

Evaluation Brief

WFP Office of Evaluation: Measuring Results, Sharing Lessons



Corporate Emergency Evaluation of the WFP Regional response to the Syrian Crisis (January 2015- March 2018)

Context

In the eighth year of the conflict, and characterized as a 'protection crisis' both inside the Syrian Arab Republic and the region, the situation has continued to be highly volatile in Syria, with large-scale displacements and widespread vulnerability and humanitarian needs.

In 2018, 10.5 million people required food assistance, including 6.5 million acutely food insecure. 5.6 million Syrian refugees are mainly registered in five countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

The WFP response

Extremely large-scale with annual average expenditures over US\$ 1 billion, the response to the regional crisis represented 18 percent of requirements of the WFP Programme of Work 2015-2017. Operations targeted 7 million beneficiaries per year on average between 2015-2017, with over 9 million people targeted in 2018.

The main activity of General Food Assistance (GFA), comprising 82% of the total population reached from 2015-2017 across all 6 countries, was delivered using 98% in-kind rations for Syria and 98% cash-based transfers in refugee-hosting countries. This included basic needs assistance in Lebanon and Turkey. Resilience (food for assets, food for training and other livelihoods activities), school feeding, and nutrition inside Syria, expanded since 2017, but remain a small proportion of the portfolio.

Operational requirements were 65% funded in aggregate terms between 2012-2017. Under fluid, fast-moving and polarized operating conditions, Syria EMOP 200339 expanded between 2011-2016 through 16 Budget Revisions, to target 4.5 million beneficiaries in 2016. PRRO 200988 targeted 5.74 million beneficiaries from January 2017. Regional EMOP 200433, with 18 Budget Revisions between 2012-2016, targeted 2.4 million beneficiaries in 2016. PRRO 200987 targeted 3.54 million beneficiaries.

As of January 2018, under the WFP Integrated Roadmap, involved Country Offices transitioned to a Country Strategic Plan (Lebanon) and a Transitional Interim Country Strategic Plan (all other countries).

Subject and Focus of the Evaluation

The evaluation follows a previous one that covered 2011-2014. It covers the WFP response inside Syria and the five affected countries, namely Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, implemented through two Emergency Operations, and two Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations. Four main questions were assessed:

1. To what extent WFP maximized the use of partnerships and synergies to improve its response?
2. How well the response aligned to needs?
3. How efficient was the response?
4. What results were delivered?

Objectives and Users of the Evaluation

The evaluation had both learning and accountability aims. Whilst focused on the needs, interests and priorities of affected populations and the wider humanitarian community, its direct intended users are WFP country offices, Regional Bureau in Cairo and WFP management.

Key Findings

Partnerships and Synergies. Aligned with wider strategic frameworks and relevant UN resolutions for cross-border and cross-line assistance, WFP played a critical leading role within the UN Whole of Syria mechanisms. WFP acted as a conscientious partner within the collective humanitarian response, despite some tensions with partner agencies in the delivery of cash-based transfers. It earned relations of mutual respect with host governments.

The range of WFP cooperating partners expanded and diversified, namely for resilience activities and at local level. However, the mass scale of response, compounded with, in refugee hosting countries, the use of the cash modality (delivered through banks, retailers and shops) curtailed the frequency, duration and quality of cooperating partners' face to face contact with beneficiaries.

The 'Syria plus five' model was appropriate as it distinguished Syria strategically and operationally and provided a compelling vehicle for advocacy and regional-level coordination. However, it did not act as a driver for regional synergies, with limited knowledge transfer across countries addressing similar challenges.

Alignment to Needs. WFP activities were relevant to needs, helped by strong food security analysis, increased use of vulnerability-based targeting and caseload prioritization. However, gender, protection and vulnerable group analyses inconsistently carried out, as was consultation with affected populations. The use of evidence to inform programming was unsystematic. Modalities were appropriate to context. Resilience activities were less relevant however.

Efficiency. The response was highly time and cost efficient, both in-kind and cash. A professionalized supply chain inside Syria decreased lead time from four months to 40 days, and technological innovations helped keep deliveries reliable. Lessons from the many operational improvements and

innovations can serve the humanitarian community, beyond WFP. A minority of beneficiaries experienced delays, and/or temporary loss of assistance, due to routine card issues.

