IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
Evidence and Standards for Better Food Security and Nutrition Decisions

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING THE IPC'S
ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY SCALE

ABOUT THESE GUIDELINES

These guidelines, developed by the IPC Communication Unit, are intended primarily for IPC technical trainers, writers and translators, both in-house and freelance, working on any form of technical communication. Now that so many texts disseminated by the IPC are drafted in English by native and non-native speakers alike, rules, reminders and handy references will help to serve a wider readership as well. Technical writing is broadly any form of communication about the IPC's Acute Food Insecurity (AFI) scale. The writing style includes any type of text that aims to explain detailed food security information. An IPC technical writer communicates in a way that presents technical information so the reader can use the information for a specific purpose.

ABOUT THE AFI SCALE

Acute food insecurity is any manifestation of food insecurity and malnutrition found in a specified area at a specific point in time, of a severity that threatens lives or livelihoods, or both, regardless of the causes, context or duration. Countries classify and map acute food insecurity situations within geographical areas - defined according to the national administrative divisions (e.g. provinces, prefectures, counties, etc.) or livelihood zones - and the proportion of affected households within those areas. Each area is attributed a food insecurity "Phase" . A geographical area is attributed and mapped in a specific IPC phase when at least 20 percent of the population in the area is experiencing the conditions related to that phase or higher phases. The IPC Acute Food Insecurity scale categorises acute food insecurity into five Phases of severity, ranging from IPC Phase 1, corresponding to No/Minimal acute food insecurity, to IPC Phase 5, corresponding to Catastrophe/Famine. Each of these phases has important and distinct implications for where and how best to intervene.

1. COMMUNICATING THE AFI SCALE

1.1 Use of 'severe' while communicating the AFI scale

For the purposes of the IPC, we will no longer be using the term 'severe' or 'severely' to describe Phases 3-5 collectively. This is to avoid confusion with terminology used in FAO's State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) reports. The IPC will use the phrase 'high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse' or 'high acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse' when describing Phase 3-5 collectively. The IPC will stick to the term 'acute' or 'acutely' which will be qualified with the use of adjectives 'mild', for Stressed (IPC Phase 2) 'high' for Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and 'critical' for Emergency (IPC Phase 4), to describe the individual phases (2, 3 and 4) of acute food insecurity.

Qualifying Levels of Acute Food Insecurity Using the Reference Table for Area Classification

Mild acute food insecurity → *High acute food insecurity* → *Critical acute food insecurity* →

Phase name and description	Phase 1 None/Minimal	Phase 2 Stressed	Phase 3 Crisis	Phase 4 Emergency	Phase 5 Catastrophe/ Famine
	Households are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical and unsustainable strategies to access food and income.	Households have minimally adequate food consumption but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in stress-coping strategies.	Households either: • Have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition; or • Are marginally able to meet minimum food needs but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies.	Households either: • Have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality; or • Are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.	Households have an extreme lack of food and/ or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels are evident. (For Famine Classification, area needs to have extreme critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.)
Priority response objectives	Action required to build resilience and for disaster risk reduction	Action required for disaster risk reduction and to protect livelihoods	**Urgent action required to:** →		
			Protect livelihoods and reduce food consumption gaps	Save lives and livelihoods	Revert/prevent widespread death and total collapse of livelihoods

NOTE

It is important to note that these adjectives are only meant to correctly describe the situation in any of the IPC phases of interest and should not substitute or be confused with the actual IPC AFI phases.

