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Decentralized Evaluation

Executive Summary of the Final Evaluation of the Project “El Niño Response in the Dry Corridor of Centro America”, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, 2016-2018

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Executive Summary

1. This is the final evaluation report for the regional project “Response to El Niño in the Dry Corridor” (henceforth “the Project”) implemented by the World Food Program (WFP) in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua from 2016 to 2018 and financed by the European Union (EU). The evaluation was commissioned by WFP’s Regional Bureau (RB) and carried out from October 2018 to February 2019.
2. This report presents evidence-based findings for learning and accountability, with an emphasis on the former towards design of future WFP projects and programming in the Central American region. The principle utility of the evaluation within WFP will be for the RB in Panama, the four Country Offices (CO) that co-managed the Project (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua), and their principal partners in those four countries as well as the EU as principle donor. WFP will apply the evaluation results to inform strategic and operational decision-making for future project phases in areas linked to their respective National Strategies.

Context

3. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua are four of the seven countries that comprise Central America. The 35,712,000 inhabitants of these four nations represent almost 83% of the Central American population and exhibit similar socioeconomic conditions to one another. The area known as the Dry Corridor is defined as a group of ecosystems combined to form a dry tropical forest that covers a large part of the central premontane region of these four countries. The principal problem of the region is irregular distribution of rains, with alternating periods of scarcity and intensity causing landslides and flooding. The phenomenon of El Niño has aggravated the climatic conditions limiting the capacity for livelihood recovery across the Dry Corridor, which has now accumulated impacts of prolonged periods of drought over a five-year period (2014-2018). Despite government assistance, through WFP and other actors, 1.6 million people in the Dry Corridor continue to experience moderate or severe food insecurity.

Evaluation Objective

4. The primary objective of the Project was to support the households most affected by El Niño in the four Dry Corridor countries, with a focus on building resilience. WFP aspired to contribute to strengthening livelihoods by creating and rehabilitating productive assets, intensifying production at the household level, diversifying sources of income, building human capital, and facilitating a social safety net for approximately 7,200 families (in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala), and 200,000 minor children of school age and 400 smallholder farmers (Nicaragua). The project is focused on 161 communities in 25 municipalities in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, the project supports a total of 2,548 educational centers in 49 municipalities across 7 departments, and three cooperatives with 1,248 smallholder farmers in 143 municipalities (3,816 people) through training on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA).
5. The three outcomes sought in the regional logframe for the project were: a) improved access to livelihoods assets contributing to improved resilience and reduction of risk from disasters and crises; b) the communities and institutions selected strengthen their capacities to manage risks related to climatic crises; and c) improved commercialization opportunities for smallholder farmers at the local, regional, and national levels. The cross-cutting themes of gender, protection, and partnerships are always considered.
6. Prior to this Project, through its Prolonged Rescue and Recuperation Operation (PRRO, 2014-2016), WFP supported national responses in recovery from a variety of disasters, including the effects of drought on food security of vulnerable populations in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and

Nicaragua. The mid-term evaluation of PRRO highlighted the operation's regional focus and recommended developing other regional initiatives as well. Two recommendations from the evaluation linked the responses to development programs with the search for alternative income-generating activities that would lead the most vulnerable households to diversify their livelihoods, where building assets through cash-based transfers (CBT) would be a starting point but not necessarily the endpoint of activities. Corporately, a WFP strategic evaluation – *Enhancing Resilience* – was carried out mid-2018, which included the PRRO project in Guatemala as a case study.

Methodology

7. This evaluation utilized mixed methods to answer the key questions established in the Terms of Reference (ToR): a) **Question 1:** To what extent was the project designed and implemented in an appropriate/relevant way? Pertinence, Relevance, and Sustainability; b) **Question 2:** What outcomes have been achieved, and what have been the intended and unintended consequences? Effectiveness, Impact; c) **Question 3:** How and why were the results achieved? Efficiency, Sustainability, Pertinence/Coherence.

8. The evaluation team used primarily qualitative methods to gather information triangulated with data and documentation available from the RO and each respective CO. An orientation meeting brought the evaluation team together with the RO in Panama and the four COs participating in the project. The team visited 15 communities and 5 educational centers where they conducted Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with 440 individuals (56% women). The quantitative data came from pre-existing documentation or measurements taken during project implementation.

