



## Technical Note 7

### Voices of the Hungry: Where in the World Is Food Insecurity More Severe?

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Members of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) have no doubts: assessing the extent of food insecurity in the world at the necessary level of detail has proven to be, thus far, a daunting task. The main reason for such a state of affairs is that any reliable measure not of the simple presence but of the *distribution* and *severity* of food insecurity requires information at the household or the individual level. Research is continuing in several directions toward improving collection of food consumption data through large-scale national household surveys.<sup>1,2</sup> The possibility of making these types of endeavors the basis for a regular and timely assessment of food insecurity in the world, however, remains hindered by the significant financial, human, and time resources needed to implement and sustain such data collection efforts.

Voices of the Hungry is an initiative that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and its partners<sup>3</sup> have launched to fill this gap, and it entails a change in perspective in tackling the food security measurement problem. Rather than measuring the consequences of food insecurity in terms of what people eat (analysis of food consumption data), the *severity of food insecurity* is measured by asking people directly about their food-related behaviors in the face of restricted access to food. Though it cannot be directly observed, its extent can be inferred from the lived experiences of food-insecure people themselves.

The practice of measuring food insecurity through experience-based scales has been regularly applied in the assessment of food insecurity in US households since 1995, using the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM).<sup>4</sup> The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), being developed by FAO, builds on both the content and experience of the HFSSM and of similar tools,<sup>5</sup> with the addition of having developed an analytic framework to allow comparability in the measures even when slightly different versions of the tools are employed in different countries.

Another innovation brought about by Voices of the Hungry is to measure food insecurity at the *individual* rather than the household level, which will allow, for example, to understand how the dynamics of food insecurity may affect men and women differently, leading to more precise programs and policies to reduce food insecurity in the population.

Voices of the Hungry has two major interlinked objectives:

1. The establishment of a valid global standard for measuring the *severity* of food insecurity based on people's self-reported experiences of food hardships, which might be used throughout the world in

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<sup>1</sup> Jones AD, Ngure FM, Pelto G, Young SL. What are we assessing when we measure food security? a compendium and review of current metrics. *AdvNutr* September 2013;4(5):481–505.

<sup>2</sup> de Weerd Joachim, Kathleen Beegle, Jed Friedman, and John Gibson. *The Challenge of Measuring Hunger*. Policy Research Working Paper No 6736. The World Bank Development Research Group. Poverty and Inequality Team. January 2014. <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-6736>.

<sup>3</sup> The project is implemented by FAO with financial support from the governments of the United Kingdom and of the Kingdom of Belgium. Global data collection is conducted in partnership with the Gallup World Poll.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Household Food Insecure Access Scale<sup>5</sup> and the Latin American and Caribbean Food Security Scale. <http://www.fantaproject.org/and> <http://www.rlc.fao.org/es/publicaciones/elcsla/>.

different contexts and at various scales of application (national assessment, program monitoring, impact assessment, and so forth)

2. The application of the FIES at the national level in more than 150 countries annually, to produce comparable indicators on the prevalence of food insecurity of individuals at moderate and severe levels, to be integrated in the suite of indicators that FAO publishes every year with *State of Food Insecurity in the World (SOFI)*.

The severity of food insecurity is measured on a quantitative scale, reflecting a continuum ranging from food security to severe food insecurity. Surveyed individuals in a sample are assigned a measure on the scale to produce globally comparable country profiles of food insecurity at various levels of severity.

