



WFP EVALUATION



World Food Programme

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Evaluation of the WFP Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Centralized Evaluation Report – Volume I

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Executive Summary

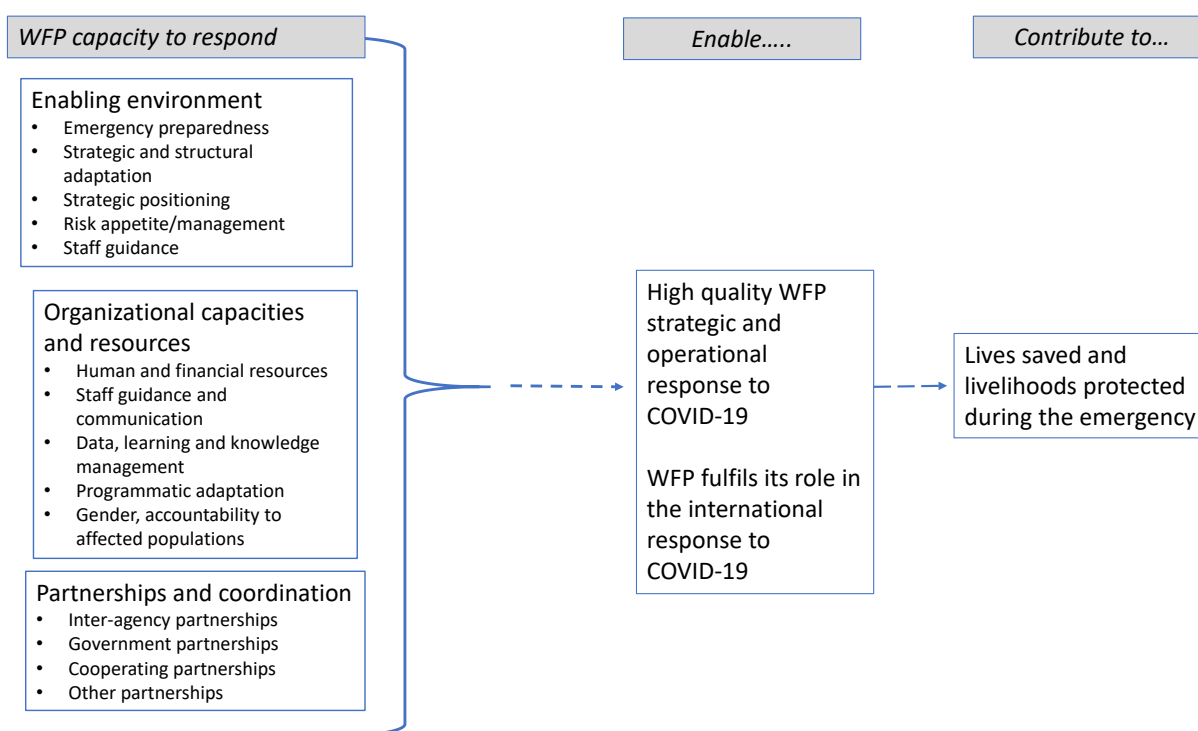
INTRODUCTION

Evaluation features

1. The WFP Office of Evaluation commissioned an independent evaluation of the WFP response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to meet organizational learning and accountability needs. The evaluation covered the period from February 2020 to June 2021. It followed a previous (2020) evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies covering the period from 2011 to 2018.¹
2. The evaluation asked three questions, which all aimed to explore the adaptive capacity of WFP under pandemic conditions:
 - i) How well did the enabling environment and organizational assets of WFP adapt to respond to the demands of the COVID-19 crisis?
 - ii) How well did WFP fulfil its role as a partner in the collective humanitarian response?
 - iii) What was achieved, and what was learned?
3. The evaluation was conducted under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, including WFP in emergency mode; travel and movement restrictions; and the need to avoid unduly burdening country offices. Accordingly, it adopted a “retrospective developmental” design, which focuses on providing evidence to support adaptation in dynamic environments. This involved the application of three principles:
 - i) prioritizing organizational learning needs;
 - ii) ensuring consultation and evidence sharing with stakeholders throughout; and
 - iii) integrating with the surrounding evidence building environment.
4. The evaluation applied an analytical framework that organized the WFP response around three areas: the enabling environment (the systems and structures put in place to enable the response); WFP assets and capacity to deliver the response; and partnerships. The framework also integrated the results of the response.

¹ “Summary report on the strategic evaluation of WFP’s capacity to respond to emergencies (2011–2018)” (WFP/EB.1/2020/5-A).

Figure 1: Analytical framework



Source: Evaluation team, August 2020.

5. The evaluation produced ten thematic evidence summaries on various aspects of the response (and all aspects of WFP systems and capacities) (table 1). Consultations on the evidence summaries were held from March to July 2021.

TABLE 1: EVIDENCE SUMMARIES	
1. Workforce management	6. Programme adaptation
2. Strategic adaptation and management	7. Cross-cutting issues
3. Evidence, data and knowledge management	8. Oversight and risk management systems
4. Financing	9. Emergency preparedness
5. Guidance and communication	10. Partnerships

6. Interviews were conducted with 340 stakeholders from inside and outside WFP covering 74 of 84 WFP country offices and all six regional bureaux. Corporate results were assessed from a sample of 34 countries, and over 800 documents were reviewed.