9. Methodological limitations include availability of data, time, and logistics related to the number of sites it was possible to visit. The regional documentation does not fully capture all the nuanced complexity of the project impacts at the national and local levels related to resilience, including institutional strengthening, network building, and inter-institutional coordination. The evaluation team took measures to mitigate these limitations during the field visit, triangulating data between levels and countries. The specific country-level conclusions are less rigorous given these limitations; however, the evaluation team was able to come to relevant conclusions related to resilience at the regional level.

Key Findings

Relevance

10. The Project is based on certain common characteristics which include: (i) utilizing the Dry Corridor as the primary geographic delimitation; (ii) the use of the Three-Pronged Approach (3PA) throughout the design; (iii) strengthening community and municipal structures and a community- and local-level focus; (iv) primary application of Food for Assets (FFA) with an emphasis on CBT and building productive assets at the community and household levels; (v) promoting the exchange of experiences and learning across national and regional boundaries; (vi) an orientation towards building resilience supporting the Sustainable Development Objectives (SDO) 2 and 17 of the United Nations (UN)¹. The combination of these shared parameters with country-level contextualization resulted in a project that is adapted to the specifics of each locality.

11. The Project is aligned with WFP's resilience strategies² within the framework of the FFA Theory of Change.³ The consultative focus also aligned with the distinct governmental priorities and programs in each country. The primary partners were the corresponding government ministries in

¹ This orientation is based on efforts to end hunger; achieve food security; and to improve nutrition, sustainable agriculture and slow start disaster mitigation such as drought.

² Building Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition (2015)

³ Food for Assets Theory of Change Draft (2016)

each country (Agriculture, Environment, Forests, Education, secretariat of food security [SESAN], civil protection agencies, etc.). There is also a regional Central American institution under the umbrella of SICA, which houses specialists in areas related to resilience, Food Security and Nutrition (FSN), DRR, and CCA.⁴ The focus on resilience and livelihoods, diversification of production and diet, establishment of territorial agricultural systems for food security and nutrition education are highly relevant in this regional context.

12. The contextualized selection of assets based on participatory processes in each country reflects local adaptation of the project and contributed to relevance at the local and national levels. However, the resulting diversity of assets was a challenge for building a conceptual framework for resilience, as well as for a unified and coherent theory of change across the region to guide the project. This created challenges in project and logframe design. These challenges included limitations in WFP's corporate indicators for measuring and capturing progress and impacts in building resilience, limitations which are recognized at the heart of WFP.

13. Gender analysis was integrated in the participatory community-based processes. Beneficiary selection was carried out according to vulnerability criteria and households headed by single mothers were prioritized. Certain fundamental principles of gender equality (e.g. analysis of responses categorized by gender and participation of women in all meetings) were applied across each context, with adaptations in each specific country.

Results

14. Altogether, the Project supported 7,682 households through the FFA component in three countries,⁵ and 200,683 children through the school feeding supplement in Nicaragua with 821 MT of food in 2017⁶. A portion of the products distributed in the school supplement – corn and beans – were purchased from cooperatives that received WFP support. The total value of transferences (merchandise, cash, and vouchers) across all four countries was 3,625,454 over two years. Food consumption and CSI indicators have improved significantly from the baseline. At the regional level, a percentage of households with adequate levels of food consumption increased by 18 percentage points (from 71.9% to 89.6%). The percentage of households with negative adaptation strategies decreased from 25.2% to 4.9% by project end. The situation in Guatemala is somewhat contradictory: although households reported improvements in food consumption, they also reported an increase in negative adaptation strategies. Guatemala has been affected recently by new crises and it is possible that CSI indicators show increased vulnerability consequently.

15. Although generally positive, the changes in corporate indicators likely measure the impact of cash-based transfers (CBT) in households rather than an impact of assets towards resilience, given the time needed for full maturation of these assets. A specific study would be needed to trace the production of assets and their subsequent contribution towards food security, or following one or several crises/climatic shocks in order to reliably establish the contribution of assets towards resilience *per se*.

16. Although the corporate indicators on gender generally show relatively stable values, the women beneficiaries interviewed reported a significant impact towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Their participation in the program has given them opportunities to socialize outside their homes, improve equality to men with respect to agricultural knowledge gained, and a more equal division of labor between men and women.

⁴ Some entities were consulted during the design phase, but not during project implementation.

⁵ Beneficiaries in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras received CBT as well as trainings and materials for building assets. Beneficiaries in the three cooperatives in Nicaragua did not receive CBT, but only trainings and materials for building assets. However, the beneficiaries in the Nicaraguan cooperatives are numbered among the 7,682; excluding them the beneficiaries would number 6,440 households.

