

**Gathering and Analyzing Qualitative Information**  
**USAID FEWS Project**  
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“Qualitative and quantitative methods are often seen as opposites; quantitative data are considered objective and rigorous, while qualitative information is speculative and subjective. These differences do not mean the two approaches are incompatible, although researchers have often favored one or the other.

In practice, most information gathering, whether it is quantitative or qualitative, includes elements of the other approach. In a formal survey, there are often many examples where a qualitative approach is taken, for example, in interpreting causal relationships, deciphering puzzling responses, presenting case-study illustrations and selecting variables to serve as indices. Likewise qualitative methods may report relevant statistics (secondary data).....

In practice, these two approaches are complementary as they each make up for the limitations of the other. Quantitative methods are unsuited to causal analysis or understanding the processes of change, while qualitative methods are unable to show the extent or severity of malnutrition (even though they can show malnutrition is present). But if qualitative and quantitative methods are used in combination, it is possible to measure how much or how many, and at the same time give meaning to the facts and figures by explaining who and why. This powerful combination of methods is far, superior to the use of either approach in isolation.”

Helen Young and Susan Jaspars, “Nutrition Matters—People, Food and Famine,” Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995.

“We usually think of a sort of hierarchy of information according to its respectability. The lowest of the low is hearsay evidence, and the highest is quantified, for where we see numbers, we tend to assume authority, rather as we find text in print more convincing than in longhand. But most of our information actually comes in ‘longhand’, with few absolute numbers but a great amount of qualitative description and comparative judgment and estimation.”<sup>1</sup>

FEWS relies on secondary data as the basis for its food security analysis and monitoring of vulnerable groups. “Standard Early Warning” data sources as used in the FEWS project include satellite imagery, demographic data from available census studies, agricultural statistics, rainfall and price data. Approaches to assessing vulnerability have varied in different FEWS countries but the common thread has been the assumption that decisions on how to obtain income--and the ability therefore to obtain food--are made at the household level and that an understanding of household production strategies (primary production strategies as well as alternative income-generating activities) is therefore key to being able to assess relative states of food security or insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some approaches for gathering useful qualitative information, data which FFRS in all FEWS countries use to supplement available quantitative data in their analyses. This is anything but an exhaustive inventory of approaches to gaining access to qualitative data. Most FFRS have devised their own strategies for getting their hands on information to fill in the gaps in their analysis and understanding of rural economies and food security.

The question of what to do with that information once gathered, so that it may be useful not only to the individual FFRs (for use in his regular reporting and for improving his understanding of rural economies generally) but also to others in the future is a more difficult problem. Ideally, one would like to be able to organize and structure qualitative data so that it would be available in the future for others. Save The Children/UK’s RiskMap software is used in this way to put qualitative information into a useful format and to provide a context for it. Another approach to structuring qualitative data would be to add text fields to an ACCESS file which links to AGIS administrative layers. Some examples of text fields categories might be prices, income, alternative sources of income, coping strategies, NGO and other studies.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most desirable way of getting at this kind of information would be to conduct long-term specialized field research-- including conducting detailed formal surveys and studies in those rural and urban areas of interest. NGOs, anthropologists and others are doing precisely this kind of work in a variety of disciplines in some countries; FEWS does not have the resources to undertake such work itself but it can and should tap into such work being done as

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Holt, “Understanding Rural Economies,” Save the Children Discussion Paper # 4, 1994, p.8)

<sup>2</sup> Wright, et al., “A Model for Assessing Vulnerability to Famine in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger,” FEWS, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Wright email message, January 1996.

well as into the network of different actors who have intimate and extensive knowledge and appreciation of the workings of the rural (and urban) economies in question. Many books have been written on farming systems research methods and extension work as well as on rapid or participatory rural (RRA or PRA) appraisal approaches in general and rural food security appraisals in particular ; FFRs have used some RRA tools (key informant interviews, open-ended group interviews) which are feasible in the FEWS context given time and resource constraints. Others which require more time and or preparation may be less appropriate for FEWS (focus group interviews, use of maps or venn diagrams, use of transects and historical profiles).

