

# **EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme**

**Distance Learning to Support Capacity Building and Training  
for National and Local Food Security Information Systems  
and Networks**

## **FOOD SECURITY CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS**

### **LESSON 1. WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?**

#### **NOTE**

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.

## OBJECTIVES

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

- define food security as a broad concept used to determine people's general well-being;
- understand four key dimensions used to analyze people's food security status; and
- appreciate how the duration and severity of people's food insecurity status may vary.



## INTRODUCTION



This course is about how decision making in the formulation and implementation of food security policies, strategies and action can be strengthened based on relevant information about people's food security status. The overall theme is about linking food security information to action.

As a starting point, we will **clarify and define the concept of food security**.

We will then examine what is unique about a food security approach to decision-making and achieving development objectives.



## DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

How would you define **food security**?



You may already be an experienced professional with knowledge of what food security is. However, depending on your professional background and the context that you work in, your opinion on action needed to achieve food security will most likely differ.

This is because, while **food security is a multi-dimensional concept**, we usually specialize in addressing one aspect of the larger food security problem.

Agricultural production, trade, income, food quality, clean water, sanitation, governance and political stability are all factors influencing one's food security status.

It is useful to step back from our own personal experience and examine the multi-dimensional nature of the food security concept.

## DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY



The concept of food security has evolved significantly over time. The definition of food security used in this course is the one adopted at the **1996 World Food Summit** held in Rome.

This definition, which has been formally endorsed at the global level, reads as follows:



### FOOD SECURITY

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

This definition introduces four main **dimensions** of food security:



Physical **AVAILABILITY** of food

Economic and physical **ACCESS** to food

Food **UTILIZATION**

**STABILITY** of the other three dimensions over time

Let's look at the meaning of each of these terms.

### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

One way to understand these four dimensions of the broad food security concept is to examine how the meaning and common understanding of food security has evolved over time.



In modern times the interest in “food security” was reignited following the **world food crisis of 1972-74**. The crisis originated from a combination of factors, including adverse conditions in several parts of the world, which reduced global grain supplies. Subsequently, a dramatic increase in demand for grain imports doubled international grain prices, which threatened the food security status of food importing nations.

As a result, the first World Food Conference held in 1974 focused on the problem of **global production, trade and stocks**. Hence, the original food security debate focused on adequate supply of food and ensuring stability of these supplies through food reserves.

Subsequent food security efforts focused primarily on food production and storage mechanisms to offset fluctuations in global supply and ensure the ability to import food when needed.

**Food availability** addresses the “supply side” of food security and is determined by the level of food production, stock levels and net trade.

### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

However, it became obvious that an adequate supply of food at the national or international level does not in itself guarantee household level food security.

For example, the Green Revolution in Asia of the 1960s and 1970s, with its package of improved seeds, farm technology, better irrigation and chemical fertilizers, was highly successful at augmenting food supplies, but this was not automatically translated into improvements in food security of all people.

This insight highlighted the problem of a lack of **effective demand**.

From the early 1980's, the importance of **food access** was increasingly recognized as a key determinant of food security.

Hence, food production is just one of several means that people have to acquire the food that they need.

 **Other means to access food**



Concerns about **insufficient food access** have resulted in a greater policy focus on incomes and expenditure in achieving food security objectives.

This has brought food security closer to the **poverty reduction** agenda.

#### Other means to access food



Food can be accessed through trade, barter, collection of wild foods and community support networks; it can also be received as a gift (or even through theft).

Remember that access to food is influenced by market factors and the price of food as well as an individual's purchasing power, which is related to employment and livelihood opportunities.

#### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

A third dimension – **food utilization** – has become increasingly prominent in food security discussions since the 1990s. Utilization is commonly understood as the way the body makes the most of various nutrients in the food. This food security dimension is determined primarily by people's health status.

General hygiene and sanitation, water quality, health care practices and food safety and quality are determinants of good food utilization by the body.

