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Finding the information

This chapter offers guidelines on sources of information. It covers:

- locating and using documentary (secondary) sources
- locating key informants – individuals with a good knowledge of an area or some aspect of an area
- selecting and approaching communities
- observation.

The ways in which the quality of information is verified is discussed in Chapter 7. Methods for getting information, including the use of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools and interview techniques are discussed in Chapter 6.

A typical HEA enquiry will begin at the centre (the capital or regional town) and move outwards to the field. This approach has the advantage of:

- running parallel to the linear or hierarchical structure of most governmental and non-governmental organisations. This can work to your advantage, as you progress from central office (in the country capital) to regional office to district office to subdistrict office. This observes protocol, as each individual you meet knows that you have already met and been "cleared" by their superiors
- allowing you to build up your knowledge from general outlines to specific details as you get closer to the field.

Remember that:

- It is good manners to introduce yourself to the local authorities before conducting any enquiry, whether in a capital city, district centre or village. In some places it is a requirement (you may be ejected if you do not) and sometimes official written permission is required.
- People are often busy. Try to time your discussions to minimise the inconvenience to your respondents. This may mean working in the evening or at weekends.
- In interviews you should always clearly explain why you are conducting the interview, what you intend to do with the information, and what result (eg, the supply of food relief) the people being interviewed might expect.

Particularly if time is short it may feel like a waste of time to work with institutional structures. It is worth doing because:

- you might learn more from people at a distance from the field than you think you will
- informants in the field can be warned in advance about the timing and nature of the discussion, and this is likely to improve the quality of the interview
- the process of working out from a centre follows the process by which you collect secondary information, so little is lost if you combine literature searches with interviewing
- working outwards from a centre tends to also mean that you move from gathering general to gathering specific information as you go along. This allows for you to fine-tune your understanding of an area, and so your questioning, over time.

A general rule of interviewing is that the more you know before the interview starts, the more productive the interview will be.

1. Documentary sources

You are extremely unlikely to find a written source, or combination of written sources, that contains all the information you need to construct an accurate baseline description of the food economy. Fieldwork is always necessary. But written sources can be extremely helpful in giving sufficient background information to suggest the type of questions you should be asking about a food economy, in supplying information with which to cross-check what you are told by key informants, and in identifying key informants: the authors of interesting reports may possess much relevant information which they did not record in the report. Well before you go into the field, you may be able to identify some possible food economies.

Written sources may use a number of terms to describe areas having similar production systems: for example, farming system zones, livelihood areas, agro-economic zones and agro-ecological zones. These sources can tell you the weather patterns that can be expected in an area (and the likelihood of the rains failing), what crops (if any) can be grown in the area and the likely yields, the types of livestock kept, etc, which may indicate geographical areas offering the same range of possibilities for production. By putting this information together and using it to draw lines on a map you have taken the first step in defining food economy areas.

Note: Written sources are not infallible. One reason is because they often only deal with one aspect of an issue, and do not have to relate this to other economic activities. Look out for the income survey which shows 80 per cent of the population earning less than they need to survive, and the crop yield survey which is based as much on optimistic enthusiasm as on real crop production.

Secondary sources of this type will often be found at national capital, provincial and district town levels. However, as already pointed out, food economies seldom correspond exactly to administrative boundaries at provincial, regional or even sub-regional level. But since most information is collected by administrative unit, you will have to calculate how the administrative and ecological areas fit together.

Below is a list, by no means exhaustive, of secondary sources, with comments on the possible uses and drawbacks of each. Note that in some countries it is necessary to obtain government permission before conducting research in university or government archives. You should always check whether this is the case before starting the literature search.

Whenever consulting a documentary source always look for the “methods” section. How did the author get the information and how accurate is this information likely to be?

Anthropological or ethnographical studies

These may supply some information on sources of income and the wealth and poverty issues that are the basis of the wealth classification used in HEA, and may be a useful source of information on social organisation. But for many areas, particularly those that have recently experienced conflict, drought or other traumatic events, most anthropological work will be out of date and may be misleading.

Agro-ecological maps or surveys

These are of particular value for your initial consideration of how to divide a country or large region into food economy areas. Usual sources are the ministry of agriculture, the national university’s geography and agriculture departments and agencies with a specialist interest, including UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Surveys of farming systems or livestock management systems

This material can be obtained from the same sources (ie, FAO, UNEP, UNDP), and may be helpful for investigating sources of income, as it often describes the types and quantities of crops grown and livestock held. Farming systems surveys can provide information by wealth category although the information is often aggregated: it tells you about the “average” farm household, which tends to obscure the differences between rich and poor. Always try to find out how the sample was selected; it may not have been truly representative.

Surveys of household budget or income

These can give general information about sources of income, particularly non-food income and that element of food income which is gained through purchase. But the results of such surveys are usually presented in aggregated form, covering large administrative divisions – so much so that one often wonders why the information was collected and what possible practical use it is ever put to.

If using household budget surveys, be sure to check the definition of income as used in the survey: does it, for example, include on-farm production and consumption?

