

Evaluation Brief

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



Mali: An evaluation of WFP's Portfolio (2013 – 2017)

Context

Mali is a landlocked country with a population of 18.9 million people. Despite experiencing recent strong economic growth, it ranks 175th of 188 countries in the 2016 Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme.

Needs sharply increased in 2012, initially because of a drought and later because of political unrest, which affected mainly the north and centre of the country. The emergency peaked in 2014, but needs have started increasing again, especially since 2018, as result of continued security issues and a new drought. In 2017, 25.6% of household were estimated to be food insecure and 3.8 million were identified as being in need of assistance. In 2018, the number of people in need of assistance increased to 5.2 million (OCHA).

WFP Country Strategy and Portfolio

Mali was declared a Level 2 WFP emergency operation in 2012 and remained a Level 2 emergency for the entire evaluation period. As of June 2018, it is part of a Level 3 emergency, affecting most of the Sahel.

Over the evaluation period, WFP implemented a portfolio of 7 operations of which: a Country Program (until 2014), an Emergency operation (2012-2014), a Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (2015-2017), and four Special Operations including UN cluster coordination and provision of UN Humanitarian Air Services. Over the period, WFP assisted an average of 1.3 million beneficiaries per year, with a peak of 1.9 million in 2014 – the equivalent of 10% of the total population. The total required funding was USD 829 million, against which WFP received USD 425 million.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation covered the period 2013 –2017. Focusing on the portfolio as a whole, the evaluation assessed: i) WFP's alignment and strategic positioning; ii) the factors and quality of strategic decision-making; and iii) the portfolio performance and results.

Key Findings

Alignment and Strategic Positioning

When preparing its 2013-2017 strategy in 2012, WFP had not anticipated the political crisis that unfolded at the end of the year. Nonetheless, the office responded to the emergency and since 2015 has adapted its activities in order to provide support beyond emergency response.

WFP's operations were aligned with the UNDAF Framework and key national policies. Stakeholders widely perceived WFP's comparative advantages as its organizational capacity to deliver at scale in the procurement and distribution of food and in cash-based transfers, and to remain neutral despite difficult conditions.

Factors and quality of Strategic Decision-Making

WFP's response was driven by the analysis of needs, by access and by funding. In a context of funding shortfalls, emergency response activities were prioritized. The response was particularly strong in the

conflict affected regions of the North.

Consistently good relations with authorities and partners enhanced cooperation as a key component of decisions and performance, even in difficult circumstances.

Portfolio Performance and Results

Despite funding levels of 51 percent, the proportion of actual to planned beneficiaries was relatively high, averaging 83 percent.

General Food Assistance. In kind and vouchers represented the main form of assistance. WFP targeted food-insecure households in conflict areas in the north and centre for all of its general food assistance. Focus group discussions with beneficiaries highlighted a high level of appreciation of a mix of in-kind food assistance and cash transfers. WFP followed a pragmatic approach in deciding which modality to adopt where, concentrating its use of cash-based transfers in northern regions and distributing in-kind food in the central regions closer to the main warehouse. WFP made a substantial effort to increase the use of cash-based transfers.

School meals. WFP's school feeding programme reached 1.1 million primary school children, mainly in the north and centre, and had positive effects on net enrolment. However, because of funding constraints, the number of schools assisted by WFP has been cut by half between 2013 and 2017.

Nutrition. Nutrition interventions accounted for almost a third of all interventions. Prevention and treatment of moderate acute malnutrition showed positive results in a wide range of nutrition and health indicators. Nonetheless, overall, acute malnutrition rates remain high, partly because of high levels of ration sharing, funding shortfalls (which has reduced the number of schools assisted by WFP by two thirds from 2015 to 2017) and more recently, an increase in needs.

Purchase for Progress. WFP provided support to a significant number of farmers through direct purchases and support for their marketing activities. However, as a result of the decrease in in-kind distributions and an increase in cash-based transfers the purchase of food from farmer organizations has been decreasing.

Food Assistance for Assets. Focus group discussions with beneficiaries highlighted a preference for this type of assistance over food distributions. After a sharp decrease in 2015 and 2016, this activity is now increasing as donors's interest in building resilience to shocks.

Humanitarian Principles, Protection and Accountability to Affected Populations. While WFP was perceived by multiple actors as neutral, there was insufficient data to assess the application of humanitarian principles and accountability to affected populations. Since 2013, WFP has had limited access to some areas in the north and centre of Mali and has had to rely on NGOs for both the implementation of its activities and the monitoring of results.

Partnerships. WFP created close partnerships with other United Nations agencies, donors and national authorities. It worked with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on a resilience project and worked closely with UNICEF on nutrition.