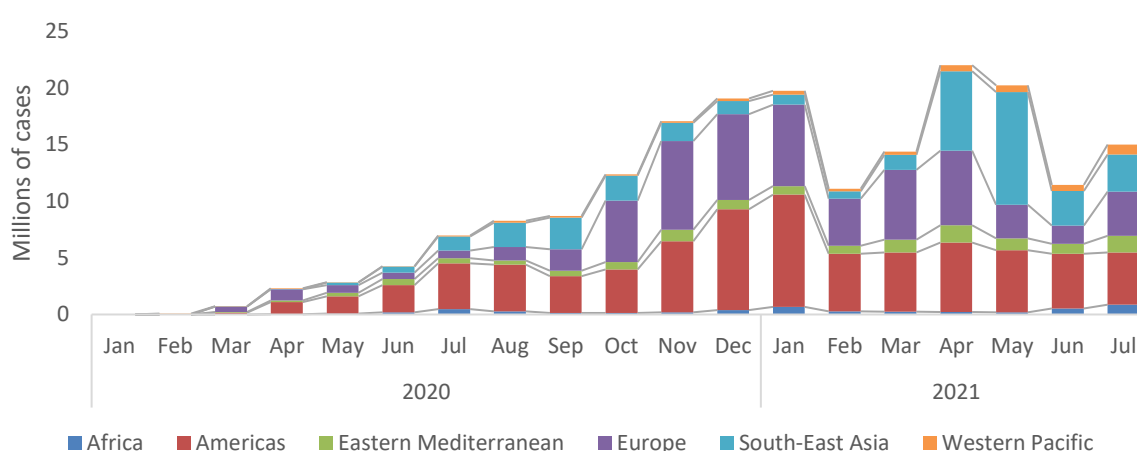
7. Despite a comprehensive evidence base, limitations included the inability to observe the COVID-19 response in situ due to travel restrictions and limited scope to inquire into individual country-level and programme area work given the need to avoid burdening country offices. Validation with stakeholders, including through a series of regional workshops in November 2021, was prioritized as a means of mitigating these limitations.

Context

8. The COVID-19 pandemic created a “perfect storm” for humanitarian actors. Organizations faced major disruptions with borders closed, supply chains impeded and access to affected populations constrained. The World Health Organization (WHO) initially declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern (30 January 2020) and subsequently a global pandemic (11 March 2020).

9. COVID-19 affected different regions and countries at different times. Beginning in East Asia, it rapidly spread to Europe and the Americas, following international travel patterns at the time (figure 2). Cases were relatively few in East Asia in the early stages, while Europe, in particular Italy, and the Americas were badly affected. In 2021 rates rose in Africa, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific, and the pandemic continues into 2022.

Figure 2: A pandemic in waves



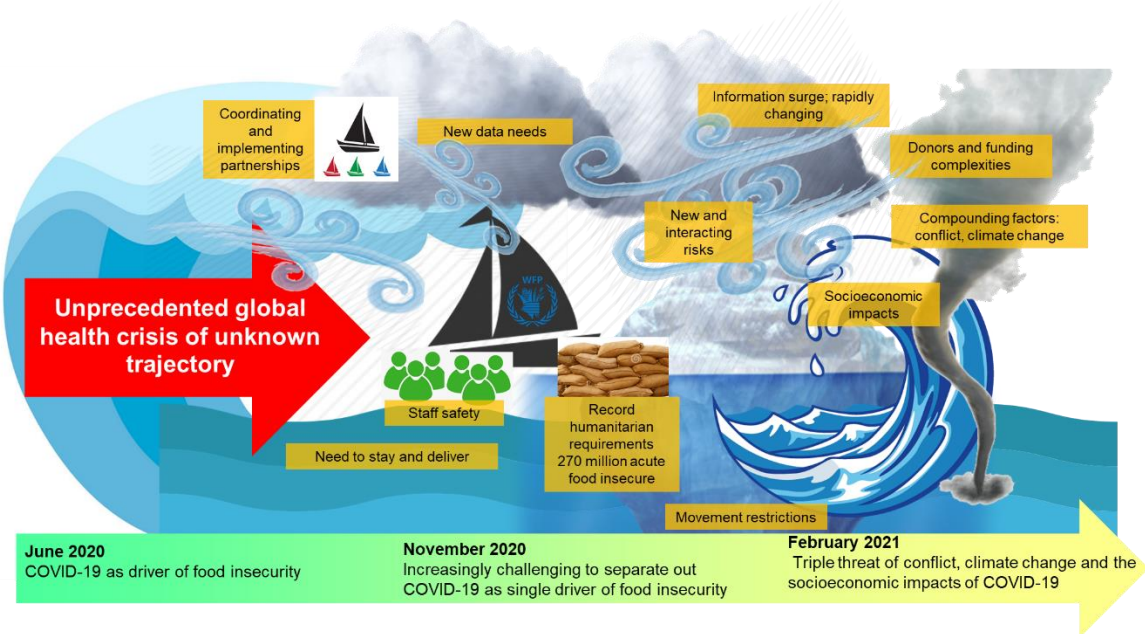
Source: WHO Coronavirus Dashboard, August 2021.

10. Key features of the pandemic included unprecedented humanitarian needs, with 270 million people directly at risk of acute hunger;² the pandemic’s covariate nature, with both the virus itself and restrictions imposed by governments creating major social and economic effects; and deepened inequality, with women and girls, refugees, the displaced and those living in conflict or with disabilities experiencing the greatest negative effects. By mid-2020, the likely medium-term effects of the pandemic were becoming apparent.

11. The pandemic created complexity for global and national response systems and uncertainty as governments and populations struggled to respond to an unknown pathology with no defined trajectory (figure 3).

² United Nations. 2020. [Global humanitarian response plan COVID-19: United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020](#).

Figure 3: Complexity and uncertainty



12. National governments assumed primary responsibility for managing the pandemic on their territories. Responses were highly varied around the world, depending on the timing and nature of the pandemic’s unfolding, political and economic factors and national experience with pandemic management.

13. Internationally, on 25 March 2020, the United Nations launched a USD 2 billion global humanitarian response plan (GHRP), targeting nearly 250 million people. Funding appeals were subsequently updated to USD 6.71 billion (May 2020); USD 10.26 billion (July 2020); and USD 9.5 billion (November 2020). The United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 was launched on 27 April 2020.³

The WFP response

14. WFP declared its Level 3 emergency response on 27 March 2020. The response had two elements: the WFP-specific response (table 2) and engagement in the GHRP (paragraph 15).