1.2 Communicating the AFI scale in key messages and recommendations

Phase Classification	Technical Interpretation	Technical Key Messaging and Call to Action	Media Messaging and Call to Action
IPC Phase 1 None/ Minimal	Households are able to meet essential food and non-food needs without engaging in atypical and unsustainable strategies to access food and income.	**Key Message** *Households are food secure. Households have adequate access to food and non-food items without resorting to unsustainable coping strategies. Area / population is classified in Minimal acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 1).*	**Key Message** *People are food secure / People do not face acute food insecurity / People have stable access to food.* *At area level, the population is minimally food insecure.*
		Call to Action *Interventions are required to build resilience and disaster risk reduction, so households can continue to sustain themselves.*	**Call to Action** *Action is required to reduce people's vulnerability to disasters/ shocks and to build resilience, so they can stay food secure.*
IPC Phase 2 Stressed	Households have minimally adequate food consumption, but are unable to afford some essential non-food expenditures without engaging in stress-coping strategies.	**Key Message** *Households face low levels of acute food insecurity / mild acute food insecurity. Households have borderline adequate access to food, but cannot afford some essential non-food expenditures without resorting to unsustainable coping strategies. Area / population is classified in Stressed (IPC Phase 2).*	**Key Message** *People face low levels of acute food insecurity / People are in mild acute food insecurity / People are at risk of facing high levels of acute food insecurity / People are in stress / People have erratic economic access to food / People are vulnerable to disasters/shocks.*
		Call to Action *Interventions are required for disaster risk reduction and to protect livelihoods, so households can sustain themselves.*	**Call to Action** *Action is required to improve people's stability of access to food and to reduce their vulnerability to disasters/shocks.*
IPC Phase 3 Crisis	Households either: • Have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition; or • Are marginally able to meet minimum food needs but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies.	**Key Message** *Households face high levels of acute food insecurity / high acute food insecurity. Many or more children than usual are malnourished due to inadequate access to food. Households only have adequate access to food by resorting to harmful coping strategies or selling their assets. Area / population is classified in Crisis (IPC Phase 3).*	**Key Message** *People face high levels of acute food insecurity / People are in high acute food insecurity / People are in crisis / People are malnourished due to inadequate access to food / People only have enough food by selling off their assets or through other harmful coping strategies.*
		Call to Action *Urgent action is required to protect livelihoods and increase access to food to avoid a food emergency..*	**Call to Action** *Urgent action is needed to improve and increase people's access to food. If nothing is done, people could face hunger.*
IPC Phase 4 Emergency	Households either: • Have large food consumption gaps which are reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality; or • Are able to mitigate large food consumption gaps but only by employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation.	**Key Message** *Households face critical levels of acute food insecurity / critical acute food insecurity. The situation is life-threatening with households being food deprived and children under five severely malnourished. Households only have adequate access to food by resorting to emergency coping strategies and selling their assets. Area / population is classified in Emergency (IPC Phase 4).*	**Key Message** *People face critical levels of acute food insecurity / People are in critical acute food insecurity / People are in a situation of emergency / People are severely malnourished due to lack of food / People only have enough food by selling off their assets or through other emergency coping strategies.*
		Call to Action *Urgent action is needed to save lives and livelihoods. If nothing is done, the population could face starvation or death.*	**Call to Action** *Urgent action is needed to save lives. If nothing is done, people could face extreme hunger or death.*
IPC Phase 5 Catastrophe/ Famine	Households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after full employment of coping strategies. Starvation, death, destitution and Extremely Critical acute malnutrition levels are evident. For Famine Classification, area needs to have Extremely Critical levels of acute malnutrition and mortality.	**Key Message** *Households face catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity / catastrophic acute food insecurity. Households are extremely food deprived and children under five severely malnourished. Households still have inadequate access to food even after full employment of coping strategies. Households face starvation and death. Area / population is classified in Catastrophy (IPC Phase 5).* *A population needs to have Extremely Critical levels of acute malnutrition/mortality for an area to be classified in Famine.*	**Key Message** *People face catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity / People are in catastrophic acute food insecurity / People are in a catastrophic situation / People are facing starvation and death / People are severely malnourished due to lack of food / People still do not have any means left to access food.* *At area level, the population is in a situation of Famine.*
		Famine definition: *According to the IPC, 'Famine' exists in areas where at least one in five households suffers from an extreme deprivation of food. Starvation, Extremely Critical levels of acute malnutrition (at least 30 percent of children malnourished) and significant mortality, directly attributable to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease (at least 1 person for every 5,000 dies each day), are occurring.*	
		Call to Action *Urgent immediate action is needed to stop widespread starvation and death, and the total collapse of livelihoods.*	**Call to Action** *Urgent action is needed to stop widespread starvation and death.*
IPC Phase 5 Famine Likely	For Famine Likely Classification, Famine is likely occurring, however, not enough evidence is available to confirm or deny it.	**Call to Action** *Urgent immediate action is needed to stop the likelihood of widespread starvation and death, and the total collapse of livelihoods. Additional evidence should be collected to confirm classification urgently.*	**Call to Action** *Urgent action is needed to stop likely widespread starvation and death. More evidence should be collected to confirm the situation.*