⁶ Data for 2018 was not available at the time of writing this report.

17. The establishment of regional platforms and empowerment of community-based committees has created a cascade effect in intended and unintended consequences, creating a foundation for the future and a sense of ownership in DRR and CCA. Likewise, the regional nature of the project has allowed for valuable exchanges between partners and between different levels of partners, and the establishment of social networks for information exchange, mutual support, problem-solving, and possible mobilization.

Contributing Factors

Effectiveness

18. The evaluation examined the effectiveness of the four major project components⁷: 1) asset building, 2) cash-based transfers, 3) community capacity-building, 4) strengthening of territorial organizations; and the cross-cutting implementation themes: participatory processes, and gender.

19. Asset building was based on community consultation and the great majority were implemented successfully. However, not all the assets ended well or were used appropriately. There were three areas of challenge: 1) management and planning, 2) assets outside the project framework, or 3) the logic of the asset was not applied correctly. It is worth mentioning that participatory processes, however good for ensuring ownership and sustainability, do not necessarily or automatically result in decisions strictly in line with the explicit theme of resilience. In some cases, detailed in the narrative portion of the report, assets prioritized by the communities were not necessarily in line with the goal of building resilience.

20. CBT proved to be effective for promoting participation of households in building assets and participation in trainings and had a short-term positive impact on food consumption in participating households. However, there were certain ambiguities related to the calculation of amounts and the logic of their application. Different stakeholders viewed the transfers through different lenses. Some, for example, saw the transfers as a) incentives for promoting participation in project activities, b) inputs for sustaining household food consumption in the short term, c) wages to compensate participants for a day's labor, d) an incentive to promote behavior changes, or e) a resource to invest in productive initiative.

21. With regards to capacity building, community level trainings were given in topics related to asset creation, although the application of learnings towards changes in behavior or agricultural practices has been less visible during the period of the project. At the organizational level, progress was made in capacity building with municipalities and communities and WFP played an important role in promoting networking among institutions.

22. The school feeding supplement was only applied in Nicaragua, as a form of social protection. In response to a government request, the number of days in which the supplement was supplied was reduced in order to increase the number of schools receiving the supplement. This reduction in days as well as other challenges made it difficult to measure the real impact of the supplement. Although it had been thought that the supplement could serve as a market for the participating cooperatives, WFP only made three purchases from them, representing a small percentage of the total purchase for the supplement overall. The trainings and assets distributed to the cooperatives were highly valued.

23. Piloting the 3PA contributed to community ownership thanks to the participatory focus and highly contextualized responses to the community realities. The cross-cutting theme of gender was seen throughout programming, with differential attention according to gender as well as registering and analyzing data disaggregated by gender with regards to results and effectiveness of activities. The national offices have supported additional studies on gender within WFP projects. The

⁷ The school feeding program was implemented only in Nicaragua but is included in this analysis.

evaluation team identified two areas for future improvement: reduce the risk of exclusion of single woman-headed households, and the risk of double workload.

24. The Project logic assumes access to land for asset creation for development. Nevertheless, land ownership should not be assumed given that this factor had a secondary but considerable impact on the development of activities in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In effect, there were three implications: a) some more vulnerable families were not included in the project; b) participating households had to rent land in order to participate in the project, or c) some project beneficiaries opted not to obtain certain assets which require longer periods of time to mature. In effect this implies a need to develop assets more appropriate for landless households.

Efficiency

25. Project implementation began in communities about six months later than planned,⁸ due to the participatory planning processes and internal WFP processes related to goods and services procurements. Nevertheless, the project achieved its goals in terms of the number of beneficiaries reached and assets built. Overall, the project reports 97% of budget disbursed in cash and vouchers, and 100% by the end of the implementation period, in line with accepted efficiency standards. CBT processes in general are efficient and have forged good relationships with a variety of financial service providers and, in some cases, local partners. In some cases, the internal administrative processes of WFP limited the timeliness of material delivery to beneficiaries; likewise, delays were reported in WFP internal processes for procurement of products from the local cooperatives.

Sustainability

26. Stakeholders noted consistently that two years is not enough time to achieve substantial increase in community and household resilience. To achieve positive results in corporate indicators for food security, the key has been the introduction of temporary initiatives through CBT. In theory, the sustainability of the improvements could be achieved through a phased strategy where CBT would shift over to support generated by assets developed over a longer term. Nevertheless, this type of chronologized planning is not described in a systematic way in the community-based participatory planning.

