

# Evaluation Brief

WFP Office of Evaluation: *Measuring Results, Sharing Lessons*



## Evaluation of WFP's Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts

### Context

WFP's policies on the humanitarian principles and access were approved by the WFP Executive Board in 2004 and 2006, respectively. This evaluation covers the period from the policy approvals through 2017, focusing on 2012–2017, and was coordinated alongside the Evaluation of WFP's Humanitarian Protection Policy.

Adherence to the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and operational independence, and the ability to gain access to those in need of assistance, are central to WFP's operations.

The evaluation was timely in the context of increasingly complex and protracted crises, a new impetus to the debate on linking the humanitarian and development agendas, and alignment of WFP's strategic planning with the Sustainable Development Goals.

### Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation was intended for both accountability and learning purposes. It assessed: i) the quality of the policies, ii) WFP's performance on humanitarian principles and access, and iii) factors affecting the results observed.

Data-gathering tools and methods included: extensive document review; review of comparator organizations); field visits to six country operations (Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Bangladesh, Mali and Burundi) and four regional hubs (Dakar, Nairobi, Amman and Bangkok); key informant interviews with WFP staff, partners and donors; surveys with staff, partners and 2,500 affected people in six countries; analysis of media, social media and complaints and feedback mechanism data; and quantitative and network analysis.

### Key Findings

#### Quality of the policies

The evaluation found that WFP's policies on humanitarian principles and access remain highly relevant at a time characterized by growth in the number of protracted emergencies and increasing politicization of the aid environment. The policies are largely coherent, but WFP has not invested sufficiently in their dissemination and implementation in concert with other cross-cutting policy areas, leading to a highly variable understanding of humanitarian principles across the organization and a lack of clarity about important aspects of WFP's approach to access.

The Statement of Humanitarian Principles remains a relevant confirmation of WFP's adherence to the foundational principles of the humanitarian system, but fails to meet the standards of a fully-fledged policy. The Statement risks diluting the importance of the core principles by presenting them together with other corporate standards; it does not distinguish between the emergency and development activities of WFP's dual mandate; and it does not address how potential tensions between the principles could be addressed.

Similarly, the Note on Humanitarian Access and its Implications fails to prescribe measures for implementation or provide guidance on how to deal with trade-offs that might be necessary to secure principled access in specific cases.

#### WFP's performance

##### Humanitarian Principles

WFP's performance on the humanitarian principles was found to be uneven. WFP enjoys a positive reputation for humanity, qualified only by concerns about the quality of the assistance it delivers. It also demonstrates a relatively strong performance on impartiality: no evidence of deliberate discrimination was found, although the evaluation team found impartiality-related weaknesses reflected in uneven coverage of food security needs, both globally and within countries. Perceptions of WFP's neutrality are less positive, especially among external stakeholders, owing to its close relationship with host governments and its reliance on the use of armed escorts, particularly in conflict situations. Finally, operational independence was found to be the least understood of the humanitarian principles, and is constrained by WFP's dependence on mostly earmarked funding from a relatively small pool of donors.

##### Access

By working through partners WFP enjoys relatively strong access for delivering food assistance. Its performance is particularly strong in difficult operating environments, covering a greater share of needs in areas that face insecurity and logistics constraints than in areas that do not. However, uneven coverage of food needs by WFP within some countries was also found. Moreover, WFP faces important constraints on its conduct of needs assessments and monitoring activities.

## Explanatory Factors for Results Achieved

The evaluation identified several factors that have both enabled and constrained application of the policies.

WFP’s *mandate* to provide food assistance was identified as one of the most important factors facilitating the organization’s access to people in need. This is due to the relatively uncontroversial nature of food, the ability to use even short windows of opportunity to distribute, and the popularity of food as a commodity.

WFP has an *organizational culture* that often gives precedence to humanity and access over, or in trade-off of, longer-term considerations like WFP’s perceived neutrality, independence and impartiality. Positive factors driving this culture include the organisation’s pride in its ability to deliver in challenging environments and incentives for prioritizing delivery.

However, WFP relies heavily on cooperating and commercial *partners* for access to operational areas and assistance delivery. Weaknesses in partner selection and management and monitoring of partner activities, combined with strong competition among partners constrained WFP’s ability to ensure adherence to the humanitarian principles.

WFP’s strategic *relationships with host governments* often facilitate authorizations and enhance WFP’s access. However, these same relationships may in some contexts undermine perceptions of WFP’s neutrality and impartiality, particularly when WFP does not actively advocate principled engagement. Similarly, the lack of systematic and strategic engagement with non-state armed groups in many contexts was found to undermine WFP’s perceived neutrality and potentially limit its access to areas controlled by such groups.

*Decision-making processes* in WFP are also highly decentralized, a flexibility which enables access, but also limits global organisational coherence. Lastly, *low staff competence* was a crucial constraining factor for both access and the principles.

## Conclusions

The evaluation concludes that the humanitarian principles and access policies are more relevant today than ever before and need increased institutional attention and support. WFP’s strong access for delivery through partners and its related strong performance on humanity comes at the expense of some compromises on the principles of impartiality, neutrality and operational independence in some settings. Greater attention to a principled approach, as well as to promoting access for needs assessment and monitoring, are essential successful policy implementation .

## Lessons

Several previous policy evaluations have noted similar shortcomings in terms of policy quality, supporting guidance and investment in implementation.

Globally, the integration of different development and humanitarian agendas raises important questions for the application of the humanitarian principles, and underscores the importance of understanding and adherence to the humanitarian principles and access guidelines, as well as possible trade-offs.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** In 2019, the Policy and Programme Division should strengthen the dissemination and operationalization of the policies on access and humanitarian principles.

**Recommendation 2.** In 2018, the Policy and Programme Division should put in place measures to increase the priority given to neutrality, impartiality and operational independence relative to access and humanity.

**Recommendation 3.** In 2019, the Human Resources Division should considerably strengthen staff competencies on humanitarian principles and access, particularly in complex emergency situations.

**Recommendation 4.** In 2019, the Operations Services Department should give more priority to humanitarian principles in all elements of engagement with cooperating partners.

**Recommendation 5.** In 2019, the Supply Chain Division should increase policy awareness, guidance and training opportunities for commercial partners.

**Recommendation 6.** In 2019, the Operations Services Department should continue investing and strengthening needs assessment and the use of its data.

**Recommendation 7.** In 2019, the Field Security Division should strengthen WFP’s security capacity in complex emergencies and improve security officers’ focus on humanitarian principles and access.

**Recommendation 8.** In 2019-2020, the Government Partnerships Division should increase and regularize the dialogue with donors on humanitarian principles and access, strengthen principled financing; and advocate for stronger support to all facets of WFP operations that are critical for principled access.

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### Reference:

Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at [www1.wfp.org/independent-evaluation](http://www1.wfp.org/independent-evaluation)  
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