



HOUSEHOLD FOOD ECONOMY ANALYSIS

**A TRAINING FOR FEWS-NET WEST AFRICA
REPRESENTATIVES AND NETWORK PARTNERS**

**Nouakchott and Monguel, Mauritania,
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**A Short Report by the Training Consultants
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1 SUMMARY

This report provides a brief account of a training organised for FEWS-NET representatives and network partners in Mauritania in April 2001. The basic objective of the training was to increase participants' understanding of food economy analysis, the tool adopted by the FEWS-NET project for analysing current food insecurity and food aid needs. Despite a number of constraints (including the relatively large number of participants and the very difficult conditions in the field), this basic objective was (in the opinion of the trainers) achieved.

The report also includes suggestions for further work in Mauritania. Mauritania seems particularly affected by two related processes affecting the region generally - desertification and urbanisation – both of which are likely to have profound impacts on food security. This makes Mauritania an excellent location for research which could provide important lessons for other countries in the region. The fieldwork undertaken during the current training highlighted the importance for food security of the links between rural and urban areas. As the productive potential of rural areas declines due to desertification, these links are likely to become more and more important. But just how many people can the urban economy support? How can poor households best take advantage of the opportunities offered by both urban and rural economies? And how can they be helped to do this? The objective of further food economy work in Mauritania would be to answer these and similar questions.

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2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 The Food Economy Analytical Framework

The FEWS-NET project has adopted the food economy analytical framework as a tool for the analysis of current food insecurity and food aid needs. The approach is described in more detail elsewhere, but a core concept is that two types of information must be combined to complete an analysis of food insecurity:

Hazard Information, i.e. information on the nature and magnitude of the problem, typically expressed in terms of its economic consequences (e.g. a 50% reduction in food crop production, complete loss of access to livestock markets due to insecurity, etc.).

Baseline Information. There are two types of baseline information. The first is information on access to food in a baseline year for typical households defined in terms of their economic circumstances (i.e. wealth) and geography (i.e. food economy zone). The second is information on the coping steps utilised by typical households to increase their access to food in response to a problem.

Baseline information provides the context for understanding the likely impact of a problem on access to food at household level (it follows, for example, that crop failure will have different impacts according to the importance of crop production for the household in a baseline year, and the household's access to other sources of food and income in a bad year).

Typically, information on hazard is collected on a regular basis through established monitoring and early warning systems. Baseline information, in contrast, is normally collected during a dedicated food economy baseline assessment. In principle, this baseline analysis does not have to be updated on a very regular basis.

The analysis of hazard information has historically been a strength of the FEWS-NET system. The food economy analytical framework and food economy baselines are new to the FEWS-NET system, however, and three regional trainings were therefore organised to introduce these concepts to FEWS-NET representatives. These trainings took place in east, west and southern Africa, respectively.

2.2 Objectives and Organisation of the FEWS-NET West Africa Training

The basic objective of the training was to increase participants' understanding of how food economy baselines are prepared and used. This was not because FEWS-NET representatives are themselves expected to prepare these analyses for their own countries (although they are expected to use them, once they have been prepared). Rather, the role of the FEWS-NET representative is to facilitate the process of baseline preparation, and for this it is important that they have a full understanding of the process. In short, the role of the FEWS-NET representative is:-

- To work with network partners to develop their understanding of the approach.
- To identify country-specific opportunities for undertaking food economy baseline work, perhaps linked to a specific interest or concern of the local USAID office, for example.
- To assist in preparing project proposals, obtaining funding and organizing food economy baseline work in their country (in collaboration with the FEWS-NET Washington office).

The initial objectives and expected output from the training are outlined below.

Objectives of the Training

To increase participants' understanding of

- The Food Economy Analytical Framework
- How baseline data is collected
- How baseline and monitoring data are combined to analyze current food insecurity

Expected Output

- A short report on one food economy zone

The West Africa training was held in Mauritania during the first two weeks of April, 2001. There were 17 participants (excluding the two trainers). Seven were FEWS-NET regional or country representatives/assistant representatives from the five countries of the FEWS-NET West Africa Region (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad). There were also eight representatives from FEWS-NET Mauritania partners and two from the regional partner, CILSS (Comité Permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contra la Secheresse dans la Sahel).