27. The maintenance of assets built in the communities following the conclusion of the project depends in large part on the levels of community participation and ownership, which overall appears to be high at the project level although it is not consistent across all the participating countries. In sites where participatory planning processes have developed the autonomy of community organizations for activity management, it is more likely that they will be self-sustaining – especially if the assets are linked to direct household production.

28. One consideration regarding the logic of CBT is that beneficiaries constantly mentioned their interest in receiving transfers of larger amounts which could be used for starting small businesses or investing in agricultural development – promoting access to markets, which responds to the concerns resulting from the prolonged climatic crisis and as a reasonable way to overcome this. This kind of focus could be considered in the future as a shift towards multi-purpose cash transfers rather than the actual focus on FFA.

29. The municipal-level coalitions and platforms are important for maintaining progress over an extended period. The project has strengthened the technical aspects but strengthening political structures will require more investment in cases where budget restrictions limit the sustainability of project activities even when their value is recognized by the government. Municipal and national transitions of government power were a continual challenge to the project, especially when resulting changes in personnel and staffing of government partners meant losing technical capacity that had been built through trainings and exchanges, since new staff had not received those benefits.

⁸ The exception was Guatemala, which initiated activities only one month later than planned.

Conclusions

Question 1: To what extent has the Project been designed and implemented in appropriate and pertinent ways?

30. The Project was generally relevant to the context, WFP policies and norms, and to national programs and government priorities. The coordination between UN agencies and regional entities like SICA is somewhat weak. Although relevant in meeting short-term food security needs of the population, the use of FFA for achieving long-term economic resilience in the communities was partially justified. Other tools such as the use of multipurpose cash transfers which would permit communities to invest progressively in productive community projects as a safety net could be considered.⁹ These forms of collaboration contribute to building long-term economic resilience, which could not be confirmed given the short time period of this Project. Strengthening local actors and platforms is relevant to the context. The broad conceptualization of resilience generates certain challenges for the Project to develop coherence given that nearly any asset or activity could be aligned with resilience based on the current corporate definition.

Question 2: What have been the impacts achieved and how are they assessed?

31. The Project has produced tangible results at the community level in terms of resilience infrastructure, productive assets, and community and institutional capacities. The project's contributions to community life and territorial organizations have been more rich and profound than what is captured by corporate indicators in the official regional log frame. The conceptualization and measurement of resilience do not capture the full potential for demonstrating impacts in increased resilience using the project components. For example, one of the most important advances has been the establishment of municipal platforms and network formation on multiple levels through exchanges and trainings, but these results are not adequately captured by existing mechanisms for monitoring.

Question 3: How and why were the observed impacts achieved?

32. The greatest strength of the project has been the fine-tuned application of 3PA to promote community- and municipality-level participation and commitment through multisectoral and multi-level strategies, generating a cascade of impacts both intended and unintended. Coalitions, municipal platforms, and transnational networks have the potential to contribute significantly to the sustainability of long-term project impacts.

33. The work of WFP in the region is dynamic, with an important innovative vision. Nonetheless, there was insufficient reflection at the national level regarding the best parameters for choosing actions to take on, which had consequences for the overall coherence of the regional institutional mission. There is a risk of attempting to cover too many different dimensions or aspects of development in each country which could weaken the overall focus of the work at the regional level.

34. WFP's internal processes limited the achievement of some results. In effect: a) in terms of purchases, administration, and internal structures; b) in terms of the implicit design logic (such as assumption of access to land); and c) community planning (such as the chronological phases from CBT to maturation of short-term and long-term assets). More technical support is required to support community-based planning to mitigate these issues, and to respond to potential gaps between the discontinuance of CBT and beginning asset production. The matter of landless farmers was also significant given its close association with vulnerability.

⁹ In the WFP 2015 policy on *Building resilience for Food and Nutrition Security*, paragraph 26 suggests that "WFP's support to productive safety nets through community-based asset creation schemes in several of its operations has been widely acknowledged as central to its resilience-building work," which supports investing assets in small businesses to strengthen productive safety nets in alignment with WFP policies.

