



Regional Policy Dialogue on Early Warning Early Action Mechanisms for the Prevention of Food Crises

A regional policy dialogue on early warning and early action mechanisms for the prevention of food crises was held in Accra, Ghana on 5 September 2019 to share challenges, lessons learned, and ways to improve these mechanisms. The event brought together more than 40 stakeholders from regional and international development agencies, government, civil society, and academia from Africa and abroad. Hosted by IFPRI through the Food Security Portal (FSP), the policy dialogue took place during the [African Green Revolution Forum 2019](#) (AGRF). It was made possible by the [European Union](#) through its funding of the FSP.

The FSP [Hub for Early Warning Systems](#) was launched during the event, and the participants were introduced to the work of the [Global Network Against Food Crises](#) (GNAFC). Key stakeholders from the region shared insights on the importance of existing EWEA systems for their national contexts and on where improvements are needed. The policy dialogue concluded with a roundtable discussion and a wrap-up of key messages for improving EWEA systems.

Setting the context - the need for improved early warning early action mechanisms

More than 113 million people across 53 countries experienced acute hunger in 2018. The main drivers of this hunger included conflict and insecurity, climate shocks, and economic shocks. Shenggen Fan, IFPRI Director General at the time, emphasized the need to improve early warning systems and other tools to prevent food crisis, as the challenges will most likely continue in the years to come. Currently, the standard for identifying food crises and their drivers is based on the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) and the Cadre Harmonisé (CH), both of which were highlighted in the dialogue. These mechanisms measure acute food insecurity using on-the-ground quantitative and qualitative information and serve to inform the early warning systems of FAO, WFP, CILSS, and other GNAFC members.

While the quality of such early warning systems has improved, there remain important information gaps that hamper timely responses to actual and potential food crises. The dialogue responded to two urgent needs. One involves improving the availability of data and analysis. Another relates to developing the understanding of regional and country-level demands for policy support to address food crises. The regional policy dialogue spurred discussion along these lines and yielded a number of policy-relevant outputs.

The FSP Hub for Early Warning System Hub for the prevention of food crisis

In his presentation of the features of the Early Warning Systems hub and the control panel of risk factors in the Food Security Portal, Rob Vos, Director of IFPRI's Markets, Trade and institutions Division,

emphasized the objective of the portal to more accurately detect the risk of food crisis by monitoring the various risk factors that drive crises.

Robert Schiliro, who spoke on behalf of the European Commission Ambassador to Ghana, expressed the continued support of the EU for the Global Network Against Food Crisis and for the Food Security Portal. He also emphasized the importance of partnerships and dialogues among donor agencies and stakeholders to transform data and information into early action to address food insecurity and food crisis.

Engaging local stakeholders is key

The importance of involving local capacity in information-gathering and decision-making was highlighted by a number of speakers. Gerardine Mukeshimana, Minister of Agriculture and Animal Resources of Rwanda, emphasized the importance of involving countries in data collection so that all stakeholders have the same information, and she highlighted the usefulness of the FSP Early Warning System Hub in this regard. Dominique Burgeon, Director of Emergencies at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, echoed this comment, stressing the need for country involvement in early warning early action. Mahalmoudou Hamadoun, representing the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), shared how the process of validating data at the national level is key in informing early action. In recounting CILSS' experience with the development and testing of the Cadre Harmonise, he emphasized the importance of coordination and consensus among the many actors and countries that work together for effective early warning early action.

Minister Mukeshimana also shared how her country deals with climate and price shocks. A number of approaches were highlighted, including public investment in resilience-enhancing technologies, linking of farmers to the market through the East African Commodity Exchange and thereby minimizing food price volatility, and social protection programs to improve food access.

Resilience often does not feature in food security data because such indicators are underdeveloped. In addition to further developing such indicators, Sheryl Hendriks, Professor of Food Security at the University of Pretoria, highlighted the importance of engaging with local stakeholders and developing close in-country linkages for achieving better information on resilience.

Translating early warning into early action

A clear message that emerged from the discussion was that early warning is only valuable when it is linked to early action. Citing risk governance, Burgeon emphasized the need for policies and financing to implement early action. Participants stressed that early action is different from early response in that it is anticipatory. For this, a toolbox of potential early actions is needed, a knowledge base that is being developed at the FAO.

Early action was framed as a good investment but one that can be difficult to justify given that a crisis might fail to materialize. Vos highlighted the paradoxical goal of pursuing prediction mechanisms that are so effective that they can be proven wrong by effective early action. This makes arguing for more funding and focus on early action challenging, as it is easier to justify responding to an actual crisis. Two approaches for addressing this issue were identified. First was the concept of *no regrets investments*, whereby investing in early warning early action is seen as useful even without a crisis since building resilience among the population is positive regardless of the occurrence of a crisis. Second was the economic argument that preventative actions bring a far greater return on investment compared to no

action. FAO's work on documenting the return on investment of specific early actions was highlighted. The need for cross-ministerial collaboration and involvement of the highest levels of government was also emphasized as essential for early action to be realized.

Social protection was discussed as an important component of early action and resilience to shocks. FAO's work on safety nets that are responsive to shocks was highlighted, and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) were mentioned as an example. Sir Gordon Conway, Professor of International Development at Imperial College, stressed the importance of diversity in sources of income and livelihoods to foster resilience to shocks. Although the importance of improving technology for EWEA was recognized, the dialogue made clear that the human capital component should not be overlooked. There should be partnership between technology and humans: not just hi-tech but "hu-tech"

Summary of Key Takeaways:

1. The technical challenge. Information has to be of high quality to foster informed decisions. There is need for granularity in the data beyond the national level to get a sense of the situation on the ground. Real-time, reliable weather data is important and is increasingly recognized by institutions in the region. The African Union has defined access to weather systems as being of strategic importance in Africa. This data must be communicated in a way that is relevant and understandable for decision-makers.
2. The institutional challenge. A consolidated communication channel for EWEA would be more effective than the current patchwork approach, which leads to confusion and slows down responses. The FSP and GNAFC play a role in this.
3. Financing early warning early action. Constantly monitoring and preparing for the next crisis requires resources. These costs can be difficult to justify, so proper communication on the importance of funding is key. The concepts of *no regrets investment* and *no regrets data* were introduced during the dialogue.
4. Accountability. When slow responses to crises bring no consequences for those in charge, people are likely to remain vulnerable. There is a role for engaging journalists and the media so that speed of response or action can be monitored.
5. Consensus-based EWEA. Having a consensus-based approach to measuring and responding to the drivers of food crises across countries and contexts improves the ability of governments to respond to crises.
6. In-country stakeholder involvement in EWEA. In-country stakeholders should be at the center of EWEA mechanisms to improve information flows, preparedness, and response times.
7. The importance of human capital in EWEA. Advances in early warning technologies and data must be matched by developing capacity within institutions at the country and regional level to transform warnings into preventative actions.