



Can experience-based household food security scales help improve food security governance?

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ABSTRACT

Experience-based food security scales (EBFSSs) have been shown to be valid across world regions. EBFSSs are increasingly being included in national food and nutrition assessments and food hardship items have been added to regional and global public opinion polls. EBFSSs meet the SMART criteria for identifying useful indicators. And have the potential to help improve accountability, transparency, intersectoral coordination and a more effective and equitable distribution of resources. EBFSSs have increased awareness about food and nutrition insecurity in the court of public opinion. Thus, it's important to understand the potential that EBFSSs have for improving food and nutrition security governance within and across countries. The case of Brazil illustrates the strong likelihood that EBFSSs do have a strong potential to influence food and governance from the national to the municipal level. A recent Gallup World Poll data analysis on the influence of the "2008 food crisis" on food hardship illustrates how even a single item from EBFSSs can help examine if food security governance in different world regions modifies the impact of crises on household food insecurity. Systematic research that bridges across economics, political science, ethics, public health and program evaluation is needed to better understand if and how measurement in general and EBFSSs in particular affect food security governance.

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1. Introduction

Global health governance reform based on the recognition of primary health care as a basic capability or public good (Sen, 1999) to achieve positive global health outcomes has been proposed for decades (Ruger, 2011) and has led to calls for reforms in major public institutions such as the World Bank (Ruger, 2007). The recent food crises brought about by major food inflation have underscored the need to also improve the governance of the complex web of governmental and non-governmental programs that conform the often chaotic architecture of national and global food and nutrition security systems (FAO, 2011, 2005; International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, 2010). At the 1996 Food Rome World Food Summit, food security was defined as a condition that exists when "all people, at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2005). Thus for households to be food secure the following conditions need to be met: physical availability of food, economic and physical access to food, and adequate food utilization that relies heavily on the ability of the body to process/use nutrients as well as on dietary quality and the

safety of the foods consumed. Because of the central role that food security plays in human development this condition has been recognized as a universal human right (FAO, 2005). There is now increasing recognition that the adequate implementation of this right depends heavily on good food security governance systems (FAO, 2011; Ruger, 2011) as reflected in The Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (FAO, 2005).

Efforts at promoting improved governance of food security systems in a highly globalized world have been in place since the beginning of the 21st century (FAO, 2005; Paarlberg, 2002) and have recently gained significant traction. According to the FAO 'Food security governance' relates to formal and informal rules and processes through which interests are articulated, and decisions relevant to food security in a country are made, implemented and enforced on behalf of members of society' (FAO, 2011). The four conditions that need to be met for good food security governance to occur are: (a) clear, participatory and responsive planning, decision making and implementation; (b) efficient, effective, transparent, and accountable institutions; (c) respect for the rule of law, and equality and fairness in resource allocation and service delivery; (d) coherent and coordinated policies, institutions, and actions.

Ultimately, food security governance quality needs to be determined by how it impacts the food and nutrition security and overall wellbeing of households and individuals. A considerable effort has

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been in place for decades to identify the best suite of indicators needed for assessing food and nutrition security at the household and individual level (Barrett, 2010; Frongillo, 1999; Pérez-Escamilla and Segall-Corrêa, 2008; Swindale and Bilinsky, 2006; Webb et al., 2006). Experience-based household food security scales (EBFSSs) are theory grounded (Radimer et al., 1992) and collect the perceptions or experience of a household with different aspects of food insecurity as reported by a member of the household. EBFSSs usually include questions on worries of not having access to food, as well as lack of access to sufficient food or to a high quality diet due to constrained economic or other food acquisition resources. Questions can be asked in reference to the whole household, adult(s) or children living in the household. Each household is categorized according to their level of food insecurity based on an additive score (number of affirmative answers to scale questions) and corresponding cut-off points (Pérez-Escamilla and Segall-Corrêa, 2008).

It is important to examine the potential that EBFSSs have to influence food security governance since overall, EBFSSs have been found to have strong construct, face, psychometric, predictive and convergent validity in diverse socio-economic and cultural settings in low and middle income countries (e.g., Becquey et al., 2010; Frongillo and Nanama, 2006; Knueppel et al., 2010; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2008, 2006; Mohammadi et al., 2011; Muñoz-Astudillo et al., 2010, Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2009, 2007, 2004; Sampaio et al., 2006; Segall-Corrêa et al., 2009a; Usfar et al., 2007; Vianna et al., 2012). EBFSSs have been included in national surveys in the US since 1995 and their use at the national level has rapidly spread in low and middle income countries since 2004, especially in Latin America (Brazil (Kac et al., 2012; Segall et al., 2010; Segall-Corrêa et al., 2009b), Colombia (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF), 2011), Guatemala (Secretaría de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional de la Presidencia de la República (SESAN), 2012), Mexico (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL), 2010a, 2010b)) and selected scale items have been included in the Gallup World Poll (2012).