35. The **lessons learned** for future projects include: the need for a more explicit thematic focus related to specific shocks – in this case, the unpredictable variations between drought and flooding; coalition and platform building at the municipal level for supporting communities; integration of multipurpose cash transfers; greater emphasis on activities that build capacity for productive resources in households and small business development; and a focus on strategies relevant to landless rural households; a continuous gender analysis of the target population; maintain transborder and multilevel exchanges in future programming with a more explicit articulation of the expected outcomes in terms of processes, structures, or impacts. Maximize the results obtained at the municipal level with development of national-level policies and connections with regional entities that could provide support through platforms promoted by the project.

Recommendations

Strategies

R1: To inform strategic planning in the future and to give continuity to the many studies and publications already carried out, the RB in cooperation with country programs should consider a synthetic exercise to capitalize on WFP experiences in the region with a more strategic orientation towards building resilience, with a cross-cutting theme of gender: Led by the RB, over the next 12-18 months. In addition to the Project “Response to El Niño in the Dry Corridor of Central America,” WFP has carried out a number of interventions in Central America around resilience, presenting an opportunity to synthesize important learnings through multiple evaluations, and to create institutional memory about the programming in Central America. This would also help the Regional Bureau to promote its resilience work in the region.

R2: For any resilience project in the Dry Corridor, based on the capitalization project described in the first recommendation, the Regional Office should more clearly define its focus related to the specific shock that the resilience-building work is designed to confront. This specificity should help define the structures of future projects: Led by the RB, during the coming year, it is recommended that future actions should focus on resilience construction in the Dry Corridor based on the principle issue identified in the region.

R3: The Country Offices and the Regional Office should consider actions to improve the evidence of impacts produced by WFP in building resilience: During the coming year. In the next set of projects and country strategic plans, define actions that gather evidence of impact in resilience; e.g., strengthening the conceptual linkages between activities and processes that best capture the effects through a systematic coordination of monitoring at the regional level.

R4: In future regional projects, the RB in collaboration with Country Offices should consider systematizing interventions at the municipal level through each CSP with coherent linkages to relevant regional institutions: Based on the good results and examples obtained through the project in the area of strengthening local organizations, the Country Offices should consider developing a framework or common set of measurements for this work. At the same time, in order to support the development of national level policies and to strengthen local capacities and other platforms supported by the project, consider including regional entities working in resilience-building during the implementation phase of future projects.

Operational

R5: The Country Offices should consider strengthening any future interventions related to resilience within the framework of their CSPs with strategies such as interventions oriented towards the most vulnerable, who depend on agricultural production but are not landowners. During the next 12-18 months. In future interventions through CSPs or in adaptations of existing strategic plans, the Country Offices should consider development components of each intervention that would strengthen the economic development of the most vulnerable – landless farmers and single woman-headed households.

R6: The Regional and Country Offices should integrate construction of a chronogram of maturation of assets in processes of Community Based Participatory Planning (CBPP): The broad range of productive assets promoted within the project reach maturity at different times. Not all households receive every kind of asset. Thus, many households find themselves in a resilience gap between the cessation of asset transfer and the time when productive assets created begin to produce. Consider integrating a chronological component in community and household planning processes by phases in such a manner that more quickly developing assets dovetail with assets of slower maturation in a systematic way to ensure that there are no gaps between these.

R7: The Regional and Country Programs should build into future projects transition platforms and sustainability plans based on the experiences at the Municipal level. In future projects, we recommend integrating a municipal-level transition and sustainability plan for management and continuous support of the progress made in organizational strengthening.

R8: The regional resilience projects and CSPs in the future should consider incorporating a result focused on strengthening transnational networks and municipal platforms: Led by the RB, during the next 12-18 months. We recommend integrating a Strategy for creating, strengthening, and monitoring the impacts of horizontal networks linking municipal platforms across national and regional boundaries. Given the great impact that technical exchanges had to promote resilience over the course of the project, we recommend integrating an exchange and learning strategy more intentionally directed at capitalizing on those valuable and effective spaces.

R9: The Country Offices, with support from the Regional Office, should clarify the logic of and improve CBTs: Regarding the use of cash-based transfers, each Country Office should carry out a technical analysis of all aspects of design and implementation of CBT to ensure that the Country Offices continue to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of this modality.

R10: Given the limitations identified, the Country Offices, with support from the Regional Office, should advocate at the headquarter level for introduction of small adjustments in internal corporate procurement processes to facilitate access to WFP markets for cooperatives or smallholder farmers in resilience projects. Over the coming year. The logic of the project through which WFP procurements become a market opportunity for vulnerable cooperatives could be strengthened with small adjustments in internal procedures.