Synthesis of Evidence and Lessons from WFP's Policy Evaluations (2011 - 2019)

CONTEXT

WFP policies provide the normative framework within which the organisation aims to realise its goals, as articulated in in the Strategic Plan. Policies cover WFP programmatic areas, corporate themes and cross-cutting concerns.

WFP currently has 33 policies in force. Under the 2011 Policy Formulation document, policies are submitted to the Executive Board (EB) for approval, for consideration and for information. All policies approved after 2011 are expected to be evaluated 4-6 years after the start of their implementation, while those approved before are progressively included in the Office of Evaluation (OEV) workplan considering their continued relevance to WFP's work or potential to contribute to new policy development.

Between 2011 and 2019, OEV covered ten policies[1] through nine policy evaluations, which are included in the scope of this synthesis.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE SYNTHESIS

Evaluation syntheses are an approach used to highlight issues across different evaluations, and address questions using an existing evidence base. Synthesis are one of the OEV products issued to respond to a growing interest in and demand for succinct and actionable analysis drawing from completed evaluations. This synthesis comprises all the nine policy evaluations conducted between 2011 and 2019. The objectives were to:

- identify common themes and systemic issues relating to policy formulation and implementation;
- analyze factors that have supported and constrained effective policy-making and implementation;
- reflect on how effectively WFP has responded to and used policy evaluations to improve results;
- assess to what extent WFP has applied the learning generated through policy evaluations.

FINDINGS

Policy formulation and implementation

The synthesis identified some common themes regarding policy formulation and implementation including: diverse policy initiation 'triggers'; no clear policy typology; inconsistent use of document classifications for EB submission; varying degrees of policy scrutiny; limited internal policy coherence; low corporate leadership and ownership.

Policy-making and policy implementation

Factors identified to support effective policy-making and implementation were primarily: consultation with staff during policy development; and investing in high-quality guidance for staff.

Factors constraining policy formulation and implementation included features around *policy design* quality including: weaknesses in the evidence base; internal logic; use of terminology; insufficient attention to gender and a WFP-centric focus.

The synthesis identified *policy implementation* challenges including: limited dissemination; insufficient human and financial resources; weaknesses in accountability frameworks; limited leadership/ownership; and limited use of partnerships to support policy implementation.

Policy evaluations and management responses

Overall, a high proportion of evaluation recommendations were accepted by WFP management particularly around improving policy operationalization through mainstreaming and staff capacity development.

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[1] Two policies – on humanitarian principles and humanitarian access – were evaluated jointly.

There is evidence of progress on implementing actions agreed by management. However, concerns remain around validity of information reported, which often describe systems in place rather than informing on completed actions or demonstrating achievements.

WFP application of learning generated through policy evaluations

Despite progress in implementation of management responses; gaps were noted where more systemic or longer-term changes were recommended, such as around creation of comprehensive knowledge management systems; and ensuring sustained availability of human resources and predictable financial resources to drive policy implementation.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

Conclusions

The synthesis exercise found a complex policy environment in WFP. A lack of policy coherence, co-ordination and prioritisation risks both coverage gaps and confusion/competition between overlapping policy areas. Individual policies struggle to define both their relationships to other WFP policies, and their relative importance to the organisation, compounding difficulties for WFP employees in the field in putting policy into practice.

Despite some instances of extensive consultation in design and the production of guidance complementing policy documents, policy implementation in WFP is generally constrained by a range of factors. These include: limited leadership and management commitment; weak or absent accountability frameworks; limited dissemination; and insufficient human and financial resources for implementation.

In particular, a number of evaluations noted that policies were not actively known or consulted across the organisation, particularly beyond Headquarters level.

WFP management reporting on the implementation of actions agreed lacks reliability. However, there is evidence that recommendations are taken seriously and acted upon by policy owners, though not always consistently or comprehensively.

Recommendations on policy revision/updating; implementation mechanisms; building staff capacities; evidence generation; and partnerships were all addressed to at least some degree. However, those requiring more systemic change, such as on knowledge management and accountability systems,have received less comprehensive treatment.

Overall, WFP's internal guidance and systems for policy formulation and implementation would benefit from a revised approach, if they are to fully inform and support the development and implementation of WFP Strategic Plans and the second generation of Country Strategic Plans.

Lessons

The synthesis identified a number of lessons aiming to strengthen the enabling policy environment within WFP.

Firstly, is the **importance of clarifying the policy nomenclature:** defining what is a policy, a strategy, an action plan, a policy update or policy statement. This is critical because such designations determine procedures such as EB consultation, approval and accountability mechanisms and are linked with (and integral to) policy initiation triggers. Clarity of designation would also provide staff with clearer parameters to guide implementation.

Secondly, is the need to **align the policy framework with WFP absorptive capacity,** taking into consideration that particularly for field staff in difficult operational conditions, that such capacity is even more restricted.

Thirdly, is the need to **define a common framework for policy content** to support internal and external coherence and help to avoid confusion and competition.

A final lesson highlights the consideration that **policies are much more than a stand-alone document**. To be effective, policies require full and visible corporate leadership, resources, implementation guidance and comprehensive accountability frameworks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Five recommendations are aimed to support the rebuilding of an enabling policy environment within WFP.

The recommendations are presented in two groups. The first three have a stronger strategic focus on the policy cycle with a view to be actioned alongside the development and implementation of the next WFP Strategic Plan. The others focus on more immediate /short term actions.

Recommendation 1. Clarify and confirm the policy cycle procedure, updating the 2011 Policy Formulation document.

Recommendation 2. Clarify policy governance and accountability procedures.

Recommendation 3. Define the policy universe through an updated WFP Policy Framework, applying coherence as a key principle; and operational recommendations.

Recommendation 4. Adopt a policy building approach with clarified standards for staff.

Recommendation 5. Overhaul the current Policy Compendium.

Recommendation 6. Review the processes for developing high quality management responses to evaluations and ensuring follow up actions to evaluation recommendations.