Sufficient energy and nutrient intake by individuals is the result of good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of the diet and intra-household distribution of food. Combined with good biological utilization of food consumed, this determines the nutritional status of individuals.

Food security was traditionally perceived as consuming sufficient protein and energy (**food quantity**). The importance of micro-nutrients for a balanced and nutritious diet (**food quality**) is now well appreciated.



### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

The phrase "all people, at all times" is integral to the definition of food security, and is key to achieving national food security objectives.

#### "All people"



Different people are food secure to varying degrees and will be affected by adverse events differently. We must assess variations in food security status between different groups of people. Most commonly, humanitarian and development agencies differentiate between groups according to their main livelihood (source of food or income), in addition to other factors such as geographical location and wealth.

#### "All times"



This recognizes that people's food security situation may change. Even if your food intake is adequate today, you are still considered to be food insecure if you have inadequate access to food on a periodic basis, risking a deterioration of your nutritional status. Adverse weather conditions (drought, floods), political instability (social unrest), or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices) may impact on your food security status.

The phrase "at all times" refers to the **stability** dimension of food security. It emphasizes the importance of having to reduce the risk of adverse effects on the other three dimensions: food availability, access to food or food utilization.

### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY

Let us go back to our original definition and see whether we can match up the statements in the definition with the four dimensions of food security.



Click on the image to review the definition

Dimensions	Definition	
AVAILABILITY		"all people, at all times"
ACCESS		"physical and economic access"
UTILIZATION		"sufficient food"
STABILITY		"safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs"

Click on each option and drag it to the correct box.  
Then, click on Check Answer.



#### FOOD SECURITY

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

#### DEFINITION OF FOOD SECURITY



The realization of the importance of each dimension has added value to our earlier understanding. For food security objectives to be realized, all four dimensions must be **fulfilled simultaneously**.

For example, while there has been a growing realization of the importance of the food **access** dimension, it has not displaced earlier concerns about adequate food **availability**. Even if people have money, if there is no food available in the market, people are at risk of food insecurity.

Similarly, the importance of food **utilization** has further enriched our understanding. Food security is not just about quantity of food consumed, but also about quality, and that your body must be healthy to enable the nutrients to be absorbed.

Finally, these three dimensions should be **stable** over time and not be affected negatively by natural, social, economic or political factors.

**DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY**



Let us now look at aspects of the nature of **food insecurity**. There are important differences in how the **duration and severity** of food insecurity impact on people's lives. Understanding these variations is important since various factors influence the choice of intervention to address food insecurity concerns. A specific vocabulary has been developed to describe the duration of food insecurity and the severity of the level of food insecurity.

**DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY**

**DURATION**



Let's look first at **duration**. Not all households or people suffer inadequate food consumption for the same period of time. This may vary from a short-term experience to a life long condition.

However, food security analysts have found it helpful to define two general types of food insecurity:

**Chronic food insecurity**



Chronic food insecurity is taken as long-term or persistent. It occurs when people are unable to meet their minimum food requirements over a sustained period of time.

**Transitory food insecurity**



Transitory food insecurity is short-term and temporary. It refers to a sudden drop in the ability to produce or access enough food to maintain a good nutritional status.

### DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY

In addition to the observable differences in duration, chronic and transitory food insecurity are also distinguished by the **different causes**.



Chronic food insecurity is often the result of extended periods of poverty, lack of assets and inadequate access to productive or financial resources.



Conversely, transitory food insecurity is primarily caused by short-term shocks and fluctuations in food availability and food access, including year-to-year variations in domestic food production, food prices and household incomes.

### DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY

The distinction between different causes is useful, as the two forms of food insecurity demand **different response measures**.



Chronic food insecurity can be overcome with typical long term development measures also used to address poverty, such as education or access to productive resources, such as credit.

On the other hand, chronically food insecure people may need more direct access to food to enable them to raise their productive capacity.