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The training was conducted in three stages:

- Stage 1: Introduction to the analytical framework, the food economy spreadsheet (a tool for storing and manipulating baseline data) and the field methodology (2 days, Nouakchott)
- Stage 2: Data collection and preliminary analysis in the field (7 days, Monguel district)
- Stage 3: Completion of baseline analysis and use of baseline to analyze the impact of various shocks or hazards, e.g. drought or conflict (3 days, Nouakchott).

Two days were spent travelling to and from Monguel, making a total of 14 days.

3 IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOME OF THE TRAINING

3.1 A General Account of the Training

Although the training had many positive aspects, there were also some obstacles that constrained the training. These are summarised in the table below.

ORGANISATION OF THE TRAINING	
<p>Positive Aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Excellent training venue in Nouakchott ▪ Good choice of location for field work (a very supportive local administration and an interesting food economy offering a number of challenges) ▪ A rural population that seemed willing to provide clear and straightforward answers to our questions. ▪ National FEWS-NET representative an excellent source of information on the economy of the study area. 	<p>Constraints:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large number of participants ▪ Lack of training materials in French ▪ Language difficulties (neither trainer fluent in French) ▪ No dedicated logistician (so logistics the responsibility of the national FEWS-NET representative) ▪ Lack of secondary data ▪ VERY basic accommodation in the field (no electricity, no functioning lavatory) ▪ Shortage of water in the field for drinking and washing ▪ Extreme heat in Monguel a major constraint to the number of hours worked per day.

Note: the above represents the views of the two trainers. The views of the participants are summarised in a separate evaluation report.

The national FEWS-NET rep, for very understandable reasons, was keen to include as many local network partners as possible. In general, these partners responded positively to the training, and their inclusion was therefore a good idea. But having such a large group also had its negative aspects; it was difficult to organise the logistics; more time was required to train a larger than a smaller group (because more people ask more questions) - and time was limited; it was difficult to cater for the mixed ability, needs and interests of such a large group, and so on.

Conditions in the field were also very difficult, which had the effect of sapping participants' motivation and exacerbating the logistical and organisational problems referred to above. Given the heat especially, several participants were unable and unwilling to put in the long hours typically required to make a success of a field exercise such as this.

The situation improved after 4-5 days in the field, once a start was made on the preliminary analysis of the data (and once an end to the fieldwork was in view). It is usually at this point of a training that participants get a better grasp of what it is they are doing, and of how the analysis will come together in the end. It is also at this stage that some of the more interesting questions and issues start to emerge.

3.2 Were the Objectives of the Training Achieved?

It is the impression of the trainers that the basic objective of increasing participants' understanding of how food economy baselines are prepared and used was achieved. There were two problems:

- The lack of secondary data meant that it was not possible to demonstrate how this type of information is incorporated into a baseline analysis. On the other hand, Mauritania provided a good example of a country with few official or formal sources of data.
- Insufficient time was spent discussing questions related to monitoring (e.g. how the food economy baseline analysis helps in the selection of monitoring indicators, how monitoring data is used to specify a problem for analysis, and so on). This was the final item on the training agenda, and was dropped because it seemed that participants had by this stage absorbed as much as was possible in one go.

The training provided an excellent opportunity to discuss and explain the various questions and issues raised by the FEWS-NET representatives and other participants. Most of the participants exhibited a lively interest in the subject matter, and many had extensive knowledge and experience upon which they could draw. There was therefore much spirited debate. The main session on the final day was a question and answer session. One very encouraging sign was that many of the answers were provided by participants themselves rather than the trainers, which we take as a sign of the success of the training.

It was anticipated that a short report on the food economy of Monguel would be prepared based upon the data collected during the training. However, it is our feeling, shared by the FEWS-NET country representative, that the results obtained are not sufficiently reliable to justify the preparation of such a report. This is to some extent to be expected. In this type of training the principle is that the participants learn by doing, and learn from their mistakes. It is obvious that data collected by trainees (even though generally knowledgeable and experienced in the subject) will be of a lower quality than data collected by experienced researchers. A particular constraint in the case of Monguel was that fewer interviews were undertaken than might have been possible in other circumstances. This was in large part due to the difficult conditions in the field.

Although insufficient data were collected to allow the preparation of a detailed food economy report, enough was learned to provide some very interesting pointers towards possible further work. These are discussed in section 4.