To attempt to determine how much EBFSSs could impact food security governance, the paper first presents a discussion on food and nutrition information systems followed by the “food security governance properties” of EBFSSs, a national case study based on the Brazilian experience and a global application based on Gallup World Poll before and after the 2008 food crisis. The paper concludes with recommendations regarding future empirical research in this area.

2. Results

2.1. Experience-based scales as part of food and nutrition information systems

Over the past decades the food security data collection emphasis has shifted from simply assessing the food supply to assessing food supply and demand and to understanding how to develop and maintain sustainable food and nutrition systems (Mock et al., 2011). This systems approach is key for understanding how to improve food security governance. Food and nutrition systems are formed by a complex web of intersectoral policies and government and non-government programs with strong influences from the global to the national, regional and municipal level. Characterizing these systems and how the intersectoral forces interact within and across levels to affect food and nutrition security of households and individuals poses major measurement challenges. The systems approach requires new analytical frameworks for understanding how food and nutrition programs work (Kim et al., 2011; McCullum et al., 2004; Pelletier

et al., 2011) and valid and useful “rapid response” food and nutrition security measures that can be obtained at a relatively low cost (Mock et al., 2011). EBFSSs have been shown to generate valid household food security measures from the national to the municipal level (Vianna et al., 2012) and thus are likely to help with program targeting and assessing the impacts of policies and programs when carefully applied (Becquey et al., 2010; Frongillo and Nanama, 2006; Knueppel et al., 2010; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2008, 2006; Mohammadi et al., 2011; Muñoz-Astudillo et al., 2010; Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2009, 2007, 2004; Sampaio et al., 2006; Segall-Corrêa et al., 2009a, 2009b; Usfar et al., 2007; Vianna et al., 2012). Low and middle income countries as diverse as Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, now include EBFSSs as part of the suite of indicators to target programs and assess food insecurity trends at the national and regional level. In all four countries, results from EBFSSs have received widespread media coverage. EBFSSs are also being included in “rapid” surveys and public opinion polls such as the Latin American Public Opinion Polls led by the University of Vanderbilt and the Gallup World Poll. EBFSSs also lend themselves to easy application through mobile wireless electronic devices and inclusion in GIS systems. Thus, a key question to answer is if EBFSSs have the right indicator properties to contribute towards improved food security governance.

2.2. Experience-based scales and food security governance

Though there are no published studies to date examining the specific contribution of EBFSSs to improving food security governance, based on the health governance empirical work (Wachira and Ruger, 2011) there are strong reasons to hypothesize that EBFSSs are likely to be able to contribute toward this end. However, for this to happen it is important to understand that an inclusive process must be followed when deciding if, when and how to make use of these type of scales. Of the methods most commonly used for assessing food security at the individual and/or household (dietary intake, anthropometry, EBFSSs) EBFSSs is the only one that directly measures the phenomenon of interest, closely adhering to the food security definition adopted at the 1996 World Food Summit (Pérez-Escamilla and Segall-Corrêa, 2008). Indeed, it is the only method that allows individuals to express their perception of the food security situation in their households. And, as previously described, valid EBFSSs measures can be obtained in reasonable amounts of time and at a reasonable cost.

Of the SMART criteria used to judge the utility of indicators EBFSSs have been shown to be specific (and valid), measurable (frequent data collection), achievable (technically possible), and timely (rapid application and sensitive to changes including seasonality and pre/post program) (Becquey et al., 2010; Frongillo and Nanama, 2006; Knueppel et al., 2010; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2008, 2006; Mohammadi et al., 2011; Muñoz-Astudillo et al., 2010; Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2009, 2007, 2004; Sampaio et al., 2006; Segall-Corrêa et al., 2009a, 2009b; Usfar et al., 2007; Vianna et al., 2012). Because only one study has examined the reliability (replicability or precision) of an EBFSS (Mohammadi et al., 2011) more research is still needed to assess this SMART criteria. But there are four reasons why EBFSSs appear to have indicator properties likely to contribute towards improved food security governance. First, EBFSSs can facilitate clear, participatory and responsive planning, decision making and implementation. Second, EBFSSs can help develop/oversee efficient, effective, transparent, and accountable institutions. Third, EBFSSs can help uphold the rule of law, through equity in resource allocation and service delivery. Fourth, EBFSSs can help develop/sustain coherent and coordinated policies, institutions, and actions. The following section examines the case study of food

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