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**RESEARCH ON INDICATORS
OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION
(INDIA)**

A Report on the Feedback
from Collaborators and Decisionmakers

August 1995

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RESEARCH ON INDICATORS OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

This report is intended to provide feedback to IFPRI researchers on the process of collaborative research on "Alternative Indicators in Locating the Food Insecure and the Malnourished" jointly conducted with ICRISAT in India.¹ The major objective of this exercise was to discuss the potential use of this research with as many policymakers and program implementers as possible. The feedback from the key-informants selected for discussions may be useful to design future research projects that may have stronger link to program implementation. Due to the diverse nature of the discussants in terms of their official status and their institutional affiliations and the associated difficulties involved in conducting open discussions, it was decided to meet them individually to get as much information as possible on the nature and usefulness of the research project. The list of key discussants is given in (appendix 1). In order to guide the discussions, a core set of lead questions was prepared before the meeting (appendix 1). The major outcomes of the discussions as they relate to assessing the process and potential use of research are given below.

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In general, the indicators research has provided some useful insights into the choice of indicators for targeting, monitoring and evaluation the impacts of the food and nutritional interventions. However, the alternative indicators identified by the research need to be further tested in various socio-economic and geographical settings. Some of the indicators identified remain ambiguous - for example in rural India even well to do households may have one child with diarrhea. What is more important is identifying the indicators that will reflect the poor sanitation and hygiene practices and relate to the both the incidence and frequency of illness. Again, the number of food purchases as an alternative indicator may not truly reflect the food insecurity situation. In fact, it may indicate the good access is guaranteed locally in the markets. Indicators that provide information on food access, food availability and food use should be combined into composite indicators since, they may not singly reflect the true situation.

Some indicators although identified through participatory approach, still lack an understanding of the cultural dimension of food access and use. For example, consumption of deliberately left over foods is considered in rural India as more nutritious and time-saving. Labor households in general prefer to eat left-over foods to save time in cooking in the early hours of work. Several households in rural India continue to be vegetarian households. Thus, practical use of indicator based on frequency of eating non-vegetarian food items such as meat and egg needs to be reconsidered.

Significance of the identified alternative indicators for practical purposes of monitoring is not clear. For example, the no one indicator of food insecurity identified can truly reflect the situation of the households for targeting for food rations or for integrated Child Development Services. Thus, there is a need for developing a

composite set of indicator which may be used jointly with other information available at the local levels to identify the vulnerable groups. These indicators must be useful for the frontline workers in the village panchayats. Some of the alternative indicators of food insecurity identified by the research while providing a general set of indicators, may still be difficult to collect. For example, the indicators associated with quality such as quality of drinking water, and quality of land may not have the same standard in various locations of the area under study. Similar is the case with frequency substitution of oil seeds for oil as a food insecurity indicator.

Also definition of some indicators lack of clarity. For example, households containing working women who have young children need not necessarily food insecure in a urban or semi-urban setting. Even in rural areas where non-farm activities which are increasingly seen as a good source of income, households with working women are better off than households in which women do not work. However, this indicator may better reflect food insecurity of a particular group of households - the landless labor households. Even for these households, when the support structure is available (such as mother-in-law) having young children and working outside home need not render the households food insecure.

The choice and use of indicators must be different for various agro-ecological zones. For example, the drought-prone areas of Bihar and Orissa will need indicators that will identify the disparity among the households in attaining food security and should be useful in addressing the conditions of vulnerable groups of the population.

As a follow-up to this research, a broad testing of the food security and nutrition indicators along with those identified by this research is essential for various purposes. The need for identifying food insecure is different for various purposes

such as food subsidies through ration shops, school feeding programs and for Anganwadis(?). Also indicators for studying the impact of these programs on the food security and nutritional status should be tested. Further, the role of casual factors in explaining the food insecurity has not been fully understood. This results in the design of the blanket programs which are not focussed towards solving specific problems. IDS is a classic example of this approach.

In developing village, block and Taluk level indicators, there is a need for using secondary data for targeting. These may include crop estimation information and food production statistics for various blocks and taluk. At the village level, rainfall could be the most effective indicators for targeting. Without specific context, it is difficult to collect information for geographical targeting.

There is a need of conducting the survey in the local languages. The questions should be sensitive to local cultural and dietary practices. Unless the indicators are sensitive to the local situations, they may not be useful for developing interventions.

UNICEF is currently testing a core set of indicators to identify the nutritionally vulnerable households. It includes; households belonging to scheduled caste or tribe, households with children under five years old, households having one or more illiterate adult, households with only one or no adult employed, households without a latrine, households with no access to safe drinking water, households eating two or less number of meals per day and households with one or more alcoholic. A household is identified as at high risk if it meets four or more of the above risk factors. This approach to identifying those at high risk has been combined with the triple A approach to nutrition intervention.

Indicators that can identify the disparity in malnutrition and food security situation could play an important role in targeting. These indicators chosen based on the relative status of the households are more appropriate for targeting. Indicators for identifying gender disparity that will identify the condition of living and the position of women as they relate to food security may be more useful for designing intervention.

The research has focussed on four villages in specific agro-ecological settings. It is important to test the identified indicators in a broader setting. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) provides an opportunity for such an exercise.

Indicators that are chosen for identifying the vulnerable groups of households should be different from the indicators used for evaluation of the benefits. Practical implications of the use of these indicators at the grass-root level is important. To what extent the indicators identified by the research as cost-effective are useful as practical tools for identifying the malnourished and for continuous monitoring of the food security and nutrition situations. The choice indicators at various levels of decision making such as village level, taluk level and district levels need to be differentiated. Also use of indicators may vary depending upon the nature of the locality such as chronically drought-prone areas and tribal areas.

APPENDIX 1

Key - Discussants Interviewed for the feedback on the Process and Usefulness of Indicators research in India (in Alphabetical Order).

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APPENDIX 2

Lead Questions for Generating Discussions on Research on Food Security Indicators

1. Why do you need to have information on alternative indicators?
2. Will it help you to design more effective M&E system?
3. Will it help to reduce the cost of M&E system?
4. Will it provide better and quicker information to redesign your intervention strategies?
5. What was your expectation when this research was initiated in terms of results?
6. Give me an example of research that you had supported and how information generated by that research helped in your programming or project preparation.
7. How do you relate this indicators research to the above example in terms of process.
8. What type of research is needed to aid your Food Security and Nutrition programming and preparation of mid-term plans?
9. To what extent users need to be involved in research design - is it realistic to involve them?
10. To what extent does the beneficiaries of interventions need to be consulted in the choice of indicators for monitoring project benefits?
11. Generic vs locality specific indicators - What do you need for your activities?
Donor: NGO: Government:
12. How would you describe an ideal research programming/decision making link in your organization - Use of information for project preparation.
13. Targeting vs. Monitoring and Evaluation indicators - How important is the differentiation in programming?
14. Community, Household, individual indicators for FSNM. How difficult are they used in your M&E activities?

15. Name the most frequently used indicators that your organization relies on for targeting and project evaluation.
16. From your opinion—what does the Government agencies look for—in terms of indicators for planning nutrition interventions?