific methodologies operate in practice, as well as how different methodologies can interlink and complement each other rather than operate in parallel. Continuous dialogue with donors is necessary with regard to evolving information systems, the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and lessons learned. Given the high turnover of donor staff, these lessons need to be captured in guidance material. There are currently no generic guidelines (there are agency guidelines) on FSIS in spite of the enormous demand for FSIS data. This lack contrasts with numerous generic guidelines on interventions in the food security sector and it needs to be remedied.

Donors should be encouraged and supported in standardised monitoring costs of FSIS and their different components. This should become a systematic donor activity. Donors should also be encouraged to invest in evaluating FSIS – especially from an institutional and decision-making perspective, where donors will have a comparative advantage. Donors at country level should as a matter of course be involved in FSIS design in order to ensure greater understanding, trust and buy-in to findings. Finally, other FSIS stakeholders (eg, Save the Children UK) should attempt to track and monitor donor policies and priorities and 'internal thinking' with regard to FSIS. As described above, these may be donor-specific across a range of countries, donor-specific for a particular country, or staff/individual-specific. This type of knowledge – perhaps kept in 'donor files' – will allow agencies with a keen interest in FSIS to target educational messages and funding requests at specific donors. It will also assist in building strong partnerships in support of specific FSIS approaches.

11. Recommendations

Recommendations to all stakeholders involved in FSIS

FSIS methodology

Establishing multi-agency technical committees and institutional stakeholder partnerships is a direct means of establishing consensus around FSIS methodology. However, care must be taken not to 'over-dilute' or 'over-stretch' the methodology in order to ensure that multi-agency concerns and agendas are represented.

The starting point should be an overview of what type of FSIS and methodology are most appropriate for a given country or region. This should be based on some form of gap analysis as well as a capacity analysis for implementing the methodology, eg, regarding staff, terrain, security. It will also be necessary to consider optimal partnerships and institutional location of the FSIS to ensure 'buy-in' and support for the adopted methodology.

FSIS and decision-making

Designers and implementers of FSIS must understand the mandates, policies and politics of UN agencies and donor governments and how these may affect decision-making in the food security sector, so that they can tailor their information management and alliance building strategies accordingly.

In order to minimise political interference, an analysis of the institutional location of the FSIS within national government structures is necessary. Consideration will have to be given to proximity of the FSIS to key decision-makers and stakeholders in government, as well as the potential need for decentralising the FSIS.

A number of strategies can be employed to maximise credibility of FSIS with decision-makers (donors, UN agencies, INGOs and national governments). These include: multi-agency consultation regarding methodology; involvement of agencies/staff perceived by decision-makers to be neutral (secondment to FSIS); and effective communication strategies (involving training) to ensure that decision-makers fully understand the FSIS methodology. A review and collation of past experiences of utilising FSIS and an assessment of predictive accuracy may also enhance the system's credibility. Equally, transparency about past failures and subsequent efforts to strengthen the system will also lend credibility to the system.

With a view to strengthening FSIS methodology for assessing the need for, and feasibility and appropriateness of, non-food aid responses in emergencies, there needs to be a greater commitment to employing non-food aid responses. Greater experience and documentation of the effectiveness of these interventions will help clarify what type of information and analysis is required to determine when and how these programmes should be implemented

Sustainability within national governments

Donors and other sponsoring agencies need to routinely compile cost information on FSIS and make this data publicly available. Although such information will be highly context-specific (ie, dependent on infrastructure, security, salary scales, etc), where possible it should be disaggregated in terms of start-up costs (training), staffing (national government/local NGOs versus external staff), surveys versus regular monitoring, analysis, dissemination of findings, data storage, decentralisation and early warning versus poverty monitoring. This will

increase the potential for diversifying and identifying sustainable funding sources for different components of a system.

Strategies to build and sustain human resource capacity in FSIS need to be developed on a country-by-country basis. A prerequisite is a thorough capacity analysis (educational and training levels, movement of staff within government and between government and international agencies, competing demands on staff working on FSIS). There is also a need for scenario planning to cover eventualities where capacity may be eroded.