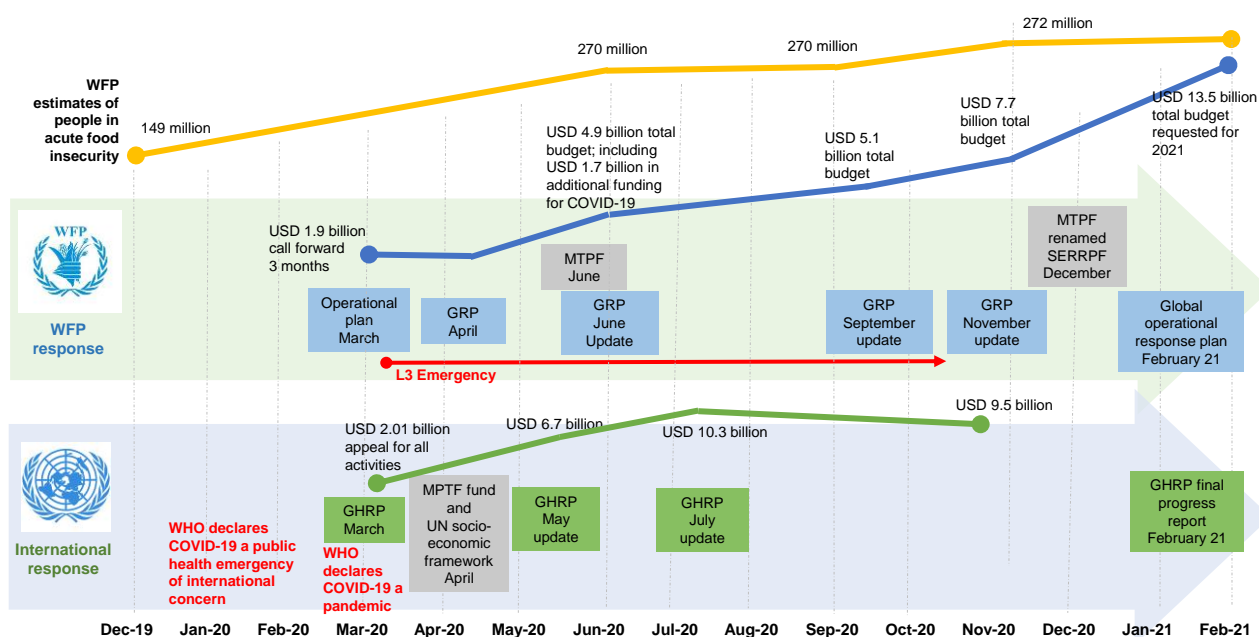
TABLE 2: THE WFP RESPONSE	
Date	Action
13 March 2020	WFP operational plan , including the strategic pre-positioning of three months of food supplies for priority operations
27 March 2020	Level 3 emergency declared
29 March 2020	Financial “call forward” for USD 1.9 billion of committed and anticipated contributions to enable an initial response
11 April 2020	Draft global implementation plan to sustain, prioritize and scale up WFP operations
24 April 2020	WFP global COVID-19 response plan (GRP)
1 June 2020	Medium-term programme framework

³ United Nations. 2020. *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19: April 2020*.

TABLE 2: THE WFP RESPONSE	
Date	Action
29 June 2020	GRP June update request: USD 4.9 billion requested to support WFP's portfolio across 83 countries
30 September 2020	GRP September update: request revised upward to USD 5.1 billion
31 October 2020	Level 3 response deactivated
18 November 2020	GRP November update: USD 7.7 billion total budget
15 December 2020	Medium-term programme framework recast as a socioeconomic response and recovery programme framework
18 February 2021	WFP global operational response plan 2021: COVID-19 integrated into global operational planning rather than continued as a stand-alone emergency

15. **GHRP:** Within the international response, WFP supplied common supply chain and logistics services, support for medical evacuation and real-time remote vulnerability monitoring. An initial request of USD 350 million rose to USD 965 million in May 2020 but was subsequently revised down to USD 316 million in October of that year. The May 2020 update included a USD 1.4 billion appeal for food security work, of which approximately 50 percent was requested for WFP. Figure 4 maps the WFP response in relation to that of the United Nations.

Figure 4: United Nations and WFP response to COVID-19

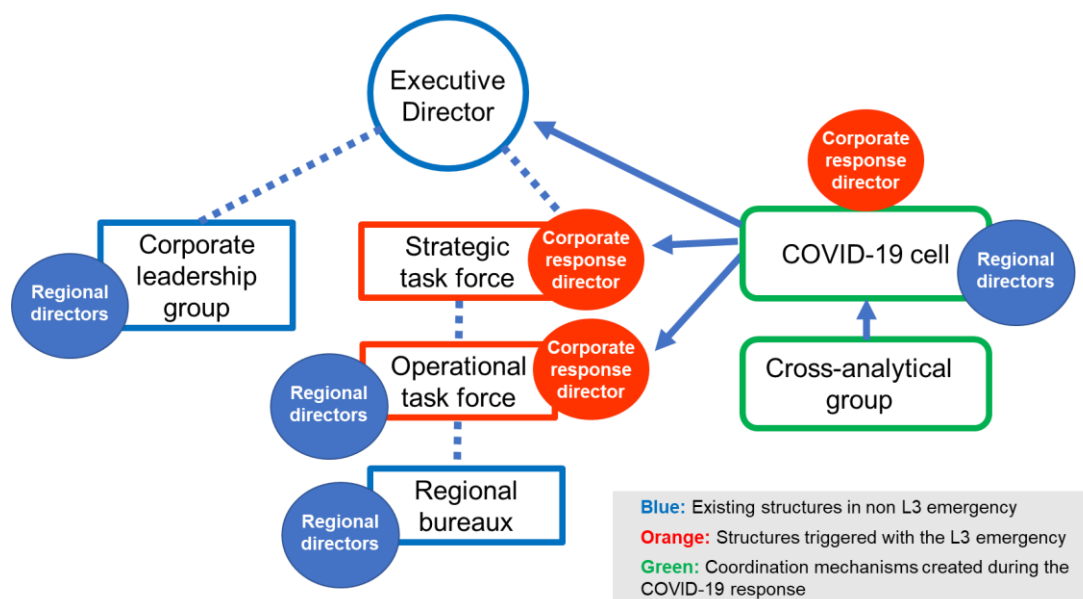


Abbreviations: SERRPF = socioeconomic response and recovery programme framework; MPTF = Multi-Partner Trust Fund.

