

GLOBAL INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE (GIEWS)

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Summary

This paper provides a brief summary of the role, structure, and methods of the Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) operated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. This complex system links governments, the UN, NGOs, businesses, and research institutes across the world, providing information and early warning on food-related issues. Some of these developments are traced here, with pointers to future developments. Much of the information provided by GIEWS relates to food emergencies, but the System is also relevant to food policymakers and trade organizations, and the general public.

1. What Does GIEWS Do?

GIEWS was established in 1975 in response to the world food crisis of the early 1970s and on the recommendation of the World Food Conference (1974). GIEWS serves policymakers and researchers in a worldwide network that includes the UN and donor agencies, 117 national Governments, 60 NGOs, and numerous universities and trade organizations. The members of the System have one thing in common: a commitment to the fight against hunger. Information is a vital weapon in this fight. It is the basis for

sound policy.

The ultimate aim of GIEWS is to avert hunger and suffering, by providing accurate, timely, and apposite information on food supply and demand at the global, regional, national, and subnational levels. GIEWS provides information free of charge to all members.

For example, many GIEWS members are interested in trade policy. They need to know what is happening on world markets. Are prices rising or falling and why? What is the likely impact of changes in world food prices? When world market prices are high, low-income food-deficit countries (LIFDCs) must make provisions to avoid being crippled by import bills.

Donors, UN agencies, and NGOs are involved in the planning of relief resources. A fundamental part of this process is the identification and prioritization of needs. GIEWS identifies the countries and population groups within those countries requiring relief assistance, pinpointing the most urgent cases.

The System provided timely warnings of famine in the Horn of Africa in the early 1980s, of drought-induced crop failures in southern Africa both in 1991–1992 and in 1994–1995, of the grave food crisis emerging in Korea, D.P.R., since 1995, the food emergency in Indonesia, and famine conditions in southern Sudan. Since its inception, the System has issued 285 Special Alerts and 122 Special Reports to the international community of impending food emergencies due to manmade and/or natural disasters in various parts of the world. Appendix 1 illustrates some recent GIEWS activities (see *Appendix 1: Some GIEWS Activities*).

Early warning does not stop when the alarm bell is rung. It has long been the contention of GIEWS that it is not enough to point out problems and resultant resource requirements. Response monitoring and advocacy is also critical, whenever problems of food insecurity require resource transfers from donor or national governments. How far do the committed resources cover the needs? Are more pledges needed? Is the assistance arriving quickly enough? If the response is inadequate, GIEWS pressures the concerned authorities to increase and/or speed up allocations.

2. Information Sharing and Management

2.1. Forging Institutional Links

GIEWS collects and compiles information from numerous sources. The effectiveness of the system depends on comprehensive, consistent, and timely access to information. For this reason the System has cultivated strong institutional links with its users and information providers. The network is vast and complex, characterized by two-way communications. This section briefly describes the information flow mechanisms, which are presented in Figure 1.

The secretariat of GIEWS is a small unit based in FAO's headquarters in Rome. A wealth of information is available from within FAO headquarters. FAO's technical

divisions and services provide GIEWS with information on agrometeorology, agricultural and demographic statistics, cross-border pest and disease threats, agriculture-related emergencies, nutrition, and so on. Experts from the Commodities and Trade Division provide updated analyses of world food market conditions.

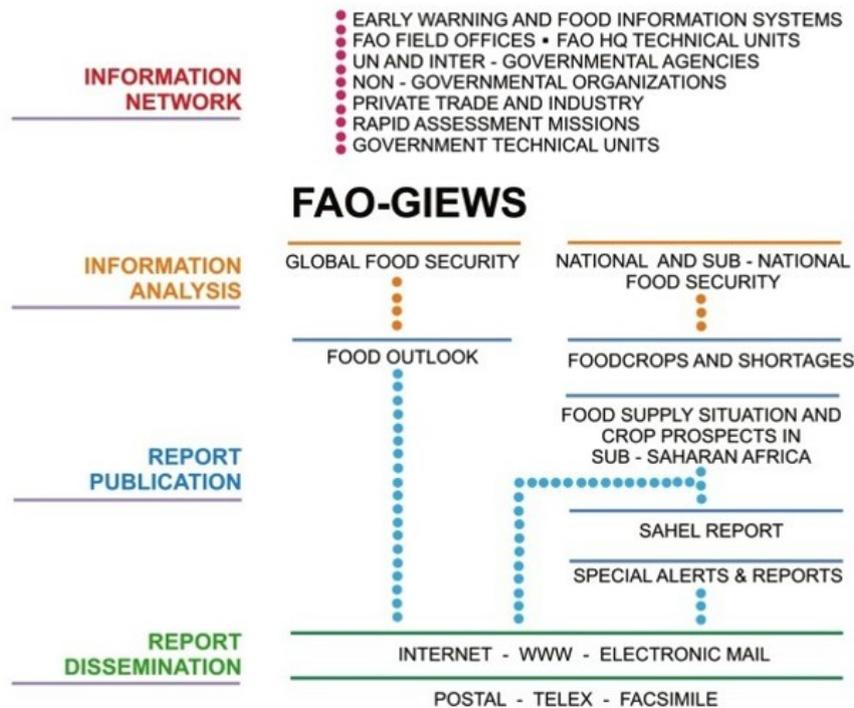


Figure 1. Global Information and Early Warning System: A simplified diagram

FAO representatives in the member states assemble much valuable information, through regular contacts with focal points in the relevant ministries. They transmit standard format reports to GIEWS each month. The decentralization of the FAO strengthened the reporting network at the field level. Perhaps the most valuable sources of local and national information are the Early Warning and Food Information Systems (EWFIS) where they are operational.