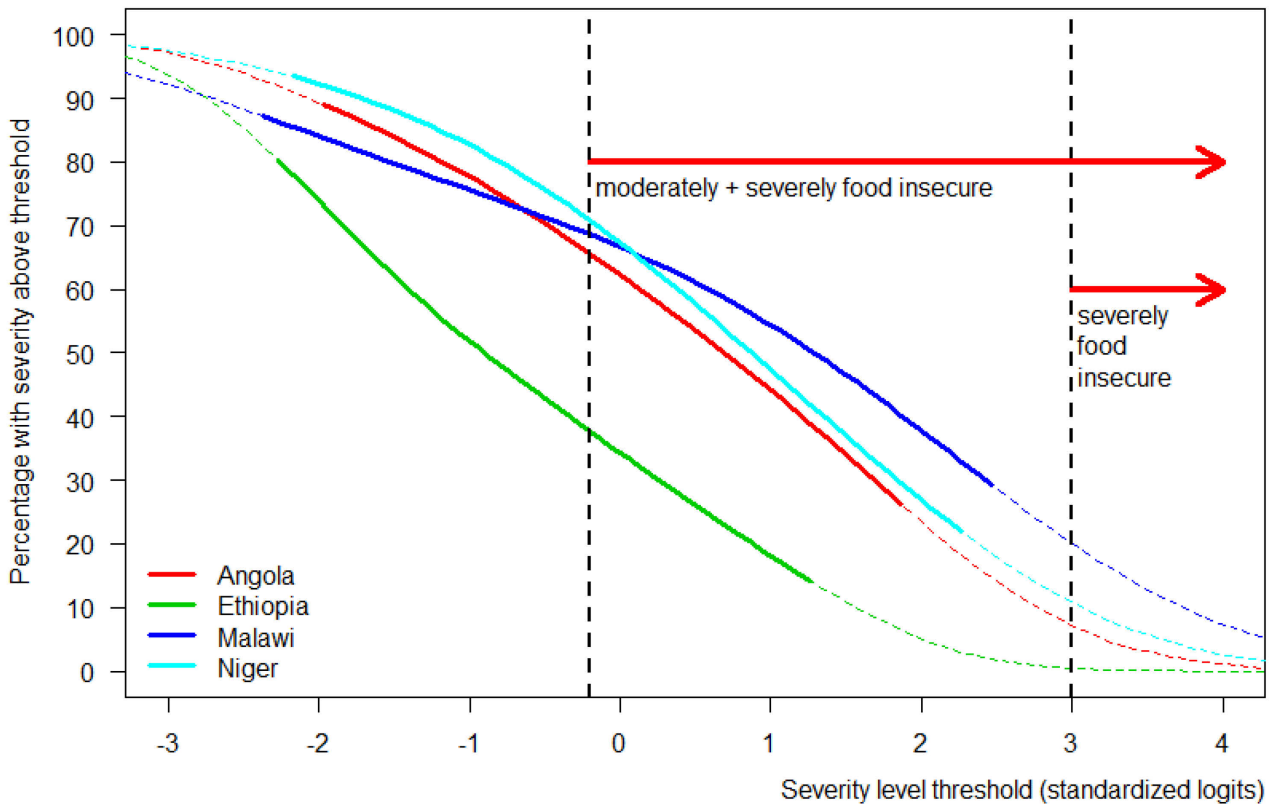
The Voices of the Hungry project started in 2013 to pilot an initial version of the FIES in Angola, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Niger to validate the effectiveness of the measurement tool and of the data collection vehicle. Results have revealed the suitability of the data collection vehicle and the robustness of the analytic methods used to obtain the measures of food insecurity.

Figure 1 shows provisional food insecurity severity profiles compiled using FIES data from these four pilot surveys. The vertical axis in the diagram indicates the estimated percentage of individuals in the national adult population who have experienced food insecurity at a level of severity equal to or greater than the one measured on the horizontal axis, which indicates possible values of thresholds on a scale of severity that is rigorously comparable across countries. For example, with these provisional data and thresholds, about 70 percent of the adults in Malawi, Angola, and Niger and about 40 percent of adults in Ethiopia would be classified as having experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The thresholds drawn in the figure are hypothetical and are only intended to illustrate the use of the profiles. When data from a larger number of countries from different regions of the world are available by the end of 2014, the standard scale will be recalibrated and common thresholds for classification into different levels will be defined for global application.

### Food insecurity Profiles: Angola, Ethiopia, Malawi and Niger, 2013



Provisional results. The standard scale of severity and the threshold positions will be recalibrated when data from more countries from all regions in the world will be available in 2014

The solid part of the curves reflects the range of severity that the current version of the FIES has been able to cover. The extended dotted parts are obtained by making reasonable assumptions on the distribution of severity among respondents who reported all eight food-insecure conditions, but this part of the diagram is subject to projection errors. These preliminary analyses reveal that the current version of the FIES may not adequately capture the most severe range of food insecurity.

With the support of UK and Belgium, in 2014 the project has become operational at the global level, with the necessary data collection extended to 152 countries for the first year, and a commitment to continue in 2015. At the same time, FAO has initiated extension and training activities for professionals throughout the world, to transfer ownership of experience-based food insecurity theory, methodologies, and tools. The current plan is to continue the two parallel activities of data collection and capacity development for five years, after which countries should have the capacity to produce the data and indicators for global as well as national monitoring on their own.