Gender. Data in standard project reports indicate that there was a good gender balance among beneficiaries reached, with women representing 51 percent of the total. There was also evidence of a significant role of women in several projects. However, there was no gender action plan for guiding the integration of gender considerations into programming.

Capacity development. WFP supported the Government through the collection of data, work on core policies and technical guidance and in the implementation of government policies. However, due to funding constraints, not all planned activities were implemented and the 2017 national capacity indexes for both school feeding and the food security programme were below target.

Efficiency. WFP made a substantial effort to improve efficiency through increases in local procurement and its use of cash-based transfers: a study carried out by WFP in 2016, found that the use of cash-based transfers was an average of 29 percent cheaper than in-kind food distributions. Data on costs by activity were insufficient to enable a more detailed analysis of efficiencies.

The evaluation team did not find any evidence of supply chain issues, except for some pipeline breaks due mainly to funding shortages.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

WFP’s response to the complex emergency in the north and centre of Mali was adequate, despite initial difficulties with scaleup. Despite the lack of a formal strategy during the period under evaluation, WFP designed and delivered a coherent response to country needs.

WFP aligned its activities with national policies and strengthened its partnerships with relevant ministries. Collaboration with other United Nations agencies through the UNDAF took place throughout the period.

The main driver of decision making was the assessment of humanitarian needs. The low level of funding compared with needs, coupled with the priorities of donors also played an important role, however, at times creating a risk of imbalance in the geographic distribution of assistance compared with needs and in the choice of modalities used.

With regards to effectiveness, despite chronic underfunding WFP was able to assist more than 80 percent of planned beneficiaries. Nonetheless, none of WFP’s operations managed to significantly improve the food consumption score, which was one of the outcome indicators of activities in Mali.

Given the high needs and persistently low funding levels, there is need for WFP and other actors, including the Government, to design a strategy for optimizing synergies and increasing efficiency, including through more efficient needs assessments and more coherent targeting.

In the design of operations, the three areas that require more in-depth analysis by WFP are understanding of the root causes of needs in conflict-affected areas, which are not always only related to the current security situation but are also often more chronic in nature; planning of the geographic distribution of assistance, taking into account evolving needs and the interventions of other actors; and analysing in advance the potential direct and indirect effects of changes in activities or modalities on beneficiaries and on the overall resilience of the communities where the changes take place.

A reduction in funding from 2014 led to decreases in school feeding and nutrition activities, creating a risk of reversing the positive results achieved so far. While some of these activities are being taken over

by the Government or other organizations, there is need for a coherent strategy agreed with partners in order to ensure a transition that is as efficient and effective as possible.

Conscious efforts were made to maintain adherence to humanitarian principles, but the beneficiary feedback mechanisms could be improved.

While beneficiary numbers by activity appear to be balanced between the genders and women have been included in income generating activities, a more integrated evidence-based gender strategy is merited.

As a result of increased local purchases and a move towards the use of cash-based transfers, the overall efficiency of WFP’s activities appears to have increased.

Recommendation

- 1. Understanding root causes of needs.** While maintaining a humanitarian response mechanism in place, prepare a formal detailed analysis of the root causes of needs by region, type of need, type of beneficiary, etc, discuss with partners and re-assess the portfolio of activities accordingly.
- 2. Assistance by region.** Review the current geographic targeting of general food assistance with a view to addressing needs in areas beyond the conflict zones of the north and centre. Ensure coordination and complementarity with all the other players.
- 3. School feeding and nutrition funding shortfalls.** Review current processes to identify any potential cost savings and prepare a handover strategy with partners and the Government with a view to minimizing the negative impact of the reduced coverage of WFP activities on beneficiaries. Solutions may include moving some activities into the main social protection and health interventions funded by the Government
- 4. Managing change in activities and modalities.** Design a tool that facilitates the formal mapping of the direct and indirect implications of changes in activities or modalities in advance of their implementation so as to support evidence-based decision making. In areas where evidence is limited, consider carrying out impact assessments.
- 5. Food Assistance for Assets.** Scale-up and strengthen the design of and monitoring methodology and ensure lessons learned from the “zero hunger village” approach, which involves the integration of several assistance modalities, including Food Assistance for Assets, are used.
- 6. Gender.** Develop an evidence-based operational strategy for integrating consideration of gender issues into programming, ensure that programming is based on specific gender analysis and strengthen the country gender team.
- 7. Protection and Humanitarian Access.** Accelerate the rollout of a comprehensive beneficiary feedback mechanism and in general, improve the monitoring of protection of women, girls and other vulnerable groups.
- 8. Leveraging technology for needs assessment and cash-based transfers.** Identify more cost-effective methods of gathering and analysing information on food-insecure and vulnerable households and the root causes of needs. Consider synergies with partners, including the Government’s universal social registry. For cash-based transfers, assess the use of vouchers in remote areas and e-transfers in urban areas.