

Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis in Humanitarian Emergencies Evidence from Nigeria

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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Since the mid-2000s, an ongoing humanitarian crisis in the three northeastern states of Nigeria has spread to the greater Lake Chad basin. The Boko Haram conflict turned into a major security problem that led to widespread displacement and a major humanitarian catastrophe. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that more than 20,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict, with 1.6 million remaining internally displaced and 200,000 living as refugees in neighboring countries (UNOCHA, 2017).

To identify and classify the severity of the food security situation, including famine conditions, Nigeria uses Cadre Harmonisé (CH) analysis. CH is an analytical process that is very similar to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) tool developed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Somalia in the early 2000s and used in some 35 countries around the world. CH uses the same five phases to categorize food security status as the IPC and gathers data on agricultural, nutrition, mortality, food security, and on meteorological and economic indicators (CILSS, 2014). CH is used in West Africa, but is nearly identical to the IPC protocol used elsewhere.

Since 2017, a team of researchers from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and the Centre for Humanitarian Change in Nairobi has been examining the IPC and CH systems to better understand the constraints—both technical and political—to the analysis of famines and extreme emergencies. The study was comprised of a background desk review, key informant interviews, and a series of private meetings with key stakeholders to test initial findings. The team conducted some 50 interviews, with a total of 58 informants. This brief summarizes the findings for CH analysis in Nigeria and lays out a condensed version of the main report, which can be found at fic.tufts.edu and whatworks.co.ke.

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Challenges and constraints to food security analysis in Nigeria

Virtually all respondents interviewed noted that the CH process has improved with each succeeding round of analysis in Nigeria, where it was introduced in 2015. Nevertheless, several key constraints to food security analysis emerged from the study. Human and financial resource challenges.

1. Human and financial resource challenges

1.1 Funding

Funding for the initial round of CH analysis workshops came from the European Union. Funding is secure through 2019, but it is the biggest issue for the sustainability of CH in the medium term. This is in two different areas—funding for data collection and for the detailed analytical processes at state and federal levels. Data for food security analysis are collected through the Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) managed by the World Food Programme and the National Bureau of Statistics; nutrition and mortality data come from the National Nutrition Surveillance System run by the Ministry of Health with support from UNICEF.

1.2 Capacity challenges

Overall, the baseline capacity for analysis in Nigeria is high, but the level of experience is lower, since the CH was only introduced in 2015. There has been a high level of turnover among the participants in analysis, so the actual on-the-ground capacity for complex analysis like CH often varies. In some cases, strong capacity exists (albeit often at national level only); in other cases, capacity and lack of experience with CH analysis—or food security and nutrition analysis generally—is a real constraint. The Regional Authority—Comité Permanent Inter-État de Lutte Contre la Sécheresse au Sahel or CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel)—makes “coaches” (technical staff who assist



in the analysis) available to support the process from state to national levels but this means that the reservoir of capacity for Cadre Harmonisé analysis is outside the country most of the time.

1.3 Timing challenges

Ownership of the Cadre Harmonisé process is clearly located within the Government of Nigeria apparatus, but in multiple different ministries and between the state and federal levels. There are also multiple international, UN, and non-governmental actors, and in turn, coordination remains a challenge. The challenge is that different data needed for Cadre Harmonisé analysis are collected on different time frames and sometimes therefore are out of date by the time the analysis is conducted.

1.4 Technical challenges

Perhaps the biggest challenge to Cadre Harmonisé analysis is the availability of data. Some data are persistently missing, including most frequently mortality and nutrition. Access constraints are the most common reason for missing data.

A second major challenge is the lack of means to identify “hotspots”—meaning that there is no systematic early warning system in Nigeria—and CH itself does not function as an early warning system per se—CH and IPC analysis are current status assessment methods. There is an effort to develop a nation-wide early warning system (EWS), but it is not yet up and running. In the meantime, the Cadre Harmonisé “projections” are as near to an EWS as Nigeria has, but there is little experience with projections. Identification of “hot spots” (small areas of acute need or rapidly worsening status) is largely on an ad hoc basis by agencies reporting on particular areas where they are working—but of course this by definition means hot spots are not identified outside of current operational areas.

