

HEALTH AND NUTRITION TRACKING SERVICE (HNTS)

EXPERT REFERENCE GROUP

WHO Geneva
17-18 February 2009

Meeting Minutes

MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THE FIRST ERG MEETING

1. UPDATE ON HNTS CURRENT STATUS AND PLANS - OBJECTIVES, ROLES, AND COMPOSITION OF THE ERG

The ERG was informed about the HNTS current status and development and members were able to ask clarification about the mission statement of HNTS, its independence from the World Health Organization and from other institutions.

Several suggestions about ERG governance were discussed and approved:

- Reporting flow from ERG to Technical Secretariat and then to Steering Committee
- Designation of a Chair for 3 years. It would be of an added value if ERG chair could attend Steering Committee meetings
- ERG composition with a better gender and regional representation,
- ERG member possible roll-over every 3 years
- Punctual participation of humanitarian actors in ERG meetings, depending on needs.
- Creation of working groups
- Peer-review panel function supported
- Twice yearly ERG meetings.
- Circulation of ERG TOR to ERG members for comments.

2. OVERVIEW OF DEMOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO ESTIMATE MORTALITY AND THEIR POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS IN VARIOUS CRISIS CONTEXTS- INTRODUCTION ON CONTROVERSIES ABOUT EXCESS MORTALITY IN DRC AND IRAQ

The ERG organized a working session about demographic approaches to estimate mortality and their possible applications in various crisis contexts. It was an introduction also on controversies about excess mortality in DRC and Iraq.

The ERG agreed that it is important to try to come to some agreement between epidemiologists and demographers in general on most valid methods to estimate mortality rates and excess mortality in humanitarian settings. A specific ERG sub-working group will be put in place to look at areas of collaboration and subjects.

Following the current controversy on mortality estimates in DRC, the ERG welcomed IRC initiative requesting the ERG to make a peer-review of their surveys and of the 2 Belgium demographers' (Lambert and Lohle-Tart) study, as commendable.

The ERG agreed to review the IRC and Lambert and Lohle-Tart studies and to give comments to IRC. The comments will be issued as a group but members of the ERG can stay behind for various reasons such as competing interests or not enough experience in the domain.

The ERG suggested that Jon Pedersen prepares a first draft of the comments, which will be circulated to the rest of the ERG for comments, and then back for finalization. The Technical Secretariat of HNTS will coordinate this process, hopefully respecting a short timing.

3. DEFINING A SET OF CORE INDICATORS TO BE TRACKED BY HNTS

The ERG was pleased to hear the presentation made by Les Roberts about priority indicators in complex emergencies. The ERG also thanked Ronald Waldman and Peter Salama for reviewing this report. Their comments and suggestions were appreciated.

The ERG supported the recommendations of Les Roberts' consultancy especially about main indicators to be tracked in crises:

- Mortality: CMR and U5MR, if possible gender specific rates;
- Malnutrition: GAM and SAM, with weight for height and MUAC;
- Other additional indicators could be used depending on specific crisis context such as indicators of humanitarian and health coverage (eg. Liters of safe drinking water per person per day, vaccination and nutritional programme coverage, OPD attendance, beneficiaries reached by food aid and assistance), and contextual indicators.

As it was agreed by the SC, the ERG supported the idea to stay flexible to adapt tracking of indicators to the field crisis contexts. The ERG supported the need for priority indicators varying depending on the type of emergency situation (acute versus chronic, natural disaster versus conflict, developing country versus developed). Under nutrition and mortality should be at the top and then one or two major indicators that correspond to each of the major underlying causes of these outcomes could be added (indicators on access to health services, environment/water/sanitation, caring practices and food security).

The ERG confirmed the need to attempt reducing the key indicators to one or two easily measurable ones per sector, in both HNTS activities and the revised Sphere standards. They should be based in some evidence suggesting that they are related to human health.

The ERG supported the need for the HNTS to participate in the revision of the SPHERE indicators building on Les Roberts' consultancy and observations.

HNTS secretariat will draw a list of core and additional indicators on mortality, nutrition and contextual information in various situations, such as camp and non camp settings, low and high income countries, and conflicts versus natural disasters. The list will be circulated to the ERG members for their comments and a conference call organized for finalization.

4. VALIDATION OF SURVEYS FROM REPORTS AND RAW DATA, AND COMBINING MULTIPLE SOURCES INTO SUMMARY ESTIMATES OF EXCESS MORTALITY

The ERG was pleased to receive the challenging presentation made by Francesco Checchi about validation of surveys reports and raw data and combining multiples sources into summary estimates of excess mortality. The ERG wanted also to thank Mike Murphy and Courtland Robinson for peer-reviewing this consultancy. Their comments and suggestions were appreciated and useful.

For supporting HNTS activities, the ERG suggested putting sub-working groups in place around several important subjects, especially, quality scoring of surveys / quality control of data collected, use of surveillance data in crises, and estimation of mortality and nutrition trends in crises.

Regarding quality scoring, it was suggested that CRED shared its experience with HNTS and to further build on Francesco Checchi's proposal. The same type of scoring system could be developed for surveillance, looking at what has been developed by UNHCR/CDC.

5. TRACKING DATA IN DRC

The ERG thanked Epicentre for its review of surveys in Eastern DRC.

A final report with recommendations will be sent to the HNTS TS in March and shared with the SC and ERG members.

HNTS should give guidance about when, where and how to do surveys and develop a peer review function to support field actors about methodology and analysis of survey results.

Although surveillance systems and data tracking are not easy to implement in crises, HNTS and the ERG should try to develop surveillance system using sentinel site approach in Eastern DRC. A specific ERG working group coordinated by the TS should be put in place to support HNTS field activities in that sense.

6. NUTRITION SESSION

The concept note on the food price crisis raised a number of technical questions. The concept note should be rethought by SC and ACF.

The proposition about the estimation of the size of programmes treating children with severe acute malnutrition will be written by André Brien and circulated to the HNTS TS and the ERG members to be confronted to different opinions. Then, HNTS will see how to support this initiative.

7. OPERATIONAL RESEARCH

It was also suggested to make a list of topics, including the technical issues listed by the secretariat, and those raised during the meeting. This list of issues could then be ranked by HNTS secretariat and ERG members, and the final ranking could be used as a guide to select issues to be further worked on.

HNTS Expert Reference Group, February 2009 - Main conclusions