Agricultural surveys

Information about yield, area under crops and production is useful for work on sources of income, especially food crops and sale of crops. However, yield information is often based on trial plots cultivated under optimum conditions, and as production information may be an extrapolation of these results, you may find wildly optimistic figures.

Livestock surveys

These are of some help when investigating sources of income (chiefly the sale of livestock and livestock products) and livestock markets where records are sometimes routinely kept. But surveys of livestock holdings are rare and are notoriously difficult to carry out accurately: absolute figures should be treated with caution unless there is clear evidence that the survey in question is trustworthy. Even then, although surveys can be informative about average herd sizes and compositions, they tend not to give information on the distribution of livestock within a community; thus they are not much use for information at a household level, which is what you are mainly looking for.

The national population census

This is, of course, vital if you wish to estimate the population of food economy areas, but it can also be useful for information about sources of income, particularly hints about wage labour (an imbalance of male and female inhabitants in an area may suggest a remittance economy, where men have moved away to work). Censuses can also be useful in cross-checking information for economic balance, to establish whether towns are large enough to provide markets for the volumes of trade described by key informants.

Censuses tend to be undertaken at ten-yearly intervals, may be published only after a long delay and may be out of date by the time of your research. In some areas you will need to obtain estimated rates of population growth and apply these to the census population to calculate the current population. If you do this, remember that national growth rates may obscure major variations in population growth between one area and another.

Price data

These are useful for verifying sources of income, as they enable the cross-checking of prices in a normal year, and so help you to check key informant data on normal year income (for example, from livestock sales) and expenditure on food (from food prices, especially cereal prices). They can sometimes also give historical evidence of how far terms of trade are distorted in a food crisis; how the exchange value of assets such as livestock collapses against grain prices. But published data is usually only from the largest markets, especially provincial capitals, which may not reasonably represent a given food economy area. Also, price data are difficult to interpret unless you have a very good historical knowledge of the area and of what underlay the price trends. Rates of currency inflation will usually need to be taken into account in interpreting long-term price trends.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO) project information

This is highly variable in quality, but most useful where the NGO works on micro-credit, agriculture or livestock projects. It can provide useful (and unique) information on sources of income; for looking at wealth categories (since reports sometimes include the results of wealth rankings); for understanding the assets of a household; and on seasonality.

Government district or regional reports

These often contain census, livestock and agricultural survey data, and can be a useful digest of other government information sources. They are often particularly good for background information on economic activities and employment in an area, thus helping you with sources of income, and may also have information relevant to drawing the boundaries of the food economy.

Relief food delivery information

This is important for recording sources of income in situations where regular relief food is an important component of "normal" household budgets. However, this situation is uncommon, the information is often very poorly recorded, and difficult to obtain other than in highly aggregated form.

Tables of labour requirement in agriculture

These are useful for cross-checking the crop production and employment aspects of sources of income.

The internet

An increasing amount of information is available on the internet, although it is often of a general kind (Annexe 4).

2. Key informants

Most of the time, the information you require, especially that relating to households, will be provided only sketchily, or not at all, by documentary sources. The information you require must be gathered in the field. The starting point for this is the key informant. A "key informant" is someone you have reason to believe can tell you what you need to know. For instance, a trader will be able to tell you about (amongst other things) trade routes and seasonal prices; an agricultural extension officer could tell you about land holding sizes, crops grown and on-farm production levels in the area where she or he works; a veterinary officer could tell you something about the numbers of livestock in the area. Members of households can also be used as key informants and are often the best informants on how they get food and income. It is a matter of deciding what you want to know, then finding someone who might be able to tell you.

Key informants are most useful for providing an overview of the area you are looking at.

From secondary sources you should have acquired some idea of possible HEA areas, and perhaps of problems with these notional areas (for example, they are the same ecologically, but not in other ways). You can explain what you are trying to achieve and ask informants to draw maps of what they think are food economies. You can also ask about specific matters that you suspect may lead to subdivision of an area: are all the people along the river cultivators? Do they all cultivate the same crops? Do they all sell crops? Do they sell these crops in the same market?

Your main types of key informant are likely to be:

- individuals who work for organisations delivering services to rural populations (government, NGOs, UN, religious)
- members of the communities you are researching
- other researchers (from, for example, national or foreign universities, the UN or an NGO). Researchers may be found anywhere. You may be introduced to them in the community; or they may be a long way from the community, writing up research in the capital. The easiest way to find out the names and whereabouts of researchers is by asking around research institutions and universities, and by following up names from your review of secondary sources.

At the same time, you should remain open to the possibility that you will find key informants in unexpected places: the retired teacher who has lived in the locality for decades, has her own agricultural plot and a lively interest in her community; in a tea shop or from herders who ask for a lift – long bush rides are as good for bouncing around ideas as for bouncing bones.

If you approach key informants properly, you will obtain good-quality information that is otherwise unavailable. Some key informants may have spent decades working with the people you are interested in and have a very detailed knowledge of their subject. The information obtained from key informants is also usually critical when you progress to interviews in communities, as you will already have a good basic knowledge of the economy concerned.

