Food Security Information for Action

Reporting Food Security Information

Lesson 2

Reporting for Results

Learner Notes

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Learning objectives

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

- understand how to provide actionable recommendations;
- construct a message for the target audience;
- understand how to present information to support actionable recommendations; and
- recognize how you can increase credibility of your reports.

Introduction

A useful Food Security Information System (FSIS) should report relevant information to decision makers in a form that can be easily used.

However, in practice many reports are less effective then they should be. Many reports are only superficially read and quickly forgotten.

How can the impact of reports on decision makers be improved? How do you make sure that your report is both read and used?

This lesson provides practical guidance and tips to align food security reporting with the goal of producing results.

What are actionable recommendations?

Reporting supports action by providing decision makers with recommendations.
You are responsible for providing decision makers with **useful recommendations, based on analysis of the available evidence**. This is the most important part of the report: your recommendations are the core message that the reader needs to listen to.
The remainder of the report should provide the context and evidence to help the targeted audience to make a decision; to accept or reject your conclusions and recommendations.

Your recommendations will have more impact if they are presented as **actionable recommendations**. These are recommendations which are **relevant** and **feasible**.

Recommendations are **relevant** if they:

1. Are consistent with the goals of your primary audience
If your recommendations are not aligned to the strategy and goals of your primary audience, then you should probably rethink the recommendations or rethink the target audience for your report.

2. Are based on a strong analysis
It is extremely important that the recommendation is based on a good understanding of the real problem. Reports will fail to lead to action when the analyst has failed to analyze the problem adequately or failed to understand the real problem that the decision maker is interested in.

3. Take into account lessons learnt from other programmes and policies
When you recommend a specific course of action have you considered past successes and failures? There is considerable experience in implementing various food security programs and policies that can be drawn on from local, regional and global experience.

Recommendations are **feasible** if well designed and likely to deliver tangible results.
You should ask:

Are the recommendations focused on informing a specific decision or need?
Try to make recommendations specific and practical, rather than general.
A better recommendation might be to scale up a proven pilot intervention in a specific geographic location.

Have any preliminary cost and resource implications been considered? Are these in line with the capacity of the primary audience?
This does not mean you have to present information on costs. But you should ask some simple questions. If your analysis indicates that access to clean water is undermining food security in a specific district. You may be thinking of recommending to the Ministry of Water to drill X number of new boreholes. But do they have the equipment, finances or skill to carry this out? If not, are there alternative actions that are better matched to their capacities?

Have the major assumptions and risks been considered?
If the recommendation has too many assumptions or risks attached to it, it may not be feasible. Have you considered what the major assumptions and risks might be?

When providing recommendations, remember that in most instances there is **no single right answer** to the problem. It is critical that you demonstrate your ability to think in a structured way and that you reach a reasoned conclusion that is supported by the evidence.

Recognize when there is **not enough data or information**. If you miss critical information, it can affect your ability to suggest solutions. Decision making is a step-wise process. Your report, and actionable recommendations, might propose intermediate steps in reaching a final decision.

You should consider when it is appropriate to recommend:

- Gathering further information
- Dialogue and consensus building
- Not taking immediate action
- Adopting a course of action

As an example, we may take a look at the early warning report produced by the Food Security Assessment Unit for Somalia[1].

Here is the opinion an expert on the recommendations included in the report:
"The early warning bulletin provides a useful set of recommendations, supported by evidence of a declining food security situation.
Recommendations are given for both life-saving and livelihood protection, allowing the audience to determine the relevance. The recommendations are given for specific geographic areas and livelihood groups.
The first three recommendations are rather general – and essentially advocate for the allocation of resources. However, the last two recommendations clearly propose a process and timeframe that will lead to the development of far more specific programmatic recommendations. The recommendations might be improved by more clarity in who the recommendations are addressed to: civil administration, UN, donors or other humanitarian agencies."

[1] Please, look at the Annex "FSAU December report"

Defining your message

What else should the report include? How do you structure a convincing argument? What should be included in the **message** that you need to communicate to your primary audience? To define your message you want to ask yourself:

1. What is the current situation?

2. Is there a problem? What is it?

3. What question do we need to answer?

4. What response is needed?

Let's consider each of these questions in detail.

1. What is the current situation?

A report should start with a clear description of the **current situation**. The reader needs to understand the context for the recommendations.
Depending on the purpose of the report, the situation summary might be very brief or more detailed. It should be clear, concise and include the most pertinent "facts" on the current conditions.