A third challenge is the population data. Population data are often not only out of date, but also overlook population displacement or movement of other kinds. At least three different estimates of population were in use up to 2017. Also, the numbers of displaced people are reported to be often either missing or unreliable. The International Organization for Migration counts new arrivals, and keeps track of numbers of people in camps to estimates total population, but has little information on the status of newly arrived people. This is critical as these population and displacement figures drive the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). However, this is a relatively “new” response—the entire response was really only ramped up in 2016, and Cadre Harmonisé analysis has only been going on for three years. So it is not surprising that there are information and data challenges.

There is little or no information on health or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sectors and very little or no causal analysis, no conflict or political analysis. There is little use of qualitative information.

1.5 Units of analysis

Up to 2017, data were often only representative at the state level. During the peak of the crisis in the northeast in 2016, the Local Government Area (LGA) became the unit of analysis¹ in Borno, Yobe

¹ A “unit of analysis” is the geographic area (and human population within it) to which data collected in an assessment can be accurately extrapolated. If different units of analysis are used by different data

and Adamawa states. But this doesn’t match the unit of analysis for the nutritional surveillance, which uses its own “domains”—usually a cluster of three to four LGAs. Even when LGAs are utilized as the unit of analysis, in some—in Borno in particular and also parts of Yobe—only a very limited part of the LGA can be accessed for assessment (or response) purposes. Typically, this is the main town or market center, which is occupied by the Nigerian military, with a civilian population in the center under their control and protection. There is often no information about civilian conditions outside of that protected zone. Given the lack of information, surrounding areas in the LGA are frequently classified *the same* as the towns or market centers where information is available. This likely means that inaccessible areas are being under-classified, but there are no data to confirm this.

1.6 Timing and frequency of data gathering exercises for inclusion in analysis

As noted above, the timing of data collection for Cadre Harmonisé analysis is weakly coordinated, so data are frequently disqualified from the analysis because they are considered out of date. Key informants highlighted the difficulties experienced in synchronizing the timing of the National Nutrition Surveillance Survey data with the timing of the EFSA, and therefore the Cadre Harmonisé (and FEWS NET) analysis. This results in some data either being ruled out or deemed unreliable because they are more than three months old and often collected in different seasons. The data collection and analysis phases are timed to represent the situation in the lean and harvest season. However, the judgment on the optimum weeks within these periods to collect data is slightly different. The NFSS requires more time to collect the full round of data, around six weeks. The speed of reporting between the end of the survey and the report is also considerably longer for the NFSS.

collection methods, it makes combining their results difficult—and largely a matter of human judgment, rather than statistical analysis.

1.7 Causal analysis

While the Cadre Harmonisé provides current status information across a range of indicators, it is almost entirely information about outcomes (food security, nutrition, livelihoods and mortality). There is relatively little information about the drivers of the crisis, little conflict analysis, and not much capacity for conflict analysis. As a result, there is no substantive analysis of the conflict—it is simply a “contributing factor.” Likewise, there is little consensus about the underlying causes and whether the situation in the northeast is an acute emergency or a manifestation of a chronic under-development crisis across the north. This is critical because if the analysis remains completely at the humanitarian level, development actors won’t understand the crisis, and humanitarian actors won’t understand the underlying root causes around governance and chronic poverty. There is also little analysis of other contributing factors, be they climate change, the drying up of the Lake Chad Basin, environmental degradation or other factors.

1.8 Uses of Cadre Harmonisé analysis

The Cadre Harmonisé analysis sets overall strategic direction and overall numbers but the information is not particularly useful for operations/operational planning. A number of respondents noted that Cadre Harmonisé analysis eclipses too much detail, and it is not sufficiently granular for operational or programmatic applications. This observation is by no means unique to Nigeria or CH, but does suggest the need to clarify the primary objectives of the CH analysis: is the primary objective to provide a picture of the overall strategic needs, or to provide specific information for operational planning of response to specific populations?