2. WRITING STYLE DEFINITION

For reasons of stylistic consistency, the IPC follows 'British English', based on the style of English spoken and written in Britain and Ireland.

This is the version of English on which this guide bases its instructions, as it is the standard commonly used in technical writing. Your text should present the information in the most professional and legible way possible. To ensure this process, we recommend integrating the following key technical characteristics into your writing:

2.1. Writing in the Correct Style

At long last you have finished the analysis, gone through the plenary and can start to write! But, where to begin? It can seem overwhelming, but by going through this thoughtful planning process, your writing will be easier and more efficient. In addition to ensuring the content is clear, you also need to ensure the style of writing is suitable for a technical document, keeping in mind political context and other influencing factors. The writing needs to be accessible, direct and professional. Flowery or emotional text is not welcome in an IPC technical document.

2.2 Active Voice

Write in the active voice. It is much easier to read and understand than the passive voice. Whenever possible, choose the active voice in your writing. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence is who or what is doing the action.

Passive Example: The food insecurity was caused by prolonged drought.

Active Example: Prolonged drought caused the food insecurity.

2.3 Accurate Word Choice

Choose your words thoughtfully. Use the best word for the context. Include necessary details that make the message clear and precise. Avoid overusing vague pronouns such as 'it', 'the area' and 'this', as the reader may have difficulty identifying the antecedent.

Example: When it rains, then the rivers flood and food is lost.

Improved: Two months of torrential rains in XX County caused flooding that has destroyed farmland and wiped out markets.

2.4 Sentence Structure

Always include the most important information in the main clause of your sentence. The reader will find it easier to identify the key points and arguments.

Example: The population in most of the merged areas experienced conflict and terrorism for almost a decade, which affected their food and livestock production, food consumption, damaged the rural infrastructure and markets.

Improved: The populations in most of the newly-merged areas in XXX have been experiencing conflict and terrorism for nearly a decade. The fighting has affected their ability to produce food and maintain livestock, damaged rural infrastructure and limited their access to food markets.

Flow: Make sure your sentences follow a logical flow from one idea to another. If you jump from one to the other, you will confuse your reader.

Just think about what makes the most sense:

Example: Distances to access water have reduced for populations across the analysed counties. However, practices of treating water before it's consumed is generally low. Hand washing practices remain low in most counties. Latrine coverage also remains low. Most open water sources are freely accessible, however, it costs an average of Ksh. 3-10 per 20-liter jerrycan.

Improved: Distances to access water have reduced for populations across the analysed counties. However, practices of treating water before it's consumed is generally low. Most open water sources are freely accessible, however, it costs an average of Ksh. 3-10 per 20-liter jerrycan. Hand washing practices remain low in most counties. Latrine coverage also remains low.

2.5 Brevity

Be brief. Shorten run-on sentences or eliminate unnecessary words to make the text as concise as possible. Technical writing must be clear and direct, so there is no need to add unnecessary colour or complexity. Always ask yourself, can I deliver the same message using less words?

Example: It is of the utmost importance to open the port for all humanitarian cargo deemed essential to save lives and livelihoods to be able to come in. If not opened imminently, the people of this great nation will starve to death.

