Food Security Information for Action

Reporting Food Security Information

Lesson 1

Understanding the User's Information Needs

Learner Notes

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Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- define the purpose for a food security report;
- identify the target audience;
- analyze their information needs;
- appreciate the importance of timeliness in reporting; and
- consider resource implications in your final reporting plan.

Introduction

A large amount of data relevant to food security are collected and reported in many countries.

However, a Food Security Information System (FSIS) must provide information and analysis that are relevant and useful to planners, policy makers and other decision makers. The challenge is to plan and produce effective reports that result in action.

Let's consider the example of a recently established National Food Security Unit (FSU) which is responsible for monitoring and analyzing food security conditions and trends.

Rainfall in the last season has been poor and consequently food insecurity is increasing in the northern areas of the country. Look at what two members of FSU are saying:

1.... "*While we have been issuing regular reports on the agro-climatic conditions in the area, the Government and humanitarian partners have not yet mounted an emergency response...*"

2.... *"I suggest that we need to improve our communication with the key decision makers. We should review the reports that we produce."*

Effective communication should start with a clear understanding of the purpose of the report. What decisions is the report intended to influence? How often are these decision made? Without a clear purpose, reports will be unfocussed and ineffective.

Once you have determined the purpose, it should be easier to determine:

- who the users are;
- what their information requirements are; and
- the most appropriate frequency to communicate with them.

This lesson provides guidance and tools that will help you with these tasks.

Defining the purpose of your report

Why we are communicating
Who the users are
What their information requirements are
Appropriate frequency for communicating

Effective reporting is done to support decision making and stimulate action. A useful question to ask is:

What action do you want to inform or influence?

Without a clearly defined purpose, a report on food security conditions is unlikely to be effective in stimulating action.

Defining your purpose involves three steps:

1. identifying what **your objective** is;
2. identifying what you want **the reader** to do;
3. clarifying what you want **the report** to do.

Within the overarching goal of improved food security, what is **your objective**?
The action that you are looking for may be relating to sharing and applying new ideas, allocating resources or establishing new forums for interaction.

Examples of possible objectives include:

- To make sure that timely, adequate and appropriate resources are allocated for emergency response.
- To assist in the planning of a food security intervention for the chronically food-insecure.
- To fine-tune implementation of an on-going programme or policy.
- To put forward ideas to be considered as part of a Government policy review.
- To establish a forum for inter-agency and inter-sectoral collaboration and cooperation.

There are probably many objectives that you are looking for, or multiple objectives for reporting. You should think about producing separate reports for each specific objective.

What do you want to achieve?

What do you want **the reader to do** to achieve the objective?

An effective document promotes action. If you can **define the action** you want the decision makers to take, you will be better able to provide the ideas and information to help them take it. For example: "*The critical issue for our report is making sure that the relevant decision makers release funds when an unforeseen disaster strikes.*"

Possible actions that you might want the decision makers to take might include:

- Allocate or release resources
- Instruct subordinates to take follow-up action
- Advocate with colleagues
- Consider some ideas
- Provide feedback
- Participate in meetings

What do you want the document to do?

What do you want **the report to do**?
Most documents do one of two things: they either characterize a situation and describe implications (**explanation**), or they can direct decision makers toward one or more solutions (**advocacy**).

Explanation
A document that explains might: update readers on the food security situation, identify or summarize problems, clarify who is affected or notify readers of future events.

Advocacy
Advocacy might involve: proposing alternative options, arguing for a particular course of action or recommending a response.

A statement that clarifies the purpose should be written and discussed with your colleagues and your line manager. The purpose statement should combine in one sentence what you want the document to do, and what action you want the reader to take.

You can start to think about the information needed to take the proposed action. Is this the same information that you are already reporting? For example:
"We have agreed that we want this report to provide an update on the food security situation so that the Government and donors can allocate the necessary resources for emergency response."

Identifying your target audience

Why we are communicating

Who the users are

What their information requirements are

Appropriate frequency for communicating

Different readers will have different expectations, priorities and levels of knowledge.

Planning the document will be easier if you have some sense of **who your readers are and what they expect**.

Food security is, by definition, an inter-sectoral activity. Readers of your report may be located in Ministries of disaster management, agriculture, health, welfare and finance, amongst others. Readers may also work for a wide variety of other institutions and agencies, including NGOs, donors, UN agencies, private sectors, etc.

You should try to make a list of all the potential readers of your report.

Potential readers may include:

- Government Ministers
- Civil servants
- Elected representatives
- Local government workers
- Researchers or trainers
- Private sector traders
- Parastatal staff
- Donors
- Multi-lateral organizations staff
- UN agency workers
- National and International NGO staff
- Community workers
- Religious leaders
- Journalists

If this is a new report, then you will need to think about whom you might like to distribute the report to.

If this is an established report, then you probably will already have an official distribution list.

But be aware that other users may access the information indirectly; for example by downloading it from a website or passed on by a friend or colleague.

It is important to categorise your readers into the **primary and secondary audience**.