Following are some suggestions for getting at this qualitative data:

**1. Build up a network of contacts and information exchange among all the "operators"<sup>4</sup> or "key collaborators" active in development or relief work in the country (whether their work is explicitly related to food security or not). In short, exploit the in-country expertise available to you.**

This includes the more obvious partners--national or other EWS (early warning systems) and MIS (market information systems), when they exist --as well as regional organizations (ICRISAT, CIMMYT, AGRHYMET, CILSS, SADC, IGADD, for example), non-governmental organizations (Oxfam, World Vision, CARE, Save the Children Fund UK and USA, among others), UN organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO, WFP), World Bank-funded and other USAID-funded projects, other governmental relief, development or research agencies (Peace Corps, GTZ, Cooperation Francaise, ODA), religious based organizations, and departments of relevant ministries (agricultural extension and research departments, agricultural statistics, animal husbandry, hydrology and water resources, health and nutrition, security cereal stocks, etc.).

While most of these key collaborators have their main offices in the capital, they also have agents in the field. Whether or not the agency is involved in activities which are explicitly related to food security, agents in the field, simply by virtue of being on the ground, are sources of information about the rural economy of a given region, information which can be of great value to FFRs. They are often excellent "key informants". They are well informed about the particularities of a region including details regarding modes of production (agriculture, animal raising, cash crops), agro-meteorological issues, hydrological issues. They are also familiar with the sociocultural, economic, ecological, and ethnic profile of the zone in question. Some of this

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<sup>4</sup>The coordinator of the World Bank and IFAD funded project ("PSANG"--Projet de la Sécurité Alimentaire du Nord Guéra) based in Guéra Province, Chad, spoke about his work organizing the major development and food security players in that region--"les operateurs"--to work in coordination one with the other. Although FEWS' job is not to organize these players, it is essential that FFRS be aware which organizations, agencies or projects are working in which regions and to be in contact/consultation with these groups. This may consist of inclusion on FEWS Bulletin distribution list, meeting before field trips as well as discussion and information gathering before final drafting of monthly reports.

information can be obtained through contacts with the home office in the capital; visits to the field and contact with knowledgeable agents there can unearth other useful information.

One of the most important sources of on the ground information regarding the agricultural season in many countries are the national networks of agricultural extension and research agents whose job it is to monitor agricultural season progress. They report regularly on crop conditions to the national office.

## **2. Establish (write up) a regular monthly schedule of contacts with the key collaborators.**

The first step is knowing who--which groups--are functioning in country and where. The FFR should undertake a "census" of which relevant organizations, projects, and agencies are working in country and what is their area of coverage. After gaining a sense of who the groups or actors of interest are, an initial "getting acquainted" meeting serves to explain the objectives, mission and interests of the FEWS project as well as those of the agency or organization in question--including the area (geographic) where that group is operating in the country. It may sometimes be possible to accomplish this goal by making a presentation of the project at a meeting of an NGO coordinating group, if such a group exists in country. Among other points, the FFR should explain that the project attempts to monitor food security conditions throughout the country and to monitor the status of vulnerable groups, relying both on *formal quantitative data sources*--satellite imagery, census results, rainfall measurements, agricultural production estimates--as well as on more *qualitative information* including observations and reports of NGO, UN, and host government personnel, based in the capital and in the field, and statements and observations of farmers, herders, merchants, village elders, in different parts of the country.

After initial meetings, it may be useful to establish a schedule of regular contacts with the key collaborators. The one week-10 days period immediately preceding submission of the regular monthly report is a good time during the month for these contacts. This time period is also often the primary time for FFR field trips outside of the capital. Meeting with NGO, ministry, UN and other personnel who have agents in the area to be visited is of course essential preparation for field visits.

Experience has shown that most organizations or agencies are very interested in collaborating with FEWS especially when they "see something in return" for the data (whether formal or informal data) which FEWS is asks for.<sup>5</sup> Understanding FEWS' mission as an EWS--to furnish timely information to USG decision makers regarding the food security situation in order that development and emergency assistance may be more efficiently allocated--may be of interest and enlightening but may also not be sufficient as "something in return". Regular distribution of the FEWS bulletin and of a longer monthly or bi-monthly report, when possible,

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<sup>5</sup>The OXFAM/UK representative in Chad, during recent meeting remarked that she liked the monthly bulletin for the regional perspective which it gave. She asked however whether there was not a longer report in Chad of food security analysis available either on a monthly or other basis.

