

## About Briefs

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## Abstract

This brief reviews the Integrated Food Security and Humanitarian Phase Classification (IPC). This is a system for defining the severity of a situation (from 'generally food secure' to 'humanitarian catastrophe'), based on a wide range of indicators of the impact of hazard events on human health and welfare. It integrates food security, nutrition and livelihoods information into a clear statement about the severity of a crisis with the aim of eliciting more timely responses that match local needs. There is a long established need to generate comparable analysis of current levels of food insecurity and this information can better guide the allocation of humanitarian resources either globally, nationally or regionally. The IPC is being seen as a major step forward in improving food security information systems and response mechanisms to addressing hunger and vulnerability. However, set against this are a number of significant weaknesses in the IPC. It is generally accepted that the IPC is at the piloting stage, and it is important that these issues are addressed before it can be realistically rolled out fully.

## A Review of the Integrated Food Security and Phase Classification (IPC)

The Integrated Food Security and Phase Classification, or IPC, brings together a number of distinct elements, namely:

- *A Situation Analysis* of the severity, causes, and magnitude of the problem
- *Early Warning Levels* to identify trends
- *Cartographic Protocols* to communicate to decision makers both the phase and trend
- *A Strategic Response Framework* that links the analysis to response recommendations.

Each of these components has been considered, looking at both strengths and weaknesses of the approach and suggesting ways of addressing a number of the perceived weaknesses. This brief is a summary of these findings, of which a full report is now available on [www.wahenga.net](http://www.wahenga.net).

## Strengths and weaknesses of the IPC

Perhaps the most significant strength of the IPC is the attempt to systematise the situation analysis. There is a long established need to generate comparable analysis of current levels of food insecurity. This information can better guide the allocation of humanitarian resources either globally, nationally or regionally and can be used to improve accountability. The question of comparability is particularly critical to the international humanitarian community.

There have been a number of recent attempts to generate such scales, however, none have developed the same level of momentum as the IPC.

The process of generating the situation analysis is generally positively perceived because it is rigorous and evidence based and the judgments are underpinned by reference to explicit standards. However, it does not rely on rigid thresholds, but rather, on a convergence of analysis. It is a consensual process because the analysis is carried out through a partnership of organisations and individuals and it seeks to make the best use of the available data, rather than imposing a requirement for large amounts of additional data collection.

The process is seen to be transparent and given the serious constraints to food security analysis - of both data and method - transparency is critical in building the credibility of the results. The underlying data, confidence in this data and assumptions are open to scrutiny and it is methodologically neutral. The process can draw on the outputs of diverse analytical processes.

The IPC reports both the current food security situation (using outcome indicators) and early warning of anticipated changes (using trend or process indicators). The situation and trend information is then explicitly linked to response recommendations. The recommendations span the dimensions of saving lives, protecting livelihoods and longer-term development options. Finally, the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) maps provides information that is clearly understandable by decision makers.

Collectively, these advantages provide the potential for taking an important step forward. However, set against this are a number of significant weaknesses in the IPC. It is generally accepted that the IPC is at the piloting stage and it is important that these issues are addressed before it can realistically be rolled out fully.

Overall, the general support for a better situation analysis is contrasted against a much more ambivalent opinion on the utility of the strategic response framework. The current response analysis framework offered by the IPC is relatively general, with the main difference between the phases being the scale and urgency of the intervention, rather than the type of intervention per se. This is because the most appropriate type of intervention depends not upon the phase, but on the specific circumstances of a situation, that is, the specifics of the hazard to which people have been exposed, the nature of their vulnerability to that hazard, the losses they have experienced as a result, and the opportunities that exist for recovery. For example, it is not the phase that will determine the appropriateness of a seeds and tools intervention, but whether or not people are short of these items and whether or not they have the opportunity to use them.

While there is agreement that, generally speaking, the current analysis of response options is extremely weak, it may be best to address this problem outside of the IPC, while concentrating on using the IPC to generate consensus on the situation analysis which is the system's obvious strength. While better response planning is critical, there is a risk that attempting too much within the context of the IPC may discredit the whole system.

Despite the intention of generating a broad based response, the nature of the IPC tends towards eliciting a symptomatic response to the highest priority crises. There is a particular danger that the analysis will not promote disaster risk reduction initiatives.

It is also ambitious to use an IPC type analysis as a platform to investigate the causal factors of underlying food insecurity. This is a highly complex process that requires specific skills and the integration of poverty indices (which are currently missing) and may be better addressed through periodic baseline type analyses.

Critically, the IPC per se does not address any of the fundamental problems that have bedevilled food security information systems over the last 20 years. The quality of the analysis ultimately remains dependent on the quality of the data. Access to timely and accurate secondary data is hugely problematic. Equally, the quality of the product depends on the quality of the analysts. However, much as the IPC tries to systematise the process of analysis and given the hugely different national contexts, there will inevitably be a large subjective

element in the final outputs. The IPC analysis is better characterised as a convergence of analysis, rather than a convergence of evidence.

The counter-argument is that the transparency of the IPC offers the opportunity to highlight deficiencies in the data, which should form a basis for advocating improvements in the availability and quality of data over time.

One requirement - if analyses from different countries are to be comparable - is that the analysts must share the same conceptual frameworks, that is, they must have the same general understanding of food security, livelihoods, vulnerability and so forth, and how these link to one another<sup>1</sup>. If this does not exist, then it implies a need for preparatory training and capacity building.

In relation to early warning, a critical weakness is that the analysis of vulnerability is implicit in the IPC, not explicit. The IPC incorporates two types of indicators, namely; outcome and process. Process indicators provide information on the hazard while outcome indicators capture effects on human health and welfare. Vulnerability (i.e. the ability to cope with a particular hazard) is not included explicitly in the framework. Rather, it is assumed that national experts will have a good understanding of local patterns of livelihood and vulnerability and will be able to factor this correctly into the analysis. This has implications not just in relation to early warning, but also in relation to needs assessment and the identification of the most appropriate types of intervention. It is important to find ways of including vulnerability more explicitly in the analysis (e.g. through the use of household economy analysis).

The point is that - in common with many other information system initiatives of the last 20 years - there is the risk that donor investments in the IPC may simply divert attention and resources from addressing the real data, analytical and institutional constraints. There is also the classic danger that the IPC may generate a false level of confidence amongst decision-makers with an attractive product that remains based on weak information and analysis. While transparency of analysis is a worthy ambition, it is doubtful how often decision-makers will refer back to the underlying assumptions.

Institutionally, there is a significant weakness evident in the IPC. One of the principal lessons from a history of investment in food security information systems has been that the systems have been designed to meet the information needs of the donors and international community<sup>2</sup>. Unsurprisingly, attempts to subsequently integrate and sustain such systems within national government systems have floundered. There is a danger

1 The IPC draws upon a number of conceptual frameworks, including UNICEF's model of nutrition analysis, Sen's entitlement theory, SC-UK and F.E.G.'s Household Economy Approach (HEA) and DFID's sustainable livelihoods approach. For further information on proposed linkages between HEA and the IPC, please refer to The links between HEA and IPC, by F.E.G, Mark Lawrence available on [www.wahenga.net](http://www.wahenga.net)

2 This still begs the question whether donors have the willingness and capacity to respond to improved analysis and recommendations in any case - the famous missing link.

that the same pattern will be repeated here. The system seems to be heavily focussed at meeting the needs of international decision-makers. There has been minimal involvement of national governments in the design phase, and yet they will inevitably be called upon to implement and manage the system.

Within the sub-component of the situation analysis there are a number of weaknesses. Firstly, and absolutely critically for southern Africa, the IPC currently confounds the duration and severity of food insecurity in one scale. In phase 2, there is the implicit assumption that chronic equates to mild food insecurity. This is both factually incorrect and would serve to continue the bias against funding interventions to address chronic food insecurity. The probable solution is introducing a third strand in the analysis to have (i) current situation, (ii) trend or early warning, and (iii) an analysis of duration, which is basically what was proposed at a recent IPC technical forum in Rome. It will be interesting to see how the IPC is modified to address this issue.

There is also a considerable discussion around the specific indicators that should be used to classify the current situation or phase. While contested, there is a strong argument that ultimately measures of under-nutrition and mortality are paramount indicators. If so, this raises fundamental questions about the comparative advantage of the IPC over other systems, such as the Health and Nutrition Humanitarian Tracking System which is being developed globally by the nutrition cluster under the UN reform process.

There are also a number of other more detailed technical issues that need to be addressed.

There is a need to:

- **Resolve the problem of data availability and how to deal with data gaps and poor quality data.** There is need for guidance on how to analyse different data streams of varying quality.
- **Resolve the potential confusion between current phase and early warning of phase.** The IPC makes use of two types of indicators, namely; outcome indicators to assess current phase and process indicators for early warning. At the moment, both sets of data are analysed together, which may generate confusion between these two very different functions. In particular, it is not clear whether and how the outcome indicators (most of which are late or trailing indicators) are to be used for early warning. For the purposes of managing a transient crisis, it may also make more sense to analyse the process indicators at a different time from the outcome indicators. Early warning information is most useful in the early stages of a crisis, while data on outcome is most useful once the impact of a crisis is beginning to be felt (at which point data on outcome can be used to target available resources to the most affected areas).