Primary audience

Your primary reader is the **reader who must read** the document. He or she will either use it for immediate decision making or have a major influence on the decision taken. There may be more than one primary reader; this will depend on the purpose.

Secondary audience

The secondary audience are the **other readers** of your report. They will need to be kept informed and satisfied. Ideally they should become supporters of the proposed programme or policy change and they can help to lobby for the proposed action.

You will need to inform and satisfy **both** of these audiences. But you must design the document for the primary readership alone[1].

As an example, let's consider again the FSU team, which is preparing a needs assessment report. Taking into account the purpose, they have identified some primary users for their report:

- *The Office of the President is responsible for declaring a national emergency and appealing for assistance.*
- *Treasury needs to mobilize funds for a domestic response.*
- *The Department of Relief and Rehabilitations need to implement the agreed contingency programmes.*
- *The heads of UN agencies should plan a programme of assistance which needs to be supported through international assistance, so the foreign food security advisors should be targeted.*

[1] For more information read the *Annex I: Stakeholder Analysis.*

Understanding your readers' needs and expectations

Having identified the primary audience, you need to invest time in **understanding their needs and expectations**.

Why we are communicating
Who the users are
What their information requirements are
Appropriate frequency for communicating

The people whose attention we are trying to attract are usually extremely busy. Your information has to compete with many others for their attention.

To be effective you need to **think from the perspective of your primary audience**. What do they expect and need to know? What decisions do they need to make? What are the information requirements of those decisions?

This will help you frame an effective message, plan your reporting and choose the most appropriate media.
You should start by investing time in understanding the broad objectives and goals of the primary audience. Where do the decision makers' priorities lie? What decision do they have to make, and how often? How does your report fit into to helping them achieve these?
These objectives may be partly understood through reading key strategy documents. But **direct interaction** with the primary users is very important. They will be able to express current priorities and any personal emphasis.

For example, depending on your audience, the analysis may be more persuasive when presented in terms of achieving:

- reduced costs or increased cost efficiency,
- greater public participation and popular appeal,
- social justice or
- innovative practice[2].

[2] For more information, read the *Annex II: Interacting with your users.*

You may try listing the objectives and goals of your primary audience. Do you feel comfortable that you fully appreciate what they are?

For instance:

1. *"The Presidency will be keen to see this done equitably and based on real needs. They don't want to be accused of favouritism in the media".*
2. *"The Treasury will want to see what this is going to cost and how it might be done more cheaply".*
3. *"The donors are keen to see how this relates to attaining the Millennium Development Goals".*

Additional questions that will help you manage the expectations of your readers and write more directly and persuasively include:

What are the existing information sources for decision makers?

What do decision makers already know?

Your report needs to complement, rather than replicate, these established sources of information. Ask why other information sources are effective in communicating to the target audience. They may provide a useful model for you to emulate.

What level of detail is required?

Many decision makers are very busy and appreciate succinct summaries. Other users may need access to more of the evidence supporting the conclusions, particularly if they are responsible for briefing senior decision makers. It may be necessary to present information in different levels of detail to different users.

A useful guide may be 1-4 pages as a summary for busy planners or a media release, 5-10 pages for programme implementers, and longer formats for interested agencies and programmes and other researchers.

How does the reader like information delivered?

Would a presentation be better than a document? Do they prefer electronic communication or printed reports? Depending on our backgrounds, we tend to have different preferences. Understanding these can be critical to getting the message across.

A good example of information being presented at different levels of detail is contained in the Famine Early Warning System Network (**FEWS NET**) website www.fews.net.

In the FEWS website, reports are available at three different levels:

- Two-page Executive Summary covering sub-Saharan Africa. This is primarily targeted to the needs of global and regional decision makers looking for comparative information.
- One-page National Food Security Alerts. These are primarily targeted towards national decision makers.
- More detailed Monthly Reports. These are targeted towards national and sub-national planners who require more detailed information.

This system also allows users to 'drill down' through the reports. The overall situation can be monitored through succinct reports, while users can easily access more detailed information when and if required.

The design of regular reports is an iterative process. You should **adjust your reporting on the basis of this feedback**.

Follow-up meetings should be held to pre-test products. Decision makers may not be able to specify in advance what they want from a report, as they don't always know what is available and possible. However, they can usually say whether they will find it useful and provide helpful suggestions on how to improve it when shown a draft.

It is important to conduct **periodic evaluations** to assess the effectiveness of your reports. The survey of recipients should include both primary and secondary audiences.

Questions that you may want to ask your readers in an evaluation include:

- Do they have access to the reports? How could access to the reports be improved?
- Do they read them? If not why not?
- What information is most useful?
- What information is least useful?
- What would they suggest adding?

Timeliness of reporting

The usefulness of information is determined by its timely availability to user groups.
Reports should provide information on a regular schedule that **meets user needs** and is consistent with the **nature of the data**.