(both regularly in the capital and during field trips) to these development colleagues is one way of offering something in return. Training in use of various software packages and other FEWS tools may also be a good exchange. FFRs can also request to be included on distribution lists for those organizations which publish regular updates or reports.

During the rainy/agricultural season, such contacts may be easier to make or at least more frequent because the FFR is actively seeking to collect secondary data from various sources. FFRs visit certain agencies regularly for the purpose of data collection (for example, in the Sahel, AGRHYMET or the national meteorological department for rainfall data, agricultural statistics department for crop updates, etc.). There also exist various formal structures during the agricultural season such as inter-ministerial working groups (GTP in the Sahel) which monitor the agricultural/rainy season, meeting every ten days and which provide the FFR with a centralized source for much of the information he/she is interested in.

During the rest of the year--when it is not the primary agricultural season--it is just as important or perhaps more important to keep up regular contact with the key organizations or agencies which the FFR has identified. In many countries, there are important off-season agricultural activities which are the subject of ongoing monitoring, for example. More “leg-work” may be required on the part of the FFR during this time of year, since there may be fewer structured, formal opportunities for contacting the key players (for example, there are usually no regular meetings such as the GTP during the off-season).

**3. Employ a strategy of “triangulation”<sup>6</sup> in one’s queries and discussions with these key collaborators, which means trying to cross check evidence or trends that one has observed based on data from one source with data from other sources.**

For example, if the national early warning system has declared that region x contains a group of agro-pastoralists who are increasingly vulnerable this year because of a second consecutive poor harvest and poor pasture lands, one might attempt to:

- analyze NDVI time series for the concerned region;
- verify production estimates with relevant Ministry (agricultural statistics department);
- speak with personnel from the NGOs, Peace Corps, UN groups, etc. who have projects and agents on the ground in that region;
- if necessary, plan and undertake a field visit to the region in question.

To take this hypothetical example further: region X may be the primary region of intervention for a given NGO in country which has a number of personnel in the field (for example, one expatriate employee who spends 1/3 of his time in the capital and 2/3 at the project site, as well as 3 nurse/midwives, 5 water resource trainers and three agricultural outreach workers). Project employees, in particular nationals, are well placed, by virtue of living and working with

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<sup>6</sup>Tim Frankenburger (“Rapid Food Security Assessment,” OFDA Famine Mitigation Strategy paper, 1992, p.5) describes triangulation as using “diverse methods and information sources to improve accuracy”.

the population in question, to assess conditions in the region--especially if the project has been in place for a number of years or if project staff are natives of the region (often the case).

Although it may seem repetitious, it is important to pose the same questions to as many different people as possible, in this case to the different NGO staff members, in order to obtain different points of view and to guard against reaching conclusions which may reflect the opinion of only one or a few people. The same is true in the context of field visits generally, i.e. to try to canvass the observations and opinions of different groups (women, men, elders, farmers, herders) on the same issues as well as those of different NGOs and agencies on the ground.

**4. In many countries, communication and travel between the capital and other parts of the country is extremely difficult and constrained. Some strategies for obtaining information regarding food security and other conditions in the interior of the country -- short of a field visit--include:**

- Telephone calls, faxes, email and radio calls to relevant people and organizations, when such communications are possible;
- Contacting individuals who have recently arrived in the capital from areas of interest in the interior of the country, for example, going to taxi or bus stations in the capital where vehicles arrive from points up-country and talking with/interviewing arriving passengers. (Observations of the numbers of arrivals from particular parts of the country can, in themselves, be useful information.)
- Subscribing and reading on a regular basis government as well as independent newspapers. These as well as radio can be sources of useful information and leads about food security conditions in different parts of the country (always to be verified). In some countries, cereal prices for different regional markets are broadcast by radio or published in newspapers on a daily or weekly basis;
- Calls, emails or faxes to FFRs or USAID missions in neighboring countries to check on border areas of concern or interest (regional perspective).

**5. Field trips to points of interest--or concern--throughout the country are essential sources of qualitative and, sometimes, quantitative data.**

FEWS analysis is based on secondary data sources--FFRS are not expected to conduct detailed formal surveys or studies when in the field. Nevertheless, field visits, conducted either by the FFR alone or in conjunction with host-country technicians or NGO personnel, are invaluable for ground-truthing purposes and for filling in holes in the national food security picture, through collection of qualitative information.