Most FAO member states and a few non-FAO members belong to GIEWS. Country membership has increased, reflecting new arrivals from the Commonwealth of Independent States and the former Yugoslavia. The aid donor and recipient countries are the main users of the System. They are also important providers of data, especially on food assistance.

GIEWS maintains a close working relationship with WFP and has regular communication with other UN agencies such as UNHCR and UNICEF. Collaborative initiatives are well under way to enhance the exchange of technical expertise and data between GIEWS and WFP's Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping Unit (VAM). GIEWS works closely with The Office of the Co-ordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), formerly DHA.

NGOs are often a crucial source of local level information, especially in conflict

situations, when the official information channels are paralyzed. The GIEWS NGO network has greatly expanded in the past five years. Formal institutional links have been forged with several NGOs, most notably with the Save the Children Fund (SCF/UK).

GIEWS is one of the key players in the establishment of an interagency mechanism for establishing and developing Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Mapping Systems (FIVIMS). This initiative is intended to improve data sharing between all institutions working in the food security sector, and to stimulate debate and technical progress through regular consultations. The Japanese government has established a generous trust fund to support the program.

Finally, the System has a close symbiotic relationship with the news media. Each day, GIEWS scans the international and national news services for information of relevance to food security and agriculture. GIEWS' reports, in turn, are frequently cited in the international and national press.

2.2. Reflecting Users Needs

The System must keep pace with users' evolving needs. It provides a service, so it is important to know whether the customers are satisfied and how the system could be improved. GIEWS encourages users to comment on all the regular reports. In addition, readership surveys were conducted in 1991 and 1997.

The surveys assessed:

- The composition and type of readership
- Perceptions on report timeliness
- Evaluation of the thematic content and scope, suggestions for additional topics
- The perceived quality, usefulness, and accuracy of the reports
- Report format/presentation

The surveys and informal comments provided by users have helped to identify priority areas for further modification. They also confirm that more than 90% of readers find the information to be useful or very useful for their work.

2.3. Supporting Local Systems

Regional, national, and subnational early warning and food information systems (EWFIS) have been established in many countries. These are the critical source of information for the most food insecure countries in the world. As a result of the complex and multidisciplinary nature of data collection and analysis, these systems require high levels of investment in computer systems and staff training. Strengthening the capacity of local, national, and regional EWFIS has long been an objective of FAO. GIEWS contributes to this process through the provision of data, expertise, and software. Regular contacts have been established with focal points in key institutions.

If such systems were effective and universal, would there be a need for a global system? The philosophy of GIEWS is that, while regional, national, and local systems are essential, and strengthening them is a priority, a global system is also necessary, for

these reasons:

- **Objectivity and independence:** food information is often politically sensitive. National governments can suppress details of food crises, especially when they reflect poorly on national policies. Sometimes governments may exaggerate requests for food assistance. An independent and objective body is able to assess the plausibility of information.
- **Comparative perspective:** National authorities have their own definitions of emergencies and methods for quantifying requirements. This makes it difficult to compare requests for assistance from different countries. By applying common definitions and methods, GIEWS is able to identify priority areas for attention and assistance.
- **Easy access to information on cross-border risks:** Many of the factors determining food security do not respect borders. Domestic policymakers are often interested to know what is happening to world markets, as this will affect imports, exports, and local prices. They need to know about cross-border pest risks. GIEWS provides the latest information on regional issues.
- **Information on world markets or conditions in neighboring countries can be difficult or costly to obtain.** There is no guarantee that governments in low-income countries will be able to afford it. By providing free information, GIEWS ensures that analyses of regional, cross-border, and international issues are available to all.
- **In conflict situations government institutions may collapse.** Data can be lost with no structures for collection and reporting. Such was the situation in Rwanda in 1994 and in Somalia from 1992. GIEWS acts as a backup in these cases.
- **Regrettably, humanitarian concerns are often overshadowed by political and resource concerns.** GIEWS performs an important role in advocacy, through its regular reporting and through the news media, for all countries in need of humanitarian assistance, regardless of their political status.

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Bibliography

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Biographical Sketch

Abdur Rashid was educated at West Pakistan Agricultural University and received a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics from the University of Wales, UK. Since 1995 he has been Chief, Global Information and Early Warning Service, Food and Agricultural Organization, Rome. He does planning coordination and supervision of the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System activities, including the preparation of Systems reports: *Food Outlook*, *Food Crop and Shortages*, the quarterly report *Food Supply Situation*

and Crop Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa, Sahel Weather and Crop Situation reports, and Special Alerts; organizing/participating crop and food supply assessment missions to vulnerable countries and promoting GIEWS collaboration with other UN agencies, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs. From 1985–1990, he was Senior Economist and Head, Early Warning Group (1990–1995), Economist (1985–1989), Global Information and Early Warning Service, Commodities and Trade Division. Main responsibilities include planning, coordination and supervision of GIEWS work on Africa, Asia, the Near East, and Oceania (developing) regions. During the period 1978–1984 he was in Nigeria as Chief Technical Advisor, FAO/UNDP Food Security Project, giving assistance to the federal government-owned National Grains Production Company, Kaduna. As Head of the Planning Unit, the main responsibility was to assist with the: formulation of grain production, processing, and storage projects, their implementation, monitoring and evaluation; procurement of local and international loans for the projects; development of marketing and price policies for grain and grain products; training of staff in project planning, analysis and grain marketing.

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