Conversely, transitory food insecurity is relatively unpredictable and can emerge suddenly.

This unpredictability makes planning and programming more difficult and requires different capacities and types of intervention, including early warning capacity and safety net programmes.

**DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY**

A number of definitions of chronic and transitory food insecurity are provided below. Please review each one and decide whether it refers to chronic or transitory food insecurity.

Definition	Duration
Occurs when there is a temporary inability to meet food needs, usually associated with a specific shock or stress such as drought, floods or civil unrest.	<input type="text" value="CHRONIC"/>  <input type="text" value="TRANSITORY"/>
A persistent inability to meet minimum nutrient intake requirements.	
The sudden reduction of a household's access to food to below the nutritionally adequate level.	
When a household is unable to meet the food requirements of its members over a long period of time.	
A consequence of diets persistently inadequate in terms of quantity and/or quality, resulting from household poverty.	
Affects households that are able to meet their minimum food needs at normal times, but are unable to do so after a shock.	

*Click on each option and drag it to the correct box.  
Then, click on Check Answer.*

**ANSWER**

Chronic	"A persistent inability to meet minimum nutrient intake requirements"  "When a household is unable to meet the food requirements of its members over a long period of time"  "A consequence of diets persistently inadequate in terms of quantity and/or quality, resulting from household poverty"
Transitory	"Occurs when there is a temporary inability to meet food needs, usually associated with a specific shock or stress such as drought, floods or civil unrest"  "The sudden reduction of a household's access to food to below the nutritionally adequate level"  "Affects households that are able to meet their minimum food needs at normal times, but are unable to do so after a shock"

### DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY



An intermediate type of food insecurity is **seasonal food insecurity**.

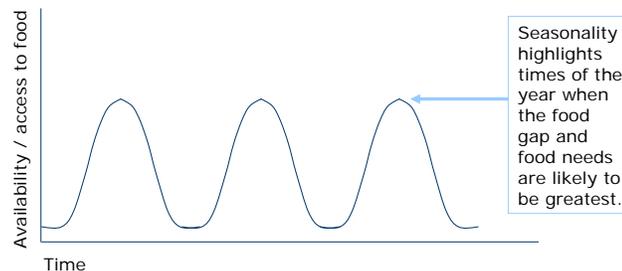
Seasonal food insecurity occurs when there is a **cyclical pattern** of inadequate availability and access to food. This is associated with seasonal fluctuations in the climate, cropping patterns, work opportunities (labour demand) and/or prevalence of diseases.

For example, food shortages may occur in the pre-harvest period, when on-farm stocks are depleted and other sources of food (e.g. wild foods) are not available. In rural communities it is common to talk of "hungry periods" and "periods of plenty" related to the agricultural calendar and/or cyclical availability of employment.

### DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY

The concept of seasonal food security falls between chronic and transitory food insecurity. It is similar to chronic food insecurity as it is usually predictable and follows a sequence of known events.

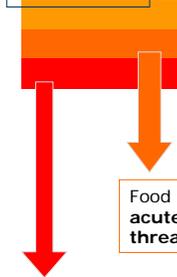
However, as seasonal food insecurity is of limited duration it can also be seen as a recurrent, transitory food insecurity.



Recognizing the appropriate duration of food insecurity has policy and programme implications. Also, to adequately assess food security, where seasonality is an important factor, it may be necessary to compare food security indicators not only against annual averages, but with reference to a baseline for the **same season (or month) in previous years**.

## DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY

### SEVERITY



When analyzing food insecurity, it is not enough to know the duration of the problem that people are experiencing, but also **how intense or severe** the impact of the identified problem is on the overall food security and nutrition status.

This knowledge will influence the nature, extent and urgency of the assistance needed by affected population groups.

Food security analysts/professionals may use the term **acute food insecurity** to describe a **severe and life threatening situation**.