3.3 Next Steps

There would seem to be two basic activities that are required as a follow-up to the training:

1. Preparation of written materials to support the work of the FEWS-NET representatives in the field. A field training manual is required to complement the spreadsheet training manual that has already been prepared. A number of specific requests were also made by participants:
 - a) Basic documents on Rapid Rural Appraisal
 - b) A guide to the preparation of food economy baselines (focussing specifically on the analysis process, i.e. how various types of information are put together to complete the baseline)
 - c) A full list of foods and their kilocalorie value
 - d) Reports that describe national food security monitoring systems that are based upon food economy analysis (e.g. Somalia, southern Sudan, Rwanda).
2. A dialogue should be initiated between the Washington-based food economy specialist and individual FEWS-NET country representatives to explore follow-up activities country by country.

4 POSSIBLE FURTHER WORK IN MAURITANIA

Note: The following section has been written by two food economists with no previous experience of working in the Sahel, and is based solely on what could be learned while organising the two-week training described in previous sections of this report.

It seems that many west African countries are affected by two inter-related longer term processes, both of which are likely to have profound effects on food security. These are:

- desertification, and
- urbanisation

Mauritania seems to be particularly affected by both, making it an excellent location for research into these processes, research which could provide important lessons for other countries in the region. What is happening in Mauritania today may well provide important clues as to what is likely to happen in other west African countries in the future.

Severe drought during the 1970s and 1980s led to an erosion of the natural resource base in Mauritania, a loss of rural productive assets and a migration of the population from rural to urban areas. In Mauritania, many of these rural migrants, who arrived in Nouakchott and other towns in desperate circumstances at the height of the drought, never returned home. The result is that a very high proportion of Mauritania's population is urban, and that links between urban and rural areas are very strong (most rural families have one or more relatives living in the town, to whom they can turn when times are hard).

As the productive potential of rural areas declines due to desertification, it is likely that rural households will become increasingly dependent upon the urban economy. But just how many people can the urban economy sustain? And what are the links between the urban and rural economies, and what implication does this have for famine prevention and mitigation activities?

The findings from Monguel provide an interesting starting point. Monguel was selected by the FEWS-NET representative for Mauritania as one of the most food insecure districts in the country, yet the findings suggest that a typical 'poor' family¹ can generally cope with even quite severe crop failure by pursuing one or both of the following strategies:

- Seasonal migration to Nouakchott and, to a lesser extent, other towns. This seems to be a relatively 'expandable' option and in the most extreme circumstances up to 5 family members (out of 8) may migrate for up to 8 months of the year. Perhaps surprisingly, it seems that most of these migrants are also able to find work and can at least sustain themselves; most are also able to send food and/or money to support those household members remaining in the villages.
- Credit from local traders. This also seemed to be a relatively expandable option; the downside being that poor households may accumulate considerable debts in a bad year. These can take several years to pay off, and may never be completely paid off at all. It seems reasonable to suppose that while access to credit may prevent acute hunger, it also tends also to exacerbate chronic poverty.

Broadly speaking, there would seem to be three main questions to pursue:

¹ Note that roughly 60% of the population were classified as poor in Monguel. A *typical* poor household is not therefore the *poorest* household. It would have been better if an effort had been made to differentiate between different types of poor household (i.e. very poor and poor), but this was not fully appreciated by participants until late in the training.

1. *Questions relating to the strength of the urban economy.* Is it really true that so many people can find so much work in Nouakchott and other towns? And if so, how is this possible? Is there a particular explanation for the apparent strength of the urban economy in Mauritania, or is this a general region-wide phenomenon?
2. *Questions relating to the role of the rural economy.* If there are so many opportunities in the urban areas, why do people remain within the rural areas?² An initial hypothesis might be that although the poor can survive in urban areas, there are few opportunities to accumulate wealth. That comes with crop production. Although most crop years are poor, the one good year in five generates a surplus and an opportunity to exchange crops for livestock and to begin accumulating wealth.
3. *Questions relating to the role of credit.* It wasn't possible to develop a full understanding of the credit system during two weeks in Mauritania, but there are obviously some interesting questions concerning the relationship between credit and short-term food security on the one hand, and credit and chronic poverty on the other³

Reference has already been made to the importance of the urban-rural links. A reasonable hypothesis is that the future for many poor households in west Africa lies in exploiting the opportunities provided by both. The objective of food economy work in Mauritania should perhaps be to understand how best they can be helped to do this.

² In fact, there is almost certainly a progressive and permanent migration from rural to urban areas, particularly among the young.

³ There is sure to be an extensive literature on this subject, and a first step would be to see what this can tell us.