2. Security-related and contextual challenge

2.1 Access

Humanitarian access in several parts of the northeast continues to be severely limited due to

continuing insecurity (OCHA, 2017). Humanitarians have thus far worked only in the areas controlled by the Nigerian military. The military has restricted humanitarian access and humanitarian agencies are unable to access areas held by Boko Haram. Humanitarian assistance and information are often limited to Local Government Area (LGA) headquarters controlled by the military. The 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) notes, “An estimated 930,000 people remain hard to reach by international humanitarian actors” (OCHA 2018, p. 20). The humanitarian community has not fully tested the extent to which it can gain access to this population. There is a significant difference in the manner in which inaccessible areas are analyzed and mapped. The means of accounting for the inaccessible areas on the maps may mean that the overall picture looks better than it actually is. At the time of the field visit in October 2017, there was no agreement on how many were completely inaccessible. Most respondents said three were inaccessible, some said six, and 19 were “partially accessible.” But “partial access” often only means the main LGA town and a variable perimeter around that center. As a result, the classification likely under-estimates the severity of the food security problem, and obscures the actual nature of humanitarian access.

3. Influencing the consensus?

The Cadre Harmonisé is a food security analysis system that is intended to be state-led and managed around a “technical consensus” on the one hand, but also intended to provide an accurate, objective and independent analysis of extreme food insecurity (or indeed other humanitarian current status indicators) on the other. The system can accommodate those two different objectives as long as the severity of any food security crisis is modest in scope. Famine and the analysis of famine is where the two objectives appear to come into direct opposition. Below, we highlight the three main areas of concern emerging from the case study in regards to influences on the analysis: independence, consensus, and support for an impartial response.

3.1 Independence of the analysis

Although it was designed only to be an analysis of food insecurity, the Cadre Harmonisé has become the default indicator of the state of the crisis in general—and therefore both an indicator of the overall conflict itself and the main indicator of the need for further funding. This inevitably puts political pressure on the analysis—and this pressure may come from various angles: from the government, from donors, and from humanitarian agencies themselves. The story heard repeatedly by the research team was that “the war against Boko Haram is over.” And therefore, to some degree Cadre Harmonisé is expected by some stakeholders to reflect progress in war against Boko Haram—to be the “barometer” on the status of the conflict—even though conflict analysis is not included within the remit of Cadre Harmonisé. The result is the perception of pressure to ensure the phase classification shows improvements in humanitarian status since the “end of the war.” This is increasingly aligned with the call for “stabilization” or “early recovery” programs. However, as noted above, some 930,000 people remain in the inaccessible areas, and are still coming into government-controlled areas. .

At the same time, the humanitarian agencies note that if the outcomes in the Cadre Harmonisé analysis don't improve, donors will question the impact of the ongoing response—perhaps endangering future programs. On the other hand, if Cadre Harmonisé outcomes improve too much, it would support the conclusion that the crisis has abated, and be a reason to consider scaling back the response. All these observations are muffled—not spoken directly, but frequently hinted at. These pressures come from a variety of actors, but they combine to threaten to undermine the independence and validity of the analysis, replacing a technical consensus (as called for in Cadre Harmonisé and IPC analysis) with much more of a political consensus. The technicians do the best that they can with the data available but it is the paucity of quality data that further opens the door for political pressure.

3.2 Speaking beyond the consensus

This raises the second concern, of agencies speaking outside of or beyond the consensus. A number of respondents criticized FEWS NET for issuing an independent report on the question of famine in 2016, after the Cadre Harmonisé analysis was complete. But numerous respondents also noted that there was no internal consensus on issues that were clearly affecting the analysis. The net result of all the differing views on technical issues outlined above is precisely what opens the door to differing interpretations of the analysis and suspicions of political motives on the part of different actors.

Any discussion of famine is bound to be political. For example numerous respondents noted the disdain of the Government of Nigeria to be considered in the same category (“famine-risk countries”) as Yemen, South Sudan or Somalia. Because of this, famine may simply be perceived as a “taboo” topic. Agencies raising some of these questions were accused of “trying to tarnish the reputation of the Government of Nigeria,” virtually identical to an accusation made against the IPC Technical Working Group in South Sudan.