Source: Evaluation team.

16. **Management structures.** Strategic and operational task forces were constituted under the Level 3 declaration, which included regional bureaux participation. An Operations Centre COVID-19 cell was also established to conduct scanning and real-time monitoring of the pandemic. Figure 5 shows these and other management structures involved in the COVID-19 response.

Figure 5: Management structures



Source: Evaluation team.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Institutional readiness

17. WFP entered the COVID-19 pandemic with a long track record of expertise and professionalism in emergency response, including its response to the Ebola pandemic of 2014–2015. Evaluations praised its agility, flexibility and ability to swiftly scale up,⁴ although the 2020 evaluation of the WFP capacity to respond to emergencies identified needed reforms. In response, some institutional reforms were undertaken but had not yet been completed by early 2020. These included:

- **Global emergency response framework and emergency preparedness systems still being built**, including improved global surge mechanisms, a new emergency protocol and the launch of an updated emergency preparedness and response package.
- **Limitations on human capacity for emergency response** due to heavy reliance (60 percent) on short-term contracts; overstretched individual capacities and the lack of an organization-wide strategy to build necessary capabilities.
- **Advance financing mechanisms still being developed or adapted** such as the Immediate Response Account.
- **Maturing risk systems**, with a new Enterprise Risk Management Division established in 2017, a new policy published in 2018 and risk management culture and capacities continuing to be built.
- **Partnerships being enhanced** in the light of United Nations development system reform, the use of long-term agreements for cooperating partners and an emphasis on private sector partnerships, for example with international financial institutions.

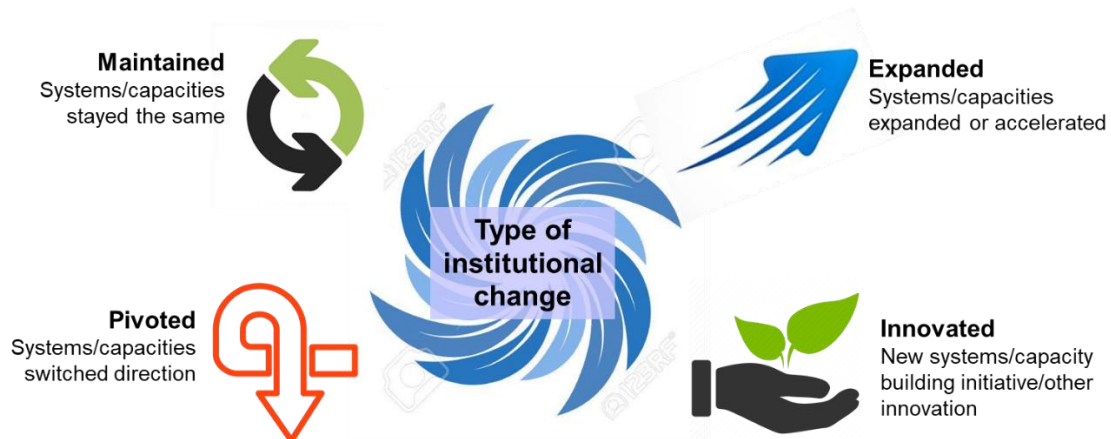
⁴ For example, evaluations of the responses to the Ebola virus disease crisis (2014–2015) (WFP/EB.1/2017/6-B); the crisis in northeast Nigeria (2019) (WFP/EB.2/2019/6-A) and the Syrian regional emergency (2018) (WFP/EB.2/2018/7-B).

18. **Knowledge management systems** remained weak, however, with mechanisms mostly experiential, informal and unsystematic. Gaps persisted in **gender equality and accountability to affected populations**. There was limited consensus on the appropriate balance between WFP's roles in emergency response and in development activity.

How did WFP adapt its systems and capacities for the response?

19. The evaluation analysed WFP organizational capacities and systems with regard to whether and how they had adapted during the pandemic (figure 6).

Figure 6: Analysis of WFP systems and capacities



Source: Evaluation team.

20. Overall the evaluation found that, although WFP – like most international bodies – entered 2020 unprepared for a pandemic on a global scale, it adapted swiftly to face demands.

21. **Emergency declaration:** The WFP Level 3 emergency declaration of 27 March 2020 was not expeditious. It was issued two weeks after the WHO declaration of a global pandemic, while COVID-19 was gaining significant momentum in Europe and the Americas. Its timing was broadly in line with the declarations of some United Nations entities, such as the United Nations Children’s Fund, but later than those of others.⁵ Once in place, however, it helped to galvanize external attention and financing and internally enabled surge deployment and adaptive financial management.

22. **Management systems and strategic frameworks:** The global nature of the emergency, and its varied unfolding from region to region, placed a significant strain on decision making. Responsibilities and accountabilities of the strategic and operational task forces were not always clear, and the sub-optimal organizational location of the corporate response director impeded timely decision making.

23. Nonetheless, corporate strategic frameworks were quickly developed. The GRP issued one month after the Level 3 declaration, followed by the medium-term programme framework (later the socioeconomic response and recovery programme) on 1 June 2020. However, there was limited interconnection between these plans and variable ownership and understanding of them across the organization.

