

New Collaborations to Assess the Reliability and Relevance of Food Data Collected in National Household Surveys

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Data from national government household surveys of income, expenditures, and budget can serve many policy purposes. Very often, the original purpose of these surveys is to provide data for Consumer Price Index and System of National Accounts compilation. However, for many low- and middle-income countries, data collected on food consumption from these instruments also contributes to poverty analysis, improving food security for vulnerable population groups, and designing food fortification programs.

Under the auspices of the International Household Survey Network (IHSN), the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and others undertook an assessment of the *reliability* and *relevance* of food data collected in surveys for the above-mentioned policy purposes. The assessment was based on 100 household survey questionnaires and related documentation from low- and middle-income countries.

In regards to *reliability*, many basic criteria are met by a large majority of current household surveys. However, the assessment identified three key problem areas: i) improve estimates of food consumed away from home, ii) improve capture of seasonal variations in food consumption and expenditure patterns, and iii) ensure information on all major food groups is captured.

Much could be done to improve the *relevance* of food data collected to maximize its use. Specifically: i) improve the collection of food quantity, ii) improve the estimates of food consumed away from the home, and iii) ensure food can be categorized to facilitate conversion into its nutritional content.

In sum, household surveys are critical for their original purposes, but also prove to be useful for informing additional policy purposes – especially as the underlying microdata becomes more publically accessible. As specific reliability and relevance issues are addressed, often through manageable changes to questionnaire design and survey scope, these surveys could expand their impact and inform a host of policy issues at very low marginal cost.

Key words: Household surveys, assessment, microdata, questionnaire design