Improved: The port must be opened to allow humanitarian cargo in, to avoid severe food shortages and get supplies to the people who need them.

2.6 Avoid Too Much Jargon

Jargon is an easy trap for an IPC technical writer to fall into. If you're an expert in your field, it can be easy to use language that is familiar among your colleagues without realizing it may be confusing for other readers. Some people use jargon in an effort to impress and prove they know what they are talking about. However, the true sign of an expert is someone who can break complicated concepts down into simplified explanations. Jargon should be avoided and only used when appropriate for specific audiences. When you need to use technical terms, make sure to define them for the first reference in the text. When it comes to abbreviations, write out the complete title followed by the abbreviation in parentheses for the first reference in the text. These strategies act as reference points for readers who may not be familiar with the subject.

3. 'FOOD SECURITY' AND 'HUNGER'

More often than not, communicators conveying IPC AFI information have substituted the term "Food Insecurity" with "Hunger". Whereas those two concepts are vastly different, it is clear that lay audiences better resonate with "hunger", compared to "food security" which remains somewhat technical and sometimes confused with food safety.

What is hunger?

Hunger[1] is an uncomfortable or painful physical sensation caused by insufficient consumption of dietary energy. It becomes chronic when the person does not consume a sufficient amount of calories (dietary energy) on a regular basis to lead a normal, active, and healthy life.

What is food insecurity?

A person is food insecure[2] when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food. Food insecurity can be experienced at different levels of severity.

Whereas it is technically unsuitable to substitute 'food insecurity' with 'hunger', we understand, but don't necessarily encourage this, especially in information products meant for technical audiences. As such, IPC's technical information products will consistently use 'food insecurity' as a specific technical area of focus.

4. USING NUMBERS IN IPC AFI PRODUCTS

Using too many numbers in the same sentence can confuse a reader. In IPC technical writing it is obviously impossible to avoid numbers, but there is a standard rule to follow: try to include no more than three numbers in a sentence. When it comes to writing numbers out in your text, the standard is:

-Write out numbers from one to ten; and

-Write the actual number for any figure above ten.

> *Example: The analysis includes data from 33 regions in the country, including the three most affected districts.*

When it comes to large numbers, the simplest form is best. For the purposes of consistency, we will follow this style:

-Write out the full number for anything under 1,000,000.

> *Example: 980,000 people are classified in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and worse.*

-Write anything over 1,000,000 as a combination of number and word.

> *Example: More than 3 million people in XXX are expected to experience high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse in July 2020.*

-You can round large numbers up/down in key messages and figures, but do not include more than three digits. Be consistent in the way you round up/down. We generally round to the nearest 1000 for numbers under one million and 10,000 for numbers over one million.

> *Example: Rounding up 2,675,437 people to 2.68 million people, or rounding down 344,371 people to 344,000 people.*

5. CURRENT VS PROJECTION LANGUAGE:

This can be a tricky one. IPC analyses include two time periods: current and projected. That means we have to write in two different tenses. For the purposes of this guide, we will follow this rule: **use the tense that is appropriate for the time frame of the publishing date**.

The current period should be written in the present tense, if it corresponds to the current time frame - what is currently happening.

> *Example: Over 500,000 people are facing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse between May and August 2020.*

The projection period should then be written in the future tense - what will happen. For IPC purposes, we also need to couch the language further for projections by using words such as 'likely' or 'expected' since we don't yet know the outcome - what will likely happen.

> *Example: Over 500,000 people will likely face a food crisis between September and December 2020.*

Sometimes, a brief is published after the CURRENT period has expired, and while the projection period is ongoing. In this case, the current period should be described using the past tense - what has happened.

> *Example: Over 500,000 people faced Crisis and Emergency levels of acute food insecurity between October and December 2019.*

The projection period should then be described using the present continuous tense (+ likely) - what is likely happening. It shows that something started in the past and is continuing at the present time.