Timely reporting enables users to effectively integrate information into their decision making.
In general reporting is most valuable when there is a predictable *schedule of reports* which is consistently adhered to. Special updates can be issued when unexpected but critical developments occur, such as a flood or a cyclone. Ad hoc reports may also be required to support specific decision making processes, such as policy reviews.

Reporting also needs to consider the nature of the data that are used for reporting. Some data may only be available on an annual basis (for example harvest outcomes), while other data may be updated more frequently (for example price information).

For each of the reporting purposes identified, you should **consult the primary audience** on the desired frequency of information.

Consulting your audience: a tip

Beware of a tendency of some users to **ask for information on a more frequent basis** than is really required. Users may ask for it 'just in case' there is an unanticipated need for the information.
Ask how the requested frequency relates to the timing of critical decisions.
Are there specific dates when decisions need to be taken? These may be influenced by budget cycles (even in 'emergency' situations) or dates set for a policy formulation or review processes.

Once the frequency of reporting has been agreed, it is very important to **respect** it.

How can you maintain the timeliness of reporting?

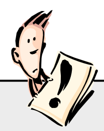
- Keep the design of the reporting system **simple**. Be realistic in what you attempt to report in the first place and avoid the temptation to make the analysis too complex.

- Don’t wait for the **latest data**. A common explanation for the late release of a report is that “We were just waiting for the latest <crop/malnutrition/food aid/etc.> figures to come in”. Users will prefer an incomplete report delivered on time over one that is comprehensive but outdated.

- Simplify the **editing and approval** process. Most reports go through some form of editing and official approval. Examine these procedures to see where they add value (and should be retained) or where they create unnecessary delays (and may be streamlined).

- Use new communication **technologies** creatively. New technologies are speeding the transmission of information. Investigate where the lags and delays in data and information flows. Are they between the data providers and the analysts? Or between the analysts and the users? What options are there to close these gaps?

- Establish strong links with the **users**. Strong user demand provides a powerful incentive to respect deadlines. The users can help you respect the reporting schedule by demonstrating that they use and need the information.



Remember:

- Do not over-promise.
- Do not under-deliver.
- If necessary, advocate for additional resources to meet your reporting requirements.

Resource allocation

In order to develop a feasible final reporting plan, the resource implications need to be considered. In order to do this, it is useful for you to assemble information about proposed tasks, persons responsible and timing.

The FSU team is using a matrix and has filled in the first column with their proposed list of reports.

Reporting products	Why? Purpose	Primary audience	Frequency and schedule	Who is responsible / participates	Estimated time requirement	How is the report disseminated
Ministerial briefs						
Routine food security report						
Annual vulnerability assessment						
PRSP policy brief						
MDG monitoring report						

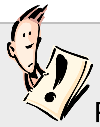
Table I. Proposed list of reports

By providing realistic estimates of the staff and financial costs it should be possible to assess whether the proposed reporting strategy is proportionate to the overall resources available to your unit.

If the matrix indicates that the proposed expenditure on reporting is either too high or too low, then the proposed mix of products and media should be reconsidered. Questions to be asked in adjusting the reporting plan include:

- Which reports should be prioritized?
- What is the most pressing purpose and key audience?
- Can cheaper dissemination channels be used?
- Can printed bulletins be replaced by electronic dissemination?

- Is the proposed frequency of reports really necessary?



Remember to be realistic in the amount of resources devoted to reporting costs. Advice to research scientists from the funding board in the UK suggests that a minimum of 5% of the total budget is allocated to costs of dissemination – excluding any analysis costs. The appropriate proportion will depend on the particular situation and may be much greater than this.

In order to develop a feasible final reporting, plan the resource implications need to be considered. In order to do this, it is useful for you to assemble information about proposed tasks, persons responsible and timing.

The following matrix is a tool which can help in this process.

Reporting products	Why? (Purpose)	Primary audience	Frequency and schedule	Who is responsible /participates	Estimated time requirement	How the report is disseminated

Table 11. Tool for resource allocation

Summary

- Start by defining the purpose of the report; what do you want to achieve, what do you want the reader to do and clarifying the role of the report.

- Identify your target audience and segregate into the primary audience – people who use reports to take decisions – and secondary audience – people who generally benefit from report.

- Examine the needs and expectations of this audience; what are their goals and objectives, what information do they already have, what decisions they have to make, what do they need to know and what format and media is most appropriate.

- Know when the information is needed (timing, frequency).

- Determine whether the proposed reporting plan is feasible.

Additional readings

Suggested references:

Barker, A. and Manji, F 2000. Writing for Change - An Interactive Guide to Effective Writing, Writing for Science, and Writing for Advocacy. IDRC / Fahamu. http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-9428-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Chopak, C. 2000. Early Warning Primer: An Overview of Monitoring and Reporting, Charles Chopak. USAID FEWS Project. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/LHON-5TVF55?OpenDocument

Hovland, I. 2005. Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations. Overseas Development Institute (ODI). http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/Documents/Comms_tools_web.pdf

Suggested websites:

Overseas Development Institute, Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/

USAID Famine Early Warning System Network http://www.fews.net