For example, for the purposes of a press release, the text on the right may be sufficient to capture the situation.

For other reporting purposes the situation would need to be covered in much more detail and may run to several pages.

"Every year, millions of people in southern Africa live with hunger, unable to obtain enough food for their families. But this is the fourth consecutive year of severe shortages and many people have exhausted their typical ways of coping having already sold their animals and sold their farming tools to buy food"

Also, if you are **reporting in an early warning context** you will be reporting on a dynamic situation. Individual reports form part of a longer narrative on an evolving situation.
You need to carefully consider how much information needs to be repeated from one report to the next. Avoid unnecessary duplication. Reports should not be repetitive and boring - or they will lose the interest of regular readers.
But each report needs to function as an independent document. Do not assume that the reader has read the previous report. Readers should be able to justify any decisions on the basis of the information presented in the report alone.

- Do maintain a narrative thread in your reports.
- Explain changes in the situation from one report to the next.
- Follow-up on the outcome of scenarios presented in previous reports.

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2. Is there a problem? What is it?

You need to **clearly identify the problem** in the situation that you have described.
There are two basic types of problem:

1. The first type of problem is where **something has happened** and the situation has deteriorated, or is anticipated to worsen. This may be the result of a recent change, a longer-term trend or an anticipated event.
2. The second type of problem is when we want to **improve the current situation** – when it does not match our expectations or desired goals.

It is important to be explicit about the problem, as you need to make sure that **you and the reader agree that a problem exists** and that action is required[2].

[2] Please read the Annex "Establishing a common understanding with the reader" for more information

3. What question do we need to answer?

The problem should provoke questions. For example:

- What caused the problem?
- What are the consequences?
- What can be done about it?
- What are the options?
- What is the best option?

The questions should include spatial and temporal aspects in order to provide a **crucial link** between the problem and suggesting the recommended response. Asking the right question is not always as straightforward as it may appear. It is useful to confirm with your primary audience that you are investigating a question that they need answered.

The question may also have been predetermined before you started your report. In this case, the target audience may have told you what question they wanted answered.

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4. What response is needed?

Your report should reach a conclusion. The **recommendations** are the key to the report.

- Don't just summarize what you have discussed: think about **what the actionable next steps** are, and which ones are the most important.
- Synthesize your thoughts concisely and develop a recommendation.
- The rest of the report should help to support and justify the conclusions reached: conclusions and recommendations should logically flow from the report.

As you develop the message, it is important to remember **not to overload the user** with too much information.

Decision makers tend to be very busy. While you may have lots of interesting information on the situation, decision makers may not need, or want, to read it. Often they are most interested in the options for action. If your report is too long it will probably not be read.

Try to **provide the minimum amount of information** that the primary audience needs to support their decision making. Ask for feedback from your primary audience on how much information they need.

Now, we may look at the index for a recent report issued by the UN in southern Africa[3].

Here is the opinion of an expert on the report:
"The Malawi Flash Appeal provides a good example of communicating a well structured message.
The purpose of the document is to persuade donors to support the emergency humanitarian response. For senior decision makers the length is well chosen, with approximately 10 pages in the main text.
Within this limited space the author manages to summarize the situation, analyze the problem and detail the recommended responses.
Note that the majority of the report is used to discuss the recommendations, not the situation and problem. If necessary the reader will be able to consult other reports which analyzes the problem in more depth or provide greater detail on the proposed interventions".

[3] Please, look at the Annex "Flash_2005_Malawi"

Facts and analysis to support actionable recommendations

Once you have constructed the message, you need to present the **evidence to support** and refine your recommendations.

The problem and questions that you have defined will help you to decide **which data you should present**.

The raw building blocks of evidence come from the **data**. You will need to interpret them to present usable **information**. Decision makers do not have time or desire to do the analysis themselves.

Reporting information, not data

Your job is to analyse and interpret the data to produce **usable information**.

Data are unprocessed facts, figures, opinions and observations. They are collected either directly or from secondary sources.

The data are analyzed and interpreted to create information. This involves the definition of the problem, an analysis of the available options and recommendations for action.

When understood and assimilated by the users, for decision making and implementation, the information becomes knowledge. Remember - when reporting for results the starting point is the purpose: what decisions are we supporting. The report should not be driven by the data. Rather, the decision-making process should determine what you choose to analyze and report.

You should be prepared to analyze far **more data than you report** on.