> *Example: Over 500,000 people are likely facing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse between January and April 2020.*

However, sometimes a brief is published after even the PROJECTION period has expired. So, what do you do in that case? We suggest using the present perfect tense (+ likely) for the projection period - what has likely happened.

> *Example: Over 500,000 people have likely faced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) and worse between January and April 2020.*

[1]Hunger and food insecurity http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/

[2]Hunger and food insecurity http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/

6. VISUAL DISPLAY

While the core of an IPC technical document is its text, the visual display, especially for maps and graphics, should not be forgotten. A wall of text is difficult to read through. Even the clearest instructions can be lost in a document that has poor visual representation. Thoughtful formatting, templates, maps and infographics will help to break down complicated issues, make the information more dynamic for the IPC's audiences to read, and guide their eyes to key points.

6.1 Clarity in Formatting

The visual style of the technical document also applies to the formatting stage. Formatting should look clean and professional. Well-chosen, readable fonts, sizing, and layout will assist the reader in following and understanding the text. Larger documents should consider including a table of contents, section headers, and appendices to best structure the information.

6.2 Correct Use of Colours

IPC Phases are communicated with colour codes. It's crucial to follow these colour codes in IPC analyses in order to communicate the phases clearly and consistently.

6.3 Communication Templates

IPC 3.0 communication templates for technical documents make it easy for technical writers and communicators to follow a standard style. The templates were developed for the purpose of clarifying the writing process for analysts and with the IPC audience's needs in mind.

6.4 Enhance with Appropriate Graphics

They say 'a picture is worth a thousand words.' This phrase rings true even for IPC technical writing. However, not just any visual works in a technical document. Technical information can be difficult to convey with text alone. A well-placed image or diagram can help make the writer's point clearer. The visual (map or infographic) should be directly relevant to the text and be clearly referenced in both the narrative and an explanatory caption.

7. FINAL REVIEW

7.1. Review Carefully – Tap into Your Nerdy Side

Good writing of any form must be free of spelling and grammar errors. It may seem obvious, but it's not always easy, especially when writing lengthy technical documents. But, don't worry – you're not on your own. There are a number of software tools that can assist in your grammatical review. The two most useful tools we suggest are:

· *Microsoft Word Spelling and Grammar with the Readability Measurement*

· *Grammarly (See www.grammarly.com) - you can select British English from the four available dialects*

It is recommended to run your text through both of these programs to double-check for any errors. This should be a preliminary check, followed by a thorough secondary review using your own eyes. Software cannot always grasp inconsistencies, nor understand context or nuance. During the secondary review, we recommend reading passages aloud to test how it sounds and if there are any awkward spots.

7.2. IPC Technical Review

Once you have ensured the text is linguistically correct, you will need to ensure it's also technically correct. Take a minute to step back from the document and return to it with the mindset of targeting your intended audience. For example, if your document is a user manual, you want the instructions to be written in a way that guide your audience on to operate the product. Or, if your document is a proposal for a new business, you want it to be written in a way that encourages investors to buy into what you are selling.

7.3 Design Review

All designers struggle at times to get a design to achieve a look that they are thoroughly happy with and in line with official guidelines. Many times, we'll have an idea that really seems like it will work, but when it's executed in any format, it just doesn't look complete. Sometimes, it can be difficult to pinpoint a specific reason why the design isn't quite right. In another set of guidelines, we'll take a look at our design review checklist, which features some questions to ask yourself when a design is not living up to your expectations. These questions focus primarily on the design aspects including, colour use, mapping protocols and guidelines, typography, layout and hierarchy.

7.3. Review Cycle

With your personal review complete, the document should now be reviewed by other members of the Technical Working Group. This peer review process is very valuable for you as a technical writer. External feedback will help you improve the current text, catch any points or errors you may have missed and will also improve your writing in the future. Becoming a good writer is a process that simply takes practice. Reviewing, revising and editing should never be an afterthought, but should be a carefully-considered component of every technical writing work.

For any questions about these guidelines, please contact the IPC Communications Unit at ipc@fao.org.