However numerous respondents noted that these pressures may come from several sources, not just the government. And in any case, the Government of Nigeria is not a monolithic structure. It is a federal system in which the states have a good deal of autonomy, and there are various layers and overlaps of jurisdiction. There is no single “government” perspective on Cadre Harmonisé analysis. However, given the sensitivities around this issue, agencies are often self-censoring with respect to the question of famine. On the one hand, there is the technical sense in which “famine,” or IPC/Cadre Harmonisé Phase 5, is simply a category, a classification—a severe one to be sure, but nothing more than a technical category. On the other hand, “famine” is synonymous not only with inhumanity, but with a failure—a failure of humanitarian response and of governance. It is a term that no one—a donor, a humanitarian agency or a government—wants to have associated with “their watch.”

Perhaps the only identifiable group with a stake in the outcome of the analysis who does not have a voice in the analysis or the debate over its meaning is the very population at risk of malnutrition and mortality as a result of the conflict, the displacement and the way the outcomes of war, displacement (or entrapment) and famine are managed. But of course, it is to protect their rights and ensure their access to adequate food or humanitarian action of some other kind that the analysis is conducted in the first place. So, this is not merely a problem about information and analysis—it has real consequences for the lives, livelihoods, rights and dignity of millions of people.

3.3 Undermining the impartiality of the humanitarian response?

As noted above, Cadre Harmonisé and IPC procedures have only limited analysis of conflict—focusing mainly on categorizing the outcomes of food insecurity, malnutrition and mortality. Many observers noted that the strategy of the Nigerian military against Boko Haram is essentially to surround the areas controlled by Boko Haram, cut off access to markets, trade, and communications, cut off any population movement from government controlled areas into opposition-controlled areas, and offer civilians protection in “strategic fortresses” or hamlets. The humanitarian response is reliant on the Nigerian military for access, as a result of the insecure environment. But this compromises the perception of impartiality in the delivery of assistance, and raises the concern that humanitarian assistance—and the analysis that underpins it—is being used to implement the strategy by incentivizing people to move into these protected enclaves, undermining the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. Currently the populations living in areas protected by the military have most of their needs met by humanitarian assistance. Use of assistance in this way would be tantamount to taking sides in the counter insurgency, contributing to a humanitarian response that is not impartial, in which the use of aid is a “pull factor” to attract civilians to government-controlled areas. Some 50,000 people are reported to have moved into government-controlled areas since this new strategy was announced. Even the possibility that these analytical processes could be used to undermine the core

principle of impartiality should raise warning flags for all involved in the analysis—and in the response.

4. Lessons learned: Managing the constraints

Many of the suggestions outlined below are technical matters that can be dealt with by CILSS and the Technical Working Group that conducts the analysis. Clearly, in the views of respondents, there is always a need for better technical and analytical capacity. Any time there is a glitch in the technical information, or any time the technical capacity is inadequate, the door is opened to differing political interpretations. But other choices are more fundamental: if there is a clash in the objectives of the Cadre Harmonisé analysis system at the extremes of food insecurity, which objective takes precedence? If the priority objective is consensus, questions arise about the independence and objectivity of the analysis. If the objective of independent analysis takes precedent, what becomes of the consensus, and the issue of speaking outside the consensus? These are not technical matters—and perhaps can only be worked out on a case-by-case basis.

Although this report has highlighted external influences on the Cadre Harmonisé analysis, most respondents noted improvement over time both in the technical quality of the analysis, and in the ability to deal with these influences. Nevertheless, a number of lessons have emerged in terms of good practice to manage these influences. The most pertinent lessons learned in managing these influences are outlined below.

4.1 Leadership and coordination of the process

The Cadre Harmonisé process is led by the combined efforts of the Government of Nigeria, through the NPFS; CILSS, which provides the technical support; and the UN FAO. Better coordination structures could help to reduce some of the political fears. Greater awareness within and involvement of the UN Humanitarian Country Team would be helpful in the meeting point between technical and political consensus building.