You will limit how much information you include for reasons of:

Consistency

The data available to the analyst may give conflicting signals. It is up to the analyst to sort through this and distil information that is actionable. It may be unhelpful to include information that is suspect or contradictory.

Relevance

Some data (for example information provided by a local project) may have limited geographical coverage. This data may be useful in confirming trends and outcomes, but not very useful to present to decision makers who are more interested in the national overview.

Brevity

The target audience of decision makers do not want to see all of your workings. You have to weight the data and include only the most important information. Keep your report short and use what you need to support the conclusions and recommendations.

Data should be analyzed and reported in **context**. For example:

- Providing a **historical perspective**. Comparing values to known reference periods (e.g. a very good or bad year, or a long-term average) will show whether the data deviate from the norm.
- Confirming **data reliability**. If the information is deviating from the norm then we need to confirm the credibility of the data. Is this a measurement or data entry error rather than a real event? Can we triangulate[4] this with different data sources?

[4] Triangulation is the process of using multiple, independent data sources to validate an observation. For example, the rainfall station data might indicate a significant decline in rainfall. You could verify (or disprove) this measurement by comparing the ground station data with satellite-based imagery, or talking to informants who live in or have recently visited the area.

The reader is not interested in “the amount of rain”, but in the consequences for food security. If the information is not related to the problem or recommendation, then it should probably be omitted from the report.

The importance of credibility to decision makers

Food security information is most likely to be used if it is **trusted** and seen as **credible**. Credibility is a particular problem when information systems are owned by one agency, yet making recommendations to a different agency.

How can the credibility be increased?

Information is most likely to be trusted if the decision makers have a stake in the system and really understand it. An important way to achieve this is through **collaboration** in data collection, analysis and reporting. The shift towards collaboration and networking has improved consensus over the conclusions and increased the likelihood of action in response to the reports.

Here is an example of building joint ownership:

The Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) in southern Africa

The 2001/03 food crisis in southern Africa prompted the development of Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs) at regional and national level. Established under the auspices of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), their mandate is “to strengthen national and regional vulnerability analysis systems in order to inform policy formulation, development programmes and emergency interventions that lead to a reduction in vulnerability within the SADC region”. At national level, the NVAC is a committee comprised of government ministries or departments, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations. One of the government departments chairs the committee. At regional level, the RVAC is a committee of the SADC Directorates and technical units, FEWSNET, SC-UK, WFP, UNICEF, OCHA and FAO.

From the outset, the VAC analysis has been extremely influential on food security programming. Several evaluation exercises have consistently attributed this, at least in part, to extensive participation and broad membership.

A good reputation is established through producing reliable analysis over a period of time. If your analysis has been proved right in the past, people are more likely to trust you in the future. Therefore it is essential to sustain the capacity of the FSIS **in the long term**.

Consistently producing high-quality reports is the best way to achieve credibility. Be sure to:

Provide a consistent message

Rapid changes in your conclusions – declaring an emergency last month, normal conditions this month and an alarm next month will make decision makers reluctant to follow your advice. If you do change your opinion be sure to explain and justify it.

Avoid the temptation to bid up the severity of the crisis to attract attention and resources

This is an understandable tendency in acute emergencies given the time lags and usual levels of under response. However, this may eventually backfire if the situation does not deteriorate to the catastrophic levels predicted and undermine the credibility of the system.

Explain the degree of confidence that you have in the analysis and results

Your analysis will help you to appreciate the level of reliability of different data sources. Indicate the level of confidence you have with the reader. This transparency will increase confidence in your work.

Summary

Reporting supports action by providing decision makers with actionable recommendations, based on analysis of the available evidence.

Recommendations are actionable if they are relevant and feasible.

To define your message you need to ask yourself:

- What is the current situation?
- What is the problem?
- What question do we need to answer?
- What response is needed?

Once you have constructed the message, you need to gather and present the evidence to support and refine your recommendations.

Food security information is most likely to be used if it is trusted. An important way to achieve this is through collaboration and networking.

Consistently producing high-quality reports is the best way to achieve credibility.

Further readings

- 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

- Buchanan-Smith, M. and Davies, S. 1995. Famine Early Warning and Response – The Missing Link. ITDG, London.

- Suggested websites:
  Food Security Assessment Unit for Somalia http://www.fsausomali.org/

  SADC Vulnerability Assessment Commitees
  http://www.sahims.net/vac/default.htm