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Information for food security planning: asking local people

Case studies from Sudan and Mali

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Information needs for food security planning are typically determined by donors or national government. Whilst the need to promote food security planning at sub-national as well as national level has received attention in recent years, much information collection to support it has been of a top-down data-orientated nature. Huge resources have been invested in 'high tech' methods of collecting information. Satellite imagery is the obvious example. Attempts to find objective indicators to quantify food insecurity have been a driving force. One of the consequences of this has been a tendency to centralise the processes of information collection and analysis and to reduce ground truthing. Information collection is distanced from the very people it is supposed to be about. The complex factors affecting food security are simplified in the pursuit of perfecting techniques to monitor only one or two key factors.

The alternative is a local level, 'low tech' approach to information collection and analysis, designed to tap three highly relevant sources of information:

- information generally available within local communities and upon which they depend;
- purpose-built indigenous information systems, which fulfil a specific function for a particular group (for example, among pastoralists, monitoring-grazing resources and migratory movements); and,
- local key informants.

Some useful work has been done at a local level, setting up exactly these kinds of low profile, people-oriented information systems.

They are more likely to reflect the complexity of the food security situation by incorporating perceptions of local people themselves. They are relatively cheap and simple to operate. This kind of information system is more likely to create the conditions in which interactive planning with local people can take place.

There are two challenges facing such local level 'informal' information systems. Firstly, they are in danger of being taken over by the over-zealous pursuit of 'the single right indicator' of food insecurity. This would compromise the system by over-simplifying and by removing the vital ingredient: flexibility. Secondly, although limited quantification is possible, the output of this kind of information system is predominantly qualitative. Yet the donors and government demand 'hard' quantitative data to make decisions about food security planning. If the bogus quantification which characterises many top-down information systems is imposed in this kind of local level information system, much of the system's usefulness would be undermined.

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