The most extreme situations, usually associated with substantial loss of life will warrant the description of **famine**.

Different 'scales' or 'phases' to 'grade' or 'classify' food security have been developed by food security analysts using different indicators and cut-off points or 'benchmarks'.

Let's look at a few examples. At this point, we are not interested in the precise thresholds, but rather in the classes and the general indicators used.

### Lack of a commonly used scale

Despite the importance of accurately describing the intensity of food insecurity, there is as yet no commonly used scale. In the absence of this information it is very hard to **compare** the severity of different food security crises.

This in turn makes it hard to prioritize between different contexts and respond proportionately to needs. Consequently there are continuing efforts to reach agreement on a common scale.

**DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY**



The intensity of food insecurity may be measured in terms of levels of food intake. One option is to relate the severity of food insecurity to how consumption falls below a threshold of 2,100 kcal per day:

Food security status	Indicators
Food secure	Energy intake (measured in kilocalories)
Mild food insecurity	
Moderate food insecurity	
Severe food insecurity	

The measure for **hunger** compiled by FAO, defined as **undernourishment**, refers to the **proportion** of the population whose dietary energy consumption is less than a pre-determined threshold.

People suffering from undernourishment are referred to as the **undernourished**.

Besides being a measure of **hunger**, the undernourished are also referred to as suffering from **food deprivation**.

**DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY**

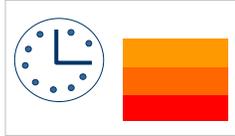


Another example is the **Integrated Food Security and Humanitarian Phase Classification Framework**.

This provides a classification system for food security and humanitarian crises based on a range of livelihood needs:

Phase classification	Indicators
Generally food secure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crude Mortality Rate</li> <li>• Malnutrition prevalence</li> <li>• Food Access/ Availability</li> <li>• Dietary Diversity</li> <li>• Water Access/Availability</li> <li>• Coping strategies</li> <li>• Livelihood Assets</li> </ul>
Chronically food insecure	
Acute food and livelihood crisis	
Humanitarian emergency	
Famine / humanitarian catastrophe	

## DURATION AND SEVERITY OF FOOD INSECURITY



You have seen how the duration and severity of food insecurity are commonly described.

Let's answer the following question before concluding this lesson.

In your opinion, can **transitory** food insecurity and **acute** food insecurity be used as synonyms?

- Yes  
 No

*Please select your option*

## SUMMARY

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

From this definition four main **dimensions** of food security can be identified:

- physical **availability** of food
- economic and physical **access** to food
- adequate food **utilization**
- **stability** of the other three dimensions over time

There are also important differences in the **duration** and **severity** of the way in which people experience food insecurity.

Understanding the various dimensions of food security is important when establishing priorities in food security policy and programme formulation, making long term investment decisions, and in evaluating response options when responding to food emergencies.

**IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE...**

**Online resources**

FAO (1996) World Food Summit: Rome Declaration and Plan of Action. October 1996. [www.fao.org/wfs](http://www.fao.org/wfs)

FAO (2006) Integrated Food Security and Humanitarian Phase Classification (IPC) Framework, ESA Policy Brief, 06-01. [ftp://ftp.fao.org/es/ESA/policybriefs/pb\\_01.pdf](ftp://ftp.fao.org/es/ESA/policybriefs/pb_01.pdf)

WFP (2005) Emergency Food Security Assessment Handbook. [www.wfp.org/operations/emergency\\_needs/EFSA\\_section1.pdf](http://www.wfp.org/operations/emergency_needs/EFSA_section1.pdf)

**Additional reading**

Sen, A.K. (1981) Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Stamoulis K., Zezza A. (2003). A Conceptual Framework for National Agricultural, Rural Development, and Food Security Strategies and Policies, Working Paper 03-17, ESA Division, FAO.

Devereux, S. (2006) Distinguishing between chronic and transitory food insecurity in emergency needs assessments. SENAC, WFP, Rome.