The analysis should be applied to all levels of the FSIS and should influence choice of methodology.

There should also be a stakeholder analysis to maximise ownership of the FSIS. This requires understanding of organisational structures and of where the decision-makers are, ensuring that the most powerful stakeholders are on board, and taking into consideration fundamental policy approaches and frameworks at a very early stage.

More systematic institutional analysis of the many FSIS currently operating is needed to enhance understanding of how institutional factors impinge on sustainability (and information use). As food security technicians and nutritionists are not usually equipped with an appropriate professional background, donors have a responsibility and comparative advantage to undertake this type of analysis and to tease out generic lessons for future FSIS planning.

Linking FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis

In attempting to integrate FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis, agencies should consider a range of technical, institutional and political challenges (see Section 7).

It may be best to begin on a small-scale (pilot) basis within a region of a country where institutional and political challenges are least likely to prevail. This would allow focus on technical areas such as sampling frames, units of analysis and the mix of professional skills required.

Given the limited experience of linking FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis, experiences and lessons should be carefully documented.

Co-ordination

Formation of multi-agency bodies, including technical institutions, stengthens co-ordination of information systems. Formation of regional multi-agency bodies lends credibility to regional leadership and builds consensus among participating institutions. However, ambitions to integrate FSIS with longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis may complicate co-ordination issues and lead to institutional conflict.

There is a need to appoint an agency with a mandate to ensure co-ordination of FSIS within countries and regions. The failure of FAO's food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping systems (FIVIMS) needs to be analysed and lessons learned before similar initiatives are revitalised. It may be that lead INGOs take on this role within countries. Furthermore, specific INGOs with a history of supporting FSIS may wish to develop this mandate and expertise.

Decentralisation of FSIS

The need for, and feasibility of, decentralising FSIS should be considered on a country-by-country basis. There are many factors to consider such as empowering local communities to plan programmes, depoliticising resource allocation, costs, sustainability and skill capacity.

Guidance material

There is an urgent need to develop comparative and scenario-based guidance material on FSIS. Guidance material should allow potential users to evaluate which type of methodology and system is most appropriate for a given context. Clearly, any such guidance material should be a 'working' document. It is extraordinary that there is currently no generic guidance material on FSIS even though such systems are a prerequisite for informing food security intervention design.

Recommendations to donors

Donors should be involved in developing the FSIS methodology and analytical framework to ensure understanding, trust and buy-in.

Given the high turnover of donor staff, donors should agree on a communication strategy with FSIS planners and implementers to ensure an understanding of the methodology and analytical framework.

Donors should be supported to:

- systematically compile information on FSIS costs
- invest in evaluating FSIS from an institutional and decision-making perspective.

FSIS planners and implementers should 'track' donors' policies, priorities and internal thinking with respect to FSIS. These may be donor-specific across a range of countries, country-specific, or staff/individual-specific. This will allow agencies to target educational messages and funding requests at specific donors and also to build strong partnerships to support specific FSIS approaches.

Recommendations to Save the Children UK

Use of HEA should be systematically documented and analysed with regard to strengths and weaknesses in different contexts.

Develop scenario-based guidance material on the use of HEA as a food security assessment tool.

Guidance material should address hybrid methodological approaches in different contexts, spelling out strengths and weaknesses.

Where possible, HEA predictive accuracy should be evaluated, ie, did HEA get it right?

Greater investment should be made in developing and promoting the role of HEA in impact assessment of food security interventions.

Save the Children UK should continue to explore the potential role of HEA within longer-term poverty monitoring and analysis systems at country level. This should involve consideration of how the HEA approach can be integrated (technically, institutionally and politically) with existing poverty monitoring and analysis tools and systems.

Experiences of employing HEA for poverty analysis should be documented and incorporated into HEA guidance material.

Save the Children UK should develop policy on a potential role for co-ordinating (or advocating for the co-ordination of) FSIS in those countries where Save the Children UK has a long-term programming presence and experience in information systems.

Save the Children UK should strengthen the role of FSIS secondees in advocacy and linking FSIS to Save the Children UK programming decisions. This would be achieved mainly through making terms of reference more explicit and through better management structures.

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