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Food counts. Measuring food consumption and expenditures in household consumption and expenditure surveys (HCES). Introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

This introductory paper presents the results of an international multi-disciplinary research project on the measurement of food consumption in national household surveys. Food consumption data from household surveys are possibly the single most important source of information on poverty, food security, and nutrition outcomes at national, sub-national and household level, and contribute building blocks to global efforts to monitor progress towards the major international development goals.

The paper synthesizes case studies from a diverse set of developing and OECD countries, looking at some of the main outstanding research issues as identified by a recent international assessment of 100 existing national household surveys (Smith et al., 2014). The project mobilized expertise from different disciplines (statistics, economics, food security, nutrition) to work towards enhancing our understanding of how to improve the quality and availability of food consumption and expenditure data, while making them more valuable for a diverse set of users. The individual studies summarized in this paper analyze, both theoretically and empirically, how different surveys design options affect the quality of the data being collected and, in turn, the implications for statistical inference and policy analysis.

The conclusions and recommendations derived from this collection of studies will be instrumental in advancing the methodological agenda for the collection of household level food data, and will provide national statistical offices and survey practitioners worldwide with practical insights for survey design, while providing poverty, food and nutrition policymakers with greater understanding of these issues, as well as improved tools for and better guidance in policy formulation.

1. Background why repurposing HCES for poverty, food security and nutrition is a smart idea

Food constitutes a core component of several of the most widely used welfare indicators in the domains of food security, nutrition, health, and poverty. Accounting for about 50 percent of the household budget (USDA, 2011), it makes up the largest share of total household expenditure in low-income countries, on average. Low levels of access to food are an important factor contributing chronic undernutrition, which is now estimated to plague 793 million individuals worldwide (FAO, 2015). The collection of high quality food consumption data is therefore central to assessing and monitoring the well-being of any human population, and is a concern of national governments, international agencies, and anyone interested in understanding the levels of and trends in social, economic, and human development.

Data on food consumption are needed, for example, to construct and monitor the indicator and targets required to assess progress towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 (end poverty and end hunger, respectively). Similarly, its measurement is crucial to assess and guide the FAO's efforts to monitor and address its mandate to eradicate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. It is also the primary data input for monitoring progress of the World Bank's twin goals of eliminating extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. Reliable food consumption data are also required by national and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations, to guide their analysis, programming and policymaking. The lack of food consumption data or its mismeasurement may result in the misallocation of funding and may compromise the design, monitoring and evaluation of

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programs and policies.

The last two decades have witnessed unprecedented progress in the production and dissemination of household consumption and expenditure data across the developing world. In 1990, the World Development Report published by the World Bank was based on data from only 22 countries, and no country had more than one survey (Jolliffe et al., 2014). Today, there are at least 99 countries with consumption or expenditure information, and most of them have multiple surveys, adding to a total of more than 687 surveys (Ferreira et al., 2012). The number of countries with no poverty data (which is primarily estimated from food consumption data) over a 10-year period declined from 33 percent to 19 percent since the 1990s, whereas the share of countries with 3 or more data points over a 10-year period increased from 27 to 41 percent over the same period (Serajuddin et al., 2015).

Despite this progress, there are still 29 countries without a single survey between 2002 and 2011 – and another 28 only have one survey in that time frame – that would enable estimating national poverty figures (Serajuddin et al., 2015). Without such data it is impossible for these countries or for international development actors to analyze trends and progress (or lack thereof) in poverty eradication, something that has prompted the World Bank President to pledge to assist all IDA countries in conducting at least one such survey every three years. At the same time, the UN Statistical Commission has established an Inter-Secretariat Working Group on Household Surveys at its forty-sixth session "to foster coordination and harmonization of household survey activities across agencies and member countries" (United Nations, 2014). These initiatives will result in a surge in the number of household surveys in developing countries in the coming years, underscoring the urgent need for more rigorous guidance on survey design.

Depending on their primary objective, the surveys collecting information on household consumption or expenditure take different forms, including Household Budget Surveys (HBS), Income and Expenditure Surveys (IES), or 'multi-purpose' or 'integrated' household surveys, like the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys. We refer to this family of surveys, which are usually nationally and subnationally representative, as Household Consumption and Expenditure Surveys (HCES).