⁵ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees declared a global level-2 emergency on 25 March 2020; the United Nations Children’s Fund declared a Level 3 emergency on 20 April 2020; WHO and the International Organization for Migration issued their strategic preparedness and response plans for COVID-19 in February 2020; and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee system-wide scale-up protocols adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic were endorsed on 17 April 2020.

24. **Data and knowledge management:** WFP pivoted to use the best available but imperfect datasets to generate global food insecurity estimates as well as its own needs-based figures. Some confusion arose regarding food insecurity figures generated by WFP and those produced by partners; donors would have appreciated a single clear set of figures. However, WFP increased and adapted its production of food insecurity data and analysis to serve both the WFP and wider international responses as a global public good.

25. Some real-time learning was conducted through internal systems, but experience from past emergency responses, such as from the 2014–2015 Ebola pandemic in West Africa, was not systematically applied due to weak knowledge management systems. Instead, knowledge transfer was largely ad hoc and person to person, based on staff's prior professional experience.

26. **Financing:** The WFP fundraising approach – which prioritized first a “call forward” of existing resource commitments – was novel and overall successful, with over 80 percent of requested funds secured in 2020. However, delayed donor contributions, little increase in flexible funding and a heavy emphasis on emergency funding created challenges. Only USD 261.5 million was raised for common services against the nearly USD 1 billion initial request through the GHRP, an amount considered overambitious by many stakeholders. WFP created new internal financial instruments to help manage funding inflows and adapted existing internal mechanisms to help balance gaps in funding coverage and sequencing. However, weaknesses in existing instruments were magnified by the large sums of money received.

27. **Risk management:** Balancing the no regrets ethos of humanitarian delivery with accountability to partner governments, donors and other funders proved challenging, and some tensions arose. Overall, however, WFP achieved a managed balance, with risk concerns prioritized from an early stage and dedicated risk-related exercises conducted. Staff observed procedures, and risk tolerance did not increase overall. Adaptations in both internal audit and evaluation systems reduced immediate demands on staff while ensuring continued oversight.

28. **Workforce management:** A major global surge response was launched to support staffing at the country level. Despite initial challenges, over 500 deployments took place. Human resource and staff well-being systems were adapted on a real-time basis, with greater flexibility and devolution of decision making appreciated by country-based staff. To support physical and mental well-being, additional medical staff were recruited, new procedures implemented and staff counselling services expanded.

29. However, as of December 2021, 29 WFP employees had sadly lost their lives to COVID-19.⁶ Moreover, at all levels and in many locations, WFP staff endured very considerable strain. Female staff in particular often faced pressures of combining domestic and professional roles. Those locked down in hazardous or remote environments incurred very high levels of stress, as did staff experiencing harsh lockdowns in some countries. Remote working faced many practical difficulties, as well as a prevailing culture of “presenteeism” and some managers unaccustomed to supervising work from a distance. However, adaptations were made, and some aspects of remote working continued into 2021.

30. **Internal cohesion:** Enhanced cross-functional coordination supported internal cohesion, and WFP streamlined its management communications and deployed a “gatekeeper” function to focus headquarters demands on country offices. It also located regional bureaux as interlocutors between headquarters and the field. Stakeholders appreciated the consistent WFP positioning in external dialogue. However, diverse vantage points and differing pandemic experiences globally prevented the development of a shared internal understanding. Regional bureaux faced

⁶ As reported to WFP's Medical Service and Staff Wellness Division as of 15 December 2021.

significant demands in managing communication flows between headquarters and country offices and translating corporate guidance for use at the country and regional levels.

How did WFP adapt its partnerships and strategic positioning?

31. **Common services:** Despite a steep learning curve, the scaling up of WFP common services provision, including cargo and passenger transport, medical and medical evacuation facilities, earned it significant international appreciation and respect. The timeliness and agility of service provision was highly valued by all partners.

32. Challenges included the establishment of humanitarian staging hubs, which required protracted negotiations with host governments and United Nations partners, and the logistical and practical implications of setting up medical treatment centres for humanitarian workers, with five planned but only those in Addis Ababa and Accra eventually utilized as intended. The co-leadership of medical evacuation services with the United Nations Department of Operational Support required system-wide agreement on entitlements as well as negotiation of roles and responsibilities, including with regard to the use of air assets.

33. **United Nations partnerships:** Some early-stage tensions arose in some of WFP's relations with other United Nations entities, particularly when the emergency "instinct" of those entities was less mature than that of WFP. However, willingness and commitment on all sides allowed these issues to be mostly ironed out, laying the foundations for future collaboration. At the country level, there was broad praise for WFP's risk appetite and no regrets approach and its focus on response.

34. **Government partnerships:** National requests to WFP were shaped by the depth and scale of the pandemic and its effect in each country, national response capacity; pre-existing strategic or operational cooperation between each government and the United Nations or WFP; and government perceptions of WFP agility, ability to respond quickly and at scale and technical competence. Overall, WFP aligned its efforts with government responses, although this sometimes took it well beyond its comfort zone, for example into urban targeting or working with unfamiliar ministries or national focal points.

35. **Cooperating partnerships:** Cooperating partners reported increased openness, flexibility and willingness to listen from WFP during the pandemic response. Private sector partnerships expanded, including to support the transport of COVID-19-related cargo and humanitarian personnel, although some challenges were encountered with regard to WFP legal and due diligence requirements.

36. **Advocacy:** WFP also expanded its global advocacy in 2020 and 2021, becoming a more visible presence in international forums for the pandemic response, including the United Nations Security Council, the Group of Seven, the Group of Twenty, permanent missions to the United Nations, the Secretary-General's office and United Nations system communications briefings. At the country level, the leveraging of WFP relationships with governments for advocacy on humanitarian access and movement for humanitarian workers was appreciated by partners.

How did WFP adapt programming to meet needs?

