Author’s response to reviews

Title: Assessing the completeness and comparability of outcomes in systematic reviews addressing food security: protocol for a methodological study

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Author’s response to reviews:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the peer reviewer feedback to our manuscript “Assessing the completeness and comparability of outcomes in systematic reviews addressing food security: protocol for a methodological study”, submitted to your journal. Please see our responses below.

Best regards
Solange Durão (on behalf of co-authors)

Reviewer reports:
Reviewer #1:

1. this is a very important research question that should be addressed. I think this a good piece of work. Most of the work process is stated clearly.

Thank you.

2. It should be stated more clearly that identifying and developing core outcomes is not the objective that it will be conducted in another project.

We have made this clearer in the objectives section, by stating that this project will inform a subsequent project aiming to identify core outcomes (line 153 of manuscript).

I read the second manuscript with the track changes - when I stated numbers, these are the lines of the manuscript:

3. -to be transparent you can register your protocol at openscienceframework (https://osf.io/) for example.
Thank you for the suggestion. We believe that by publishing the protocol for this project we are aiming for transparency regarding our research.

4. -72: Pre-specification of outcomes at the protocol stage, i.e. before data collection and analyses have been done, prevents decisions, such as which outcomes, which specific measurements, and which time-points should be examined, from being influenced by the knowledge of the results (3) - I could not find this information in the Cochrane Handbook

The Cochrane handbook refers to importance of pre-specification in the protocol in Chapter 9, section 9.6.5.2 (http://handbook-5-1.cochrane.org/): “Authors should, whenever possible, pre-specify characteristics in the protocol that later will be subject to subgroup analyses or meta-regression. Pre-specifying characteristics reduces the likelihood of spurious findings, first by limiting the number of subgroups investigated and second by preventing knowledge of the studies’ results influencing which subgroups are analysed. True pre-specification is difficult in systematic reviews, because the results of some of the relevant studies are often known when the protocol is drafted. If a characteristic was overlooked in the protocol, but is clearly of major importance and justified by external evidence, then authors should not be reluctant to explore it. However, such post hoc analyses should be identified as such.”

We noticed the incorrect chapter was cited and we have corrected this in the references.

5. -87: MA should not be abbreviated or the abbreviation explained before

Abbreviation removed, thank you.

6. -Table 1: 3) Specific metric or format of Outcome data that will be used for Analysis - would not it be rather a weight measurement as kg/pounds than any value

The metric refers to the format of the data that will be used for analysis (e.g., value at a time-point, change from baseline) rather than the unit of measurement, which would be Kg. We added another example to Table 1.

7. -119: is it 66% to 75%? Why are there two percentages?

The former statistic refers to stunting and the latter to wasting. We have made this clearer in the manuscript.

8. -Objectives: to improve food security in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) through your methods work is a consequence but not a direct one, that is a much longer shot

We do not suggest that our methods work will improve food security in LMICs; but rather contributes to how outcomes in related reviews are reported. We have clarified the language of Aim 1 to avoid confusion.
9. Objectives: Our findings will contribute to discussions about the best approach to pre-specify outcomes for SRs and Primary research in the field of food security and to identify core outcomes for this area. - I am not completely sure what that means, would you like to do a further mehtods project doing interviews with experts presenting them your list of identified outcomes?

We have clarified this sentence to convey two ideas – that this work can lead to better awareness of the importance of pre-specification and reporting of outcomes in SRs and primary research in this field, and that this work can inform future work on the development of core outcome sets.

10. I would make it clearer that identifying and developing core outcomes is not part of your methods study but would lead to a further study/Investigation

This has been clarified in the objectives section of the manuscript.

11. Methods: would be protocols also included or not, that is not consistent in the mehtods section

We have clarified this in the methods section where we describe the criteria for eligible systematic reviews. Both protocols and complete reviews were sought.

12. I am not sure if the search is sufficient, EMBASE? Epistemonikos? search startegy should be added

We believe that the search was sufficiently comprehensive to identify the relevant systematic reviews. There is much overlap between EMBASE and Epistemonikos and the other databases we searched. We did not have access to EMBASE at the time we searched for the reviews, however, given that this is not a search for a systematic review to inform healthcare decision-making, we believe it is sufficient.

Reviewer #2: The protocol reads well, although expanding the relevance to groups outside those with a shared interest might be challenging. No specific changes to suggest/recommend.

Thank you.