Results. Across operations and activities, WFP met planned beneficiary targets each year, although intended transfer values were not always achieved. Due to funding shortages, WFP delivered some two-thirds of the intended tonnage / cash-based transfer values between 2015 and 2017.

Food consumption and dietary diversity scores among GFA/basic needs assistance beneficiaries were maintained, in contrast to non-beneficiaries, and the use of coping strategies reduced. Other activity areas showed emerging gains, including resilience.

WFP also helped open up humanitarian access in Syria, shared technical knowledge, and made considerable economic contributions to host countries. Assistance adhered to the International Humanitarian Principles, though the mass scale of the response sometimes challenged the ability of WFP to track and ensure full adherence to neutrality and operational independence at local level.

The response paid insufficient attention to gender and protection and mechanisms for Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), particularly in terms of communicating with beneficiary populations, and did not adequately meet beneficiary concerns, needs or expectations in this regard. Partly induced by the scale of the response on the one hand, and the complex humanitarian context on the other, WFP had a reduced 'line of sight' to beneficiaries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

Facing humanitarian needs of an unprecedented scale in politically sensitive environments, WFP executed a high-powered, hard-fought, professionally adept and technically-sophisticated response from January 2015 - March 2018.

GFA/basic needs assistance served millions in need by innovating, adapting and piloting, and, where necessary, leading on behalf of the humanitarian community. WFP operations, particularly in cash-based transfers, achieved a scale and technological complexity new to the humanitarian community, whilst being time- and cost-efficient.

In its own terms, and those of many of its funders, WFP rose to the challenges of the crisis: a measure of its technical abilities under highly complex emergency conditions. However, in meeting needs at this scale, WFP resources and institutional energy were largely focused on the supply side of the response: ensuring delivery. This created some 'blind spots', including a reduced 'line of sight' to beneficiaries.

Such blind spots included gender, protection and AAP, all of which lacked adequate staffing as well as management and programmatic attention, particularly in terms of

communicating with beneficiary populations. The complex operational choices faced by staff in the response would benefit from a more consistently politically-astute approach.

Going forward, the response can also be improved through stronger learning and knowledge transfer and a clear articulation of the WFP regional-level vision of success.

The evaluation raises the question of how WFP and the wider humanitarian community define a successful humanitarian response, particularly when balancing the challenges of scale and sensitivity to beneficiary needs. For WFP, it suggests a need to refocus on beneficiaries' wider needs, concerns and expectations and place them more centrally within its response.

Recommendations

The recommendations aim to improve the qualitative dimensions of the WFP response, as to better place the beneficiary at the center of the next phase of the response as the crisis continues to evolve.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen capacity & systems for accountability to affected populations: allocate dedicated staff and resources, review current AAP mechanisms, and provide a clear strategic statement to ensure sufficient beneficiary communications and feedback mechanisms based on best practices.

Recommendation 2. Centralize gender in the response: allocate dedicated staff and resources, conduct/continue regular mandatory gender training for all staff, update country office gender action plans, and analyze available data on gender issues to develop gender-sensitive programmatic responses.

Recommendation 3. Reinforce protection capacities: consider revision of WFP's corporate protection indicators, allocate dedicated staff and resources, conduct regular protection training for all staff, prepare country office protection statements, and analyze available data on protection issues to develop appropriate programmatic responses.

Recommendation 4. Build capacity to ensure adherence to humanitarian principles: ensure training for all staff, and cooperating partners, on the humanitarian principles, protection and decision-making in complex operating environments particularly at the local level, and provide context-specific orientation to all incoming staff.

Recommendation 5. Improve knowledge management: develop a regional knowledge transfer strategy, focusing on the areas of technical approaches to cash-based transfers, targeting and prioritization and resilience.

Recommendation 6. Define success – build a clear intended vision: package the regional dimension of the response within the CSP environment to articulate the WFP regional-level vision of success for the response in future.

Reference:

Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www1.wfp.org/independent-evaluation
For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@WFP.org