Sources of information during field trips include:

- *Observations* of the FFR himself or herself;
- *Collection of cereal and other staple prices* in the market;
- *Statements elicited during detailed open-ended interviews* with groups of farmers, herders, merchants, village elders and also through informal discussions with taxi drivers, hotel or restaurant workers, women in the market;
- *Key informant interviews* with technicians and other knowledgeable people based in the area of interest;
- *Household interviews* with all members of one household;
- *Focus group interviews* which permit in-depth querying of a homogenous group on a particular issue;

### **Observations of FFR(S).**

Among the many areas in which the FFR may make useful first-hand observations during field visits are the following:

- Status (phenological stage, etc.) of crops in the field, location (near which villages, in which region) and variability in apparent quality or phenological stage from area to area;
- general aspect of crops and fields;
- pasture conditions;
- river, reservoir and pond levels;
- animal/herd concentrations and movements;
- market provisioning (shortages of staple products);
- importance of off-season agriculture including gardening activities.

A layman's observations of these and other areas can form the basis for further investigation and questioning of people in the region, key informants, etc.

### **Price Collection.**

Field visits offer an opportunity to collect cereal and other staple prices in large and small markets visited which is especially important in areas which are not covered by the MIS or in countries where there is no functioning MIS. It is also a method of checking prices reported by the national MIS.

### **Open Ended Interviews with Groups of Farmers, Herders, Elders.**

These interviews allow the questioner to collect diverse information concerning present or previous year's harvests and pasture conditions compared to average, or compared to a benchmark excellent or poor year. Other potential focus of inquiry include cereal stocks, crop yields, rainfall variations, animal health and numbers, alternative sources of income, farming practices, coping strategies, food stocks and nutrition/health situation of children or other groups.

It should be stressed that open-ended interviews are often best when they are informal in nature; themes for questioning and some questions themselves should be prepared in advance but

formal questionnaires or even a visible notebook and pen should not be used to avoid intimidation, feelings of distrust or fear. However, it is also critical to write down notes as soon as possible after the interview has ended to insure that important points are not forgotten.

The manner in which a question is asked can also be very important in determining what kind of response is received. The phrasing of a question can influence or even bias responses. Leading questions and questions that expect a yes or no response should be avoided. It is often most useful to attempt to get at information indirectly and in a number of different ways to minimize the chances of misinterpretation. For example, rather than asking if the harvest was good or bad, one might ask first of all, how this year's harvest compared to last year's (assuming one knows something about last year's harvest). If the harvest has recently occurred, one might ask a farmer or one family how long their harvested cereals are likely to last in months, and how this compares to normal. If the FFR is relying on a translator, it is more difficult to be sure that the right questions are being asked so the FFR and translator must spend sufficient time together in advance, reviewing questions and issues to be covered.

### **Key Informant Interviews.**

Government agricultural extension and research agents as well as ministry of agriculture farming systems agents, health, water and forestry extension agents and technicians, school teachers, NGO personnel, Peace Corps Volunteers, missionaries or other members of religious orders are among those working in the field who can be "key informants". They may be able to offer corroborating evidence regarding economic stress which may exist in an area. They may be sources of information regarding a variety of issues which may indicate changes in the food security status of a given population including:

- high infant mortality and morbidity rates;
- low school attendance rates;
- low birth weights;
- low literacy rates;
- low vaccination rates for children;
- few or no mechanized agricultural equipment;
- poor rainfall distribution in the last growing season;
- higher than normal level of out-migration;
- abnormally high level of wild food consumption;
- deferral or cancellation of ceremonial activities such as marriages, baptisms and funerals.<sup>7</sup>

### **Household Interviews.**

A different perspective can be obtained through individual household interview. OXFAM estimates that, across Africa, women are responsible for over 60% of food production in addition to their role as primary care givers to children and preparers of food. Household interviews may offer the opportunity to question all members of a household—including women—an opportunity which might not present itself if one relies strictly on key informant interviews

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, et al., op. cit.