Not all informants are of equal value. You will find that a large proportion of

A few tips... Key Informants

- Try to give key informants advance notice of your visit, and of the issues you will want to discuss.
- Arrange to meet key informants through people they know: their superiors (if in an organisation) or people who work with them (for communities).
- Prepare carefully. Have a good idea of the types of things you need to know, and background information to help you ask relevant questions.

Choose a variety of key informants. Include women and people with different social/technical backgrounds.

the useful information which is obtained is provided by a small proportion of informants. It is worth asking to be directed to people who have a reputation for having a knowledge in a particular subject area, and (tactfully) terminating interviews when it is clear they are going nowhere.

Whenever possible, try first of all to contact the ministry of agriculture, NGOs, the WFP, etc, at national level. This can go hand-in-hand with the literature search. Explain what you are doing and ask for support. By going to the top, you might be able to use communication networks within the organisation to warn people about when you want to visit them in the field, and to give them some idea, before you meet, of what you wish to talk about.

3. Information from the community

Most of the information required for an HEA enquiry will be obtained from the community, typically in group discussions which are used to establish the wealth groups in the community, and to develop household budgets for each wealth group.

This section discusses the selection of communities and the approach to community discussions. Methods and techniques are described in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Selecting communities

Selecting the communities (most often villages) in which interviews are to be conducted calls for some preparation. Ideally, the selection will be based on an overview of an area obtained from secondary sources and key informants. This will allow the selection of communities which represent the range of economic situations found within the area: for example, areas which represent slightly different agricultural conditions. The number of communities selected will depend on the nature of the enquiry and the practical constraints.

It is not enough simply to pick a likely-looking village from the window of your vehicle or the back of your donkey, arrive and start interviewing. If you do walk into a community unannounced and start to ask questions about wealth and poverty, assets and crop yields, you will probably find that you get at best poor interviews, and at worst complete silence. The questions you are asking do, after all, sound suspiciously like those of the tax inspector. The more sensitive the issue (for example, about smuggling or illicit hunting), the less likely you are to find the interview illuminating.

You should always be introduced to the community. An introduction may be in writing from, or in the company of, district officials, or through an NGO or church group, who can introduce you to their congregation.

The best way to get information in a village has to be discovered in each case. In some places enquiry can be fairly direct – for example, it may be possible to establish the wealth groups by simply discussing this with the village chief or administrator. But it may be necessary to put a group of people together and develop a view of wealth groups in stages, using ranking, etc. Approach each case with an open mind – there are no absolutely fixed ways of getting community-level information.

4. Observation

Every opportunity should be taken to directly observe:

- household conditions
- the condition of livestock and crops
- markets, which will allow direct estimates of price, and sometimes some idea of the quantities of commodities being sold.

Useful observation requires knowledge of what you should be observing: for example, thin cattle may be abnormal, or it may be seasonally normal. Conditions in the poorest households may be of extreme, even shocking poverty. This may be how people usually live.

5. Measurement

Direct measurement is not usually part of an HEA study. An exception is local measures. In many locations local measures are used for agricultural and other produce. Tins, bottles and volumetric measures are the most common, as accurate (or trusted) weighing machines may not be available. The measures used are usually standardised (eg, a tomato tin, a sack) and widely understood within a locality. As the calculation of food energy is based on weight, it is important to know the equivalent weight for each measure for the more important food items. In some cases this will be a known (eg, in northern Rwanda a basket of sweet potatoes is equivalent to roughly 5 kg) but often the equivalence will have to be measured directly. This can be done in a market using a portable spring scale – small cheap spring scales can often be purchased in larger markets.

6. How many interviews are needed?

There is no hard and fast rule for the number of interviews you need to conduct to characterise an economy. It is important to recognise that, in choosing the sites, you are not attempting to construct a statistically representative sample. Within the constraints of time, cost and access, your aim is to compile a description of the economy that is sufficient for the specific objective of your enquiry. It depends on:

- how the information will be used
- the degree of access possible
- the time available.

Your confidence in the results will be based on:

- the completeness of the appraisal. HEA focuses enquiry on those aspects of economy about which you need to have information
- the consistency of the information received. The greater the number of independent interviews (that is, where the informants are not known to each other) that yield consistent outcomes, the more confidence can be placed in the findings
- the consistency of responses from different interviews.

In extreme situations, you may not be able to gain access to a population. For example, it may be impossible to enter a war zone, and you may have to construct a view of the economy by speaking to key informants outside the area. However, it may be possible to organise trained teams to sample a range of locations thought to be representative of the range of economic situations within the area.

Summary

HEA information can be obtained from:

- documentary sources: ethnographical, agricultural and other reports
- key informants: people with a specialised knowledge of a subject or economy
- community interviews: the household wealth distribution, and information of household economy
- observation: crops, livestock, living conditions
- measurement: establishing equivalent weights for local measures.

An investigation usually starts at the centre, the capital city or district headquarters, and moves out to the field, allowing a picture to be built up from a general overview to a detailed description.

In virtually all cases, HEA will require fieldwork.

There are no hard and fast rules about the number of interviews required for an HEA analysis.