37. Overall, WFP responded with agility and flexibility to meet new programmatic needs.

38. WFP swiftly implemented biosecurity measures, including the use of masks and personal protective equipment, installation of handwashing facilities, body temperature checks and social distancing measures at activity sites. School feeding programmes were adapted to distribute take-home rations where schools were closed.

39. Country strategic plans were revised to meet new conditions as the pandemic unfolded. Sixty-six were revised in 2020, with their combined budgets increased by USD 4.3 billion through COVID-19-related additional resources. Country offices, however, struggled with the budget revision process, which can involve up to 120 separate steps⁷ and takes on average between four and five months, including approval.

40. Major country strategic plan changes included an increased emergency focus, particularly for those WFP country offices delivering largely technical advice and capacity strengthening; adapting targeting to meet new needs, including in urban areas; increased use of cash-based transfers and, linked to this, expanded engagement in social protection measures; scaling up social protection-related activities; expanding capacity strengthening and advisory support; and providing supply chain and logistics services to governments.

41. A wide range of external factors influenced the shift to more emergency-focused programming, including school closures and the consequent transfer of some beneficiaries to social assistance programmes; the moving of some beneficiaries of asset creation and livelihoods programmes to unrestricted transfer programmes; increased government requests for engagement in social protection-linked cash transfers; and donor earmarking.

42. Table 3 provides examples of programme adaptation.

TABLE 3: PROGRAMME ADAPTATION	
General food assistance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the number of distribution sites and the use of cluster locations; Loading electronic cards in batches to avoid crowding; installing additional ATMs; Switching to household and individual level distributions; Increasing transfer values and reducing frequency; Suspending biometric verification; and Providing at-home distributions to the most vulnerable. 	<p>In Somalia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the prepared meals activity was halted and its beneficiaries were given cash-based transfers in lieu of the meals.</p> <p>In Lebanon, WFP undertook batch-loading of electronic cards to avoid ATM crowding.</p> <p>In the Central African Republic, at-home distributions were provided to the most vulnerable beneficiaries.</p> <p>In the State of Palestine, WFP developed a card-free system that could be activated in shops through the use of a seven-digit code sent to beneficiaries' mobile phones.</p>
School feeding	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of take-home food rations where authorized by governments;* Use of cash-based transfers; and Technical assistance to government programmes, e.g. safe return to schools. 	<p>In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Sri Lanka, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen the school feeding programme was modified to provide take-home rations.</p> <p>In Honduras, WFP worked with the Government to provide take-home rations for 1.25 million children.</p>

⁷ "Summary report on the strategic evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies (2011–2018)" (WFP/EB.1/2020/5-A); internal review of Level 3 emergency response (2021).

TABLE 3: PROGRAMME ADAPTATION

Asset creation and livelihoods/resilience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from communal to household level asset creation such as home gardens. 	<p>In the Syrian Arab Republic and the Niger, WFP supported the conversion of communal asset creation to the household level.</p> <p>In Zimbabwe, WFP supported home gardens.</p>
Nutrition	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from delivery through health centres to community-based interventions; and Use of nutrition programming at the community level to disseminate messaging on COVID-19 prevention 	<p>In Myanmar, there was a shift from health facilities to community service delivery.</p> <p>In Guinea-Bissau, WFP disseminated health messaging through the radio on the country's national nutrition day.</p>

Source: Annual performance reports.

* This applied in all countries examined other than Mozambique, where the Government did not permit the use of take-home rations.

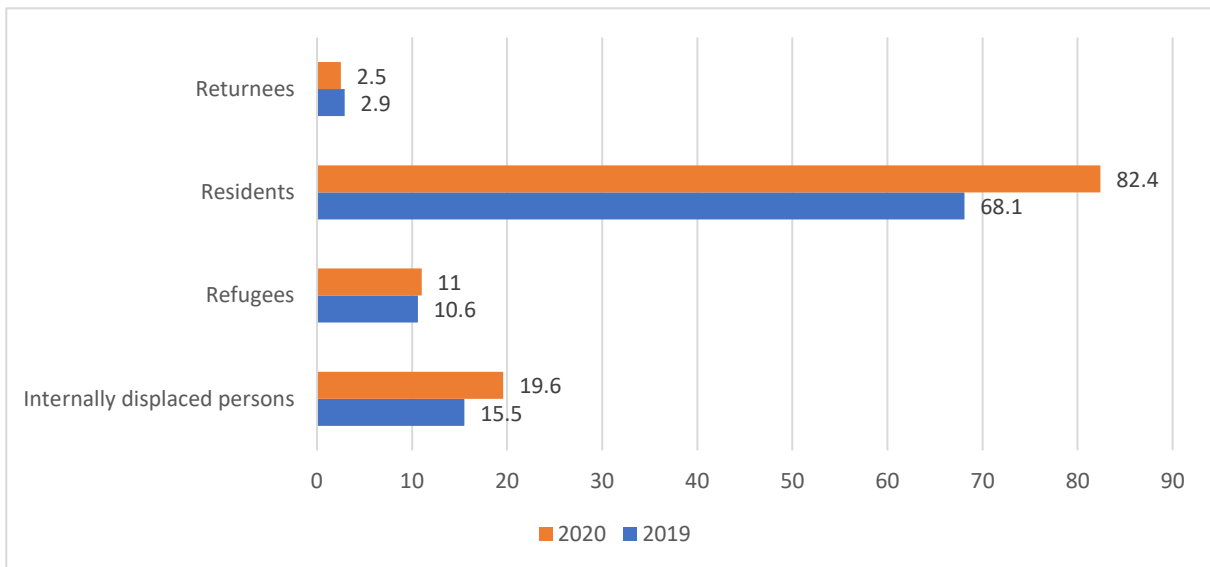
43. Beneficiary targeting was adapted to needs, including through the identification of new beneficiaries and the transfer of existing beneficiaries to new forms of assistance, such as from school feeding to social protection schemes. A particular area of expansion was in urban targeting, in which WFP had little recent experience.