While the variety of HCES purposes naturally translates into different designs, the dramatic increase in the number of household surveys in developing countries has been associated with a proliferation of approaches and methods used in the collection of food data that is not only due to their different purposes or country-specific considerations. While there exist international guidelines and recommendations for the design and implementation of each of the distinct types of HCES surveys, they are specific to each type of survey, are generally not prescriptive, lack coherence and usually leave much flexibility to national survey statisticians. Consequently, we observe heterogeneity in methods, even within the same type of survey, both across countries, as well as within countries over time.

While HCES typically are not designed for the purpose of addressing food and nutritional information gaps, they are increasingly being used for this purpose. There are many reasons for the increase in use of the HCES surveys for this end, including that they contain a wealth of information about food acquisition and consumption; are being done with increasing frequency in an increasing number of countries (Serajuddin et al., 2015); have large samples, statistically representative at subnational levels; and are much less costly than other dietary assessment data sources because these multi-purpose surveys are already being conducted and paid for by other government agencies (Fiedler, 2013).

While there has been a surge of interest and HCES analyses of nutrition and food security issues, the potential of this particular type of repurposing of HCES has yet to be realized for several reasons. First, there is a lack of awareness of public nutritionists and food policy analysts about what these data contain. Second, there is a need for further research and action to improve the quality and utility of these data. To date, the nutrition community's role has been overwhelmingly that of a passive user of HCES data from surveys that have already been conducted. Many HCES shortcomings, however, stem from design and implementation issues. If the nutrition community—with its unique skills and experiences—were to get more proactively involved in the design, implementation and analyses of HCES, they could be strengthened substantially as a tool for evidence-based food and nutrition programming and policymaking (Fiedler et al., 2017).

In this paper we summarize a set of purposely assembled studies that provide a useful perspective on the challenges and opportunities for promoting a set of science-based guidelines for the food data component of HCES. The guidelines, if endorsed and widely adopted, would promote survey harmonization and increase HCES value for money by making these surveys more relevant to a wider set of potential users that includes nutritionists and food security analysts. The main commonality linking these studies is that they compare alternative approaches to data collection (from existing datasets as well as from data purposely collected for methodological studies), in order to identify the implication of survey design for measurement and analysis, and translate those approaches considered as "best" into recommendations for scalable approaches in future survey design efforts.

2. Putting new methodological research to work for survey design

The work program summarized in this paper has been sparked by a desk review of the reliability and relevance of the food data collected in national household consumption and expenditure surveys, which was jointly led by the International Household Survey Network (IHSN), FAO and the World Bank (Smith et al., 2014). That assessment identified the multiple purposes these household surveys serve, proposed methods to assess the reliability and relevance of survey questions, and applied these methods to 100 household surveys from low- and middle-income countries (a sample that resulted from selecting the most recent nationally representative household survey from each developing country, with the only condition of having enough documentation). The assessment points to many areas where survey design and questionnaires can be significantly improved, among which five were selected as key themes for the research projects we summarize in this paper. They are the following:

• **Choosing diary or recall surveys, and the appropriate reference period.** Citing concerns about memory loss when collecting very detailed consumption or intake data, nutritionists generally favor shorter recall periods (e.g. 24-hour recall), whereas expenditure surveys commonly use recall of one week or more in order to be better able to capture "usual" behavioral patterns. The impacts of recall period decisions on the quality of the data for different uses are far from being fully understood, and some of the papers we summarize address questions related to quantifying the tradeoffs involved in having a longer recall period and increased memory loss. To assess usual consumption, how many times should data be collected from households and for what observation or "reference" period? What difference will extending reference periods and conducting repeat visits actually make to estimates of poverty and inadequate nutrient intakes?

• **Food consumed away from home (FAFH) and cooked/packaged meals.** FAFH and prepared foods represent an increasing share of food consumption, and will continue to be so as GDP per person grows, and food systems evolve. This is an area where many national surveys could be improved, but where evidence on the robustness of alternative methods is weakest. A sub-set of the papers look at the implication and methods for capturing FAFH, whether eaten in commercial or public establishments (e.g. restaurant, schools).

• **Measuring individual versus household consumption.** The food consumption/expenditure modules of HCES capture household level information. Yet, food and nutrition policies and programs often require information about which foods and nutrients are consumed by which groups of individuals, and in what quantity. While individual

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