4.2 Funding

Operational and financial independence clearly help to ensure the analytical independence. At face value, the cost of analysis a very small amount of money compared to the resources allocated in response to the results of the Cadre Harmonisé. The question is: are the results as now provided good enough for decision making (by government, by donors, and by humanitarian agencies) or would the investment of more money in improved analysis yield significantly improved results and a better-informed response?

4.3 Building participation and improving communications to build allies and coalitions

The best way to depoliticize the analysis was through greater levels of participation and dialogue with all stakeholders—governmental and humanitarian—before and during the analysis, not just after—seeking allies for the analysis, both scientific and political. If there is really good information and a really good analysis, it is much more difficult to undermine politically. Greater involvement in the design of the analysis and full training on the technical aspects of the analysis will allow “the facts to speak” in the words of several respondents.

4.4 Advocating for the results

Many respondents believed that once a consensus is built, greater advocacy and clearer communication strategies are needed to promote the findings and recommendations. This would be the responsibility of all parties to the CH analysis.

4.5 Speaking outside the consensus

Some respondents suggested that it was okay to speak outside the technical consensus, and indeed that separate reporting or separate analysis at the local level should be encouraged. Having some kind of stand-by process to press for an independent assessment of the results of analysis has been important to IPC analysis, but a parallel process for Cadre Harmonisé analysis in Nigeria doesn't exist. Important lessons have been learnt by the IPC use of a “review of last resort process” in the form of the

Emergency Review Committee (ERC) by the IPC in early 2014, to review data quality and the rigor of analysis in the event that Phase 5 (famine) might be an outcome of IPC analysis. Cadre Harmonisé consideration of something similar to this approach may be beneficial.

4.6 Clarifying processes

Many respondents noted that there would be fewer political tensions if the processes were better established, especially with regard to transparency and data sharing. Given that there are multiple and sometimes conflicting objectives in this kind of analysis, a number of suggested practices emerging from interviews were about attempting to manage these differing objectives. Involving a broader range of stakeholders was a recommendation of many.

4.7 Improving contextual analysis

One of the reasons for the disagreements in interpretation of results is because both Cadre Harmonisé and IPC analyses tend not to emphasize context analysis. The majority of the analysis is on outcomes—specifically food security, malnutrition and mortality. There is little or no analysis of the actual conflict—which of course in Borno is the major driver of the crisis. Current classification could be improved by efforts to assess populations in the inaccessible areas. This could be done by more systematic information gathering from people coming into government-controlled enclaves from the inaccessible areas—both measuring their own status and interviewing them about general status of populations in the areas they have left, and by remote sensing, or methods of triangulating the results of interviews with newly-arrived groups (IDPs and refugees). This would be a step towards upholding the impartiality of the analysis.

4.8 Other Sectors of Information

Apart from the conflict drivers, there is little data on health and WASH outcomes. Links between livelihoods and protection are poorly understood. This all relates back to the issue of strong networks with wide technical expertise to collect, and analyze information, and get decision support. Agreeing on

compromises on the timing of the Food Security and Nutrition/Mortality data collection to ensure that already available data is used to improve the analysis is clearly a short-term objective. Agreement on timings and more rapid reporting processes could immediately and significantly improve the Cadre Harmonisé analysis.

4.9 Improving technical capacity and capacity building

Finally, there remains some faith among technical analysts that improving the technical procedures alone will protect the objectivity and independence of the analysis. They emphasize ensuring scientific methodology, ensuring the sharing of data, and capacity building for the group of analysts who engage in Cadre Harmonisé. They note that people participating in Cadre Harmonisé are often not food security or nutrition analysts—and agencies often do not send the same people to successive analyses, so there is little cumulative learning about the process. There was lots of discussion about how new the Cadre Harmonisé was. It can take time to build analytical capacity. If there is a focus on the technical analysis, politics can't get in, but if the technical analysis is weak, political interests can do anything with the results.

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