



An Integrated Framework for Classifying Food Security Phases through Seven Defining Characteristics

Nicole Faddy*

Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Kyoto International University, Kyoto, Japan

DESCRIPTION

Food security describes a condition in which individuals and households have dependable access to sufficient, safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. Assessing food security requires attention to more than food availability because access, consumption, livelihoods, nutrition and stability can vary substantially between households and across time. An integrated phase classification framework can organize these conditions into meaningful stages, helping distinguish relatively secure circumstances from increasingly severe forms of deprivation. Food insecurity commonly develops as a continuum rather than appearing at one clearly defined point. Households may first experience uncertainty about obtaining adequate food. As pressures increase, they may reduce dietary variety, purchase less preferred foods, decrease portion sizes or skip meals. Continued deterioration can force families to sell productive assets, borrow money, reduce essential expenditures or adopt other strategies that weaken their future capacity to obtain food. A phase-based framework captures these progressive changes and creates a consistent way to describe their severity.

The first defining characteristic is adequate food availability. A population needs sufficient quantities of food to satisfy energy and nutritional requirements. Agricultural production, food stocks, trade, markets and humanitarian supplies can influence the amount of food available. However, adequate food supplies at the regional or national level do not guarantee that individual households can obtain what they need. Availability is therefore a fundamental component, but it must be considered alongside access. The second characteristic is physical and economic access. People need practical opportunities and sufficient resources to obtain food through household production, markets, employment, social assistance or community networks. Income, food prices, transportation, infrastructure and employment opportunities can strongly influence access. A household may live in an area with well-stocked markets but still experience food insecurity if its purchasing power is insufficient.

The third characteristic involves food consumption and dietary quality. Food security requires more than adequate calories. A healthy diet depends on sufficient protein, vitamins, minerals, fats, carbohydrates and dietary variety. Economic difficulties can encourage households to replace nutritious foods with inexpensive alternatives, resulting in monotonous diets. Changes in meal frequency, food preferences and dietary diversity can therefore provide valuable indications of deteriorating food security. The fourth characteristic is the use and severity of coping strategies. When access to food becomes difficult, households often adjust their behavior to manage immediate shortages. They may reduce portion sizes, skip meals, borrow food, purchase on credit or prioritize children and other vulnerable members. More serious conditions may lead to the sale of livestock, equipment, land or other productive resources. The nature of these responses can indicate whether a household is managing a temporary difficulty or experiencing a deeper crisis.

The fifth characteristic is the protection of livelihoods. Food security depends on a household's ability to maintain the resources required to obtain food in the future. Temporary coping measures may help families overcome short-term difficulties without damaging their productive capacity. In contrast, selling essential assets or abandoning income-generating activities can provide immediate relief while increasing long-term vulnerability. Protecting livelihoods is therefore central to preventing temporary food insecurity from becoming chronic deprivation. The sixth characteristic is the nutritional and health effect of inadequate food access. Persistent shortages can contribute to weight loss, micronutrient deficiencies, weakened immune function and impaired physical development. Children, older people, pregnant individuals and those with limited access to healthcare may face greater consequences. Nutrition-related outcomes can therefore indicate that food insecurity has progressed beyond reduced purchasing power and is beginning to affect physical well-being.

Correspondence to: Nicole Faddy, Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Kyoto International University, Kyoto, Japan, Email: nicole.faddy@kiu.ac.jp

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The seventh characteristic is the stability and duration of food access. A short disruption caused by a temporary market problem differs substantially from prolonged deprivation lasting across multiple seasons. Drought, flooding, conflict, displacement, economic instability and sudden price increases can repeatedly disrupt food access. Considering duration, recurrence and the ability to recover helps distinguish temporary shocks from persistent conditions requiring sustained support. When these seven characteristics are considered together, food security becomes a multidimensional and dynamic concept.

Availability, access, consumption, coping behavior, livelihood protection, nutritional effects and stability provide complementary information rather than functioning as isolated indicators. This integrated perspective can help decision-makers identify the nature and severity of food insecurity and determine whether responses should emphasize immediate food assistance, income support, nutritional services, market interventions or livelihood protection. Phase-based classification can provide a more detailed picture by recognizing that households may occupy different positions along the food security continuum.