Box 1: Urban targeting

- In **Kenya**, at the request of the Government, WFP launched an urban response in Nairobi's informal settlements and Mombasa to assist 478,000 people adversely affected by the pandemic with cash and nutrition support.
- In **Zimbabwe**, adaptation to COVID-19 included the scale-up of urban assistance by more than fivefold, to reach 550,000 people through April 2021.
- In **Afghanistan**, WFP assisted families with a two-month supply of cash-based assistance focusing on urban areas, reaching 1.2 million vulnerable people.
- In **South Sudan**, WFP scaled up shock-responsive urban safety net programming, supporting 185,000 urban residents with cash and food assistance.

44. Refugees, internally displaced persons and resident beneficiaries – who usually reside in urban areas – were reached in greater numbers than in 2019 (figure 7).

Figure 7: Refugees, internally displaced persons and resident beneficiaries served in 2020



Source: WFP 2019 and 2020 annual performance reports.

45. However, there was no significant shift in the number of women and girls assisted, which rose only 3.9 percent from 2019, despite the increased effects of the pandemic on gender inequality.

46. **Cash-based transfer programmes** expanded significantly, with a 37 percent increase in the use of cash in 2020, to USD 2.1 billion, and USD 1.7 billion distributed in the first nine months of 2021. WFP supported governments in 65 countries in scaling up and adapting existing social protection measures in response to COVID-19, including to develop policy frameworks and refine targeting.

Box 2: Expanding technical support for social protection

- In **Ecuador**, WFP complemented the Government's social protection programme through two types of cash-based transfers to help meet the basic food needs of vulnerable households during the pandemic.
- WFP helped develop national frameworks for shock-responsive social protection and expanding policy frameworks in **Cambodia, the Niger, Nigeria and Somalia**.
- WFP provided technical assistance in **Jordan** to the Government's national aid fund to digitize its cash assistance programme.
- WFP contributed to the design of a unified social registry in **Chad** to facilitate safety nets and serve as a platform for activating emergency responses.
- WFP helped develop a coordinated strategy for social protection engagement between the United Nations system and national authorities in **the Syrian Arab Republic**.

47. **Country capacity strengthening** support expanded, including in respect of supply chains, logistics, food security monitoring and analysis and programme design (box 3):

Box 3: Expanding capacity strengthening support

- In **Myanmar**, WFP provided technical support to help the Government design its planned cash-based response to COVID-19.
- In **Sri Lanka**, WFP entered into a partnership with a local university and a university based in the United States of America to develop methodologies for accurate targeting in urban areas.
- In **Burkina Faso**, WFP provided training to support the Government in vulnerability assessment and targeting and in the management of procurement and distribution systems.
- In **Iraq**, with school feeding activities paused, WFP focused on capacity strengthening activities, e.g. training on digital skills, communication and data collection for education personnel.
- In **the Gambia**, WFP seconded technical support personnel to the national disaster management agency to assist with the COVID-19 response.

48. WFP also led or co-led with governments the coordination of the **logistics and supply chain** aspects of the United Nations response, including by engaging in the supply chain interagency coordination cell. It provided technical support and advice on supply chains; storage and handling for humanitarian and health cargo; procurement of goods and services; and tangible logistics assets and services. For example, in Honduras, the Government requested WFP support for the entire supply chain, including cash-based transfer delivery channels and procurement and distribution of commodities.⁸

49. **Timeliness** was mixed, with delays or temporary suspensions caused by biosecurity requirements; adaptation to government restrictions; and supply chain constraints. New activities also required time to develop systems, prepare new partnerships, e.g. with financial service providers, and engage with relevant stakeholders.

50. The **in-kind supply chain** was largely sustained through forward purchasing and increased local purchases; pre-positioning of food resources; and reinforcement of key corridors with specialized overland transport and technical assistance. Regional availability of inventory was variable and pipeline breaks occurred in many countries, but supply chain costs were kept largely stable overall.

51. WFP did not scale up its corporate human or financial resources to address **gender equality**, nor re-prioritize for greater attention to the issue. Some country offices made adaptations as needs changed, but responses varied according to management interest and commitment, the seniority of the gender adviser or focal point in the country and the resources available.

52. Despite physical access constraints, WFP adapted to keep the flow of **communication** with affected populations open, including through third-party monitoring, toll-free hotlines and call centres. Efforts were also made to maintain community feedback mechanisms, although with greater reliance on remote communication and technology than before.

Results

Food security and nutrition

53. The response served a record 115.6 million beneficiaries in 2020, exceeding those reached in 2019 by almost 20 percent (97.1 million). In all, 93 percent of targeted beneficiaries were reached, with a range of 84–100 percent across all six regions (table 3). Ninety million people were served in the first half of 2021.

⁸ "Summary report on the evaluation of the country strategic plan for Honduras (2018–2021)" (WFP/EB.1/2022/6-D).

TABLE 4: ACHIEVEMENT ACROSS REGIONS (2020)				
Region	WFP regional bureau	Planned (millions)	Actual (millions)	% annual performance
Asia and the Pacific	Asia and the Pacific	20	17.5	88
Middle East and Northern Africa	Middle East and Northern Africa	28	28.1	100
Western Africa	Western Africa	20	18.2	91
Southern Africa	Southern Africa	23	19.3	84
Eastern Africa	Eastern Africa	27	26.5	98
Latin America and the Caribbean	Latin America and the Caribbean	6	6.0	100
Total		124	115.6	93

Source: WFP annual performance report for 2020.

54. Apart from funding constraints, the main COVID-19-related reasons for underachievement were the suspension of activities due to national conditions and supply chain disruptions. The amount of cash and commodities distributed remained virtually the same during 2020 as in 2019.

55. Overall, WFP assistance prevented any significant deterioration in the food security and nutrition status of its beneficiaries – although it did not improve. Against the significant headwinds of the pandemic, however, this is a positive gain (table 5).

TABLE 5: OUTCOME DATA FROM A SAMPLE OF 34 COUNTRIES				
Strategic result	Outcome indicators with sufficient evidence to report (ten countries or more in both 2019 and 2020)	Improved from 2019–2020	Remained the same as 2019–2020	Declined from 2019–2020
1	1.1 Maintained/enhanced individual and household access to adequate food	2	16	2
2	2.1 Improved consumption of high-quality, nutrient-dense foods among targeted individuals		7	1
3	3.1 Increased smallholder production and sales	1	1	
4	4.1 Improved household adaptation and resilience to climate and other shocks		2	
5	5.1 Enhanced capacities of public and private sector institutions and systems, including local responders, to identify, target and assist food-insecure and nutritionally vulnerable populations		1	
8	8.1 Enhanced common coordination platforms		1	
Total		3	28	3

Source: 2020 WFP annual country reports.

Enabling the international response

56. WFP common services activities successfully underpinned the global humanitarian response. This has repositioned WFP globally, increasing its visibility and generating considerable reputational capital.

TABLE 6: CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN			
GHRP strategic priority	Results area	Result achieved by the global response	WFP contribution
1	Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality	By December 2020, 55 GHRP countries had received nearly 114 million medical masks.	Cargo services, with 135,000 m ³ of cargo transported from April 2020 to March 2021; establishment of an emergency service marketplace
2	Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods.	Nearly 57 million people in 60 GHRP countries were reached with essential health care services.	Cargo services; passenger services, transporting humanitarian workers (almost 30,000 passengers transported between April 2020 and March 2021); establishment of emergency service marketplace
		A data facility covering 29 countries was set up to support remote data collection and analysis.	Provision of technical support, data and analytics
3	Protect, assist and advocate refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.	9.4 million refugees, internally displaced persons and 1.24 million people most vulnerable to or affected by COVID-19 in 50 GHRP countries received livelihood support.	Provision of food and livelihoods support through existing agreements with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; advocacy of humanitarian access

Source: Evaluation team, based on GHRP and WFP data.

Systems and capacities

57. Internally, existing systems and capacities mostly expanded or pivoted to meet need. Some innovation also flourished. Systems for managing risk and staff well-being, providing a global surge and generating data and analysis all expanded, as did United Nations, government and private sector partnerships and WFP’s advocacy role. Response management, workforce and internal financial arrangements, along with estimations of needs, also adapted to the changed external conditions.

Figure 8: Adaptation of systems and capacities



Source: Evaluation team

58. Changes in approaches to gender and the expansion of social protection work occurred at the country level without increased corporate investment. This arguably limited the potential of WFP for transformative change in these areas.

59. The major WFP organizational capacities of agility and resilience – borne from long experience in emergency response – are reflected in these results.

CONCLUSIONS

60. Although corporately unprepared for a global pandemic, and despite “bumps on the road”, WFP mostly adapted to meet the needs created by COVID-19. Internal systems for pandemic management largely expanded or pivoted to respond, although areas of longstanding underinvestment such as knowledge management continued to be constrained. Limited central investment in social protection and gender equality did not prevent adaptation on the ground but did restrict the scope for more transformational change. Standard response systems struggled amid a crisis whose defining feature was its global diversity, with no common view of the pandemic’s unfolding and strains and tensions emerging between headquarters and the regional and country levels.

61. Operationally, WFP stayed to deliver even as many other organizations departed. Programmatic action on the ground continued, with cash support, often as part of national social protection responses, and were scaled up to address new and emerging needs. New populations were served with agility, and WFP expanded into urban areas. Technical advice and support were supplied, along with supply chain and logistics support and new, often atypical, requests were addressed with flexibility and agility.

62. The WFP contribution to the global humanitarian response through its common services earned it appreciation and respect from partners around the world. Its achievements here – along with increased external advocacy – have changed its global profile. More than just a safe pair of hands or a capable service provider, it is seen as a critical and fundamental **systems enabler**, without which the international humanitarian response to the pandemic – and ultimately the hungry poor – would have been severely compromised.

63. However, these achievements had a **high human cost**. WFP owes an immense debt to its workforce, which – at all levels – shouldered the burdens of staying to deliver amid often intense conditions of strain. A service-based ethos; individual identity as humanitarians; a culture of flexibility; the familiarity of running towards an emergency even as others leave; and a resolute commitment to the people WFP serves all played their part. But staff care – over and above wellness – has many dimensions and is an organization-wide concern.

64. The pandemic response has posed a vast array of challenges and opportunities for the humanitarian system. Reaching greater clarity on WFP's *raison d'être* in a world of systemic crises is therefore timely. The evaluation report offers some suggestions for WFP to help maximize its role as a systems enabler and to stimulate reflection as it moves into its next strategic plan period.

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

65. The evidence presented in the evaluation indicates a clear strategic positioning for WFP as a systems enabler for the humanitarian architecture of the future – at all levels. Rather than recommendations, six items are presented for WFP to consider as it moves forward to the implementation of its strategic plan for 2022–2025, recognizing that the organization is already engaging with recommendations from the strategic evaluation of its capacity to respond to emergencies.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>1. Reposition WFP as a key actor in COVID-19 recovery. The experience of the pandemic has highlighted the futility of the humanitarian-development divide – particularly in contexts that involve multiple shocks and stressors – and reinforced the importance of the concept of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. WFP has expressed its intention, for example in its strategic plan for 2022–2025, to work on structural vulnerabilities⁹ through, for example, resilience activities.</p> <p>The increase in demand for WFP social protection expertise – beyond support for cash transfers as an emergency response – presents a major opportunity to reposition WFP as an integral part of the COVID-19 recovery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The reputational capital garnered by WFP in its