(there may be few women in positions as technicians and teachers) or open ended group interviews in town (women may be very reluctant to respond to questions and to speak freely when in the presence of men). Potential lines of questioning include those regarding sources of income, consumption habits, migration of family members, family cereal stocks, harvest results, child and maternal health, animal and other asset holdings.

### **Focus Groups**

Women may often be reticent in the presence of their own husband or other male family members during a household interview; it may therefore be desirable to question women in some other forum. Focus groups are conducted with homogeneous groups of people from a village or town (women, artisans, herders, landless) to obtain different perspectives on food security issues.

### **Possible Topics for Inquiry during Field Visits.**

#### **1. Crop Production**

- What are the primary crops in the region?
- What changes in crop mix have occurred this year?
- Why were there delays in planting time this year?
- Changes in area planted, up or down?
- Changes in location of fields, for example, increased planting in lower (depression) areas to compensate for poor rainfall?
- If agricultural inputs are important, were fertilizers, seeds, credit available and was their distribution timely and if not which areas were most affected?
- Are crops developing ahead of or behind what is normal (phenological stage)?
- What were farmers' responses to the late start of agriculturally significant rains?
- Have there been significant breaks in the rains, causing replanting or slowing crop development and in which areas?
- Which areas were adversely affected by excessive rains, washing out of fields, etc.?
- Where have there been significant pest-related problems including grasshoppers, locusts birds, or rats and what has their effect been on crops?
- (After harvest) How many months is (a family's or farmer's) cereal expected to last?
- How did this year's results compare to last year or to "average"?
- How important are vegetable market gardening and other off-season agricultural activities such as recessional or irrigated agriculture?

#### **2. Pastoral/Animal Issues.**

- Where are the most important pasture areas in the region?
- How is the quality of pastures compared to normal?
- Where are the most important watering areas, seasonal lakes in the region and are they filled adequately?
- Where have herders moved their animals and are these normal or unusual/altered paths for this time of year?

- What effect is the arrival of herds in the region from other areas having on indigenous herders and their animals?
  - What unusual animal disease problems have been observed in the region?
  - What effects have brush fires had and in which areas?
3. Market conditions.
- Are markets well stocked in cereals and other staples?
  - Is there a net inflow or outflow of grain?
  - Are prices stable, rising or falling and what does this imply about conditions at this time of year (harvest prospects or results)?
  - What are animal price trends and what are the terms of trade between a sack of grain and a goat and how does that compare to other parts of the country and to normal for this region?
4. Health and Nutrition
- What evidence is there of increased rates of infectious diseases, epidemics (malaria, measles, diarrheal diseases)?
  - Are there unusual increases in malnutrition rates among children (NGO studies or surveillance, local health technicians)?
  - Are there increased problems related to lack of potable water sources?
5. Coping Strategies
- What evidence is there of dietary changes: skipping one or more meals per day by families, decreased dietary variation, switching from preferred to less desirable foods?
  - Are there signs that people are increasing their dependence on wild food collection and consumption?
  - Are the numbers of people seeking off-farm work increasing and are there noticeable changes in petty marketing strategies?
  - Are there indications that increasing numbers of people are seeking loans with relatives or friends or seeking credit?
  - Are sales of goats, sheep and other animals on the increase?
  - Are more men leaving the area in seasonal migration in search of employment, and earlier than usual?
  - Are households beginning to liquidate other household goods and productive assets?
  - Is there evidence of whole families either leaving the area or migrating in (distress migration)?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Frankenburger, op. cit, p.18.

Finally, adequate preparation and also follow-up for field visits are essential and include:

- informing the RFFR and FEWS/W RC (three weeks in advance) of your field travel plans including goals and objectives of the trip, detailed itinerary with proposed dates and areas to be visited, references regarding groups or individuals to be visited;
- making contacts before departure with groups and agencies working in the region(s) to be visited; many groups are in contact by radio with agents in the interior of the country and may be willing to forewarn agents of your visit and highlight trip objectives;
- when travel plans change, to keep the RFFR and/or FEWS/W RC informed of new itinerary;
- after trip, send copies (or summary) of trip report to individuals and organizations who were contacted and interviewed.

As stated at the outset, these recommendations do not exhaust all possible approaches but rather are some general guidelines (which should be built upon and expanded by FFRs with experience in this area) for getting at useful qualitative information which FFRS can use to supplement available quantitative data in their analyses.