- **Provide guidance as to the methods that can be used for early warning.** The IPC is method-neutral, but that does not mean that details of the available methods cannot be set out more clearly. In particular, guidance is needed on how to provide early warning of phase in general, and for specific reference outcomes, such as nutritional status, mortality rate, civil security and destitution/displacement.
- **Clarify the relationship between the IPC and needs assessment.** At the moment the IPC assesses the severity of a situation but stops short of assessing needs, at least in terms of the numbers of people in need and the deficits they face. The stated reason for this is that it leaves decision-makers free to decide between non-resource transfers (e.g. policy change, market interventions etc) and resource transfers (e.g. food aid, cash, etc.) However, defining the size of the deficit (which should not be equated with a food gap) does not in itself tie decision-makers to one or other type of intervention but it does tell them about the magnitude of the problem they are addressing.

## Application of the IPC in southern Africa

The most pertinent question concerns the added value of adopting the IPC format. From the preceding discussion, it follows that adopting a uniform classification system would provide a comparative picture of relative levels of food insecurity across southern Africa. This would support improved decision-making on the allocation of scarce (primarily) donor resources. However, this raises intriguing questions about the incentives for national systems to make such comparisons possible.

As it stands, the current IPC framework remains rudimentary in its analysis of chronic hunger, poverty and vulnerability. Equally, the IPC does not appear to significantly strengthen the analysis of the range of response options. These are the principal concerns for RHVP, and indeed the states of Southern Africa, and alternative tools still need to be developed in these areas.

However, the goal of comparability is worth pursuing as an end in itself. There appears to be the potential to implement an IPC framework in Southern Africa. Ideally, this would be a framework which addresses the preceding concerns. A number of scenarios could be envisaged of how this might occur.

The simplistic option is to incorporate the IPC classification system into the current annual Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VAC) reporting cycle. The stated advantage of the IPC is that it utilises existing data streams and does not explicitly require additional data to be collected<sup>3</sup>, whether derived from the Household Economy Approach (HEA) or other sources. At its most basic, and provided minimal adequate data is available and compiled at

regional or national level, there are no immediate additional data costs. If data is not available, and a district-level data collection exercise is required, the costs of this could be significant.

Indeed, the VAC system offers an ideal platform to conduct the basic situation analysis. This already brings together analysts to develop a food security consensus. The basic skills are already present in several countries in southern Africa, but basic training specifically on the IPC would need to be provided. There will also be a need for outside facilitation. A shortage of experienced facilitators and trainers is likely to be a significant constraint, at least in the short term. Specific skills in GIS presentation may be a constraint in some countries, but several notable institutions may well be able to provide support.

It should be borne in mind, however, that implementing an IPC is relatively intensive in terms of time and labour, and therefore resources. For example, the level of effort required to complete an IPC in Somalia is on a similar scale to the analysis required for many existing national needs assessment exercises. There is obviously scope for combining an IPC exercise with a national needs assessment, but it remains to be seen what the implications of this would be in terms of additional time and resources.

Given the requirements for implementing an IPC, there is a danger that existing capacities may be overloaded. This may especially be the case in countries that are already in the process of introducing or developing a new methodology, such as HEA in Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. The IPC is currently at a pilot phase, and care should be taken in terms of selecting pilot countries so as not to overload existing capacities.

An annual analysis, much as is done in the current cycle of VAC reporting, could conceivably be done immediately.

However, the quality and utility of such outputs is questionable. It is hard to see how comparability might be improved without accompanying measures to improve data quality and availability, as noted above. If the goal is to improve comparability of food security outcomes, the emerging weight of opinion is specifically behind improved nutritional data. Nutritional surveillance systems are poorly developed in this region.

There is also a question over the frequency of analysis and reporting. It could be argued that an IPC format is consistent with a shift from annual reporting to more regular monitoring. This in turn has far more significant implications, including increased data collection, dedicated analysts and report distribution and production costs.

Bearing in mind the above, it is recommended that in southern Africa, the IPC be piloted in two to three countries initially. These should be chosen to represent a range of situations, especially in relation to the availability and quality of data. One aim of the pilots would be to see how the approach works in a relatively data-poor country. Related questions would be: what needs to be done to bring the quality and availability of data up to a minimum acceptable standard to generate a reliable IPC, how much would this cost and would the investment be justified?

**To find out more on the relationship between the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) and the Household Economy Analysis (HEA), click on the articles below:**

- [The Links between Household Economy Analysis \(HEA\) and the Integrated Phase Classification \(IPC\)](#)
- [Household Economy Analysis \(HEA\) And The Integrated Phase Classification \(IPC\)](#)

## About the Authors

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3 However, this is under discussion. There is an active debate about whether there should be minimum data requirements before a phase can be assigned as opposed to 'undetermined'.

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