

28 November 2005

**Background paper prepared for the WHO workshop:
"Tracking Health Performance and Humanitarian Outcomes"
1-2 December 2005, CCV, Geneva**

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Summary

The paper reviews the role of nutritional information to determine the nature and severity of humanitarian crises, identifies areas of consensus and outstanding technical and institutional issues, and makes recommendations for the use of acute malnutrition as an indicator for an international benchmarking system.

There is consensus on the use of nutritional survey information to confirm the severity of a crisis, and as part of monitoring and evaluating programmes which have a nutritional objective. There is broad agreement about the procedures for gathering and analyzing anthropometric data for estimating the prevalence of acute malnutrition. There is also agreement that it is not possible to use nutrition data on its own for decision making, but that it should be interpreted together with morbidity and mortality rates, seasonal fluctuations, preemergency levels of malnutrition, and the underlying causes of malnutrition. The UNICEF model on underlying causes of malnutrition has been widely adopted as the conceptual framework for analyzing nutrition in populations. Agencies agree on the indicators for monitoring the quality and performance of selective feeding programmes given in the Sphere Project's Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for Disaster Response.

The key technical issues around nutritional surveys are concerned with the interpretation and use of acute malnutrition data. The inter-relationship between malnutrition and mortality varies, and this has implications for both predicting the progression of food insecurity to famine, and also for diagnosing different types of crisis. Further clarification of the relationship between malnutrition and mortality in a range of emergency contexts is a priority.

Another issue is the use of thresholds of prevalence of malnutrition in decision making frameworks for selective feeding programmes, and frameworks for classifying different phases or levels of food insecurity. The use of these framework is inconsistent with the UNICEF model on underlying causes. There is large variation in the thresholds used between different frameworks. Selective feeding decision making frameworks have been rejected by a number of agencies, but are still in wide use. The use of these frameworks needs to be reviewed.

Other technical issues that need to be resolved include:

1. Sampling procedures for dispersed rural populations, and for linking nutritional status data with livelihood groups or zones
2. Standardization of methods for assessing the underlying causes of malnutrition and clarification of good practice principles associated with qualitative methods.

¹ The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors only.

A large number of international agencies (UN and NGOs), professional networks, and donor led technical groups, as well as national governments are involved in nutrition in emergencies, each with their own interests. There are no clear responsibilities for determining when a survey is necessary, judging the reliability of surveys, compiling nutritional information or providing an overview of nutrition for the crisis as a whole. Globally, there is only the Nutrition Information in Crisis Situations information system which collates nutrition information in emergency situations. The NICS approach is unique in that it gives equal importance to all underlying causes of malnutrition, and considers constraints in the delivery of assistance, as well as the prevalence of malnutrition, to classify situations according to nutritional risk. NICS, however, relies on voluntary submission of survey reports, which given clearance procedures of many NGOs often means that reports are out of date by the time they are published, which limits their use for decision making.

There is also a key issue of capacity for all actors involved in nutrition related activities. Many of the key actors involved in humanitarian response, including UN agencies with a mandate for improving nutrition, do not have this capacity to plan, coordinate, implement and monitor nutritional surveys.

The following recommendations address some of these institutional issues:

1. A single internationally endorsed practical guideline on nutrition surveys
2. A systematic approach to capacity development of key stakeholders
3. Unicef and WHO to jointly take responsibility for capacity development of national government departments
4. The development of an international humanitarian nutrition information system that adequately spans all administrative levels. This system could build on NICS.

There may be situations where it is necessary to commission nutrition surveys specifically for the purpose of confirming the severity of a crisis, monitoring performance, or when emergency responses are under-resourced. In all cases, however, the resources required to carry out large scale nutritional surveys, must be carefully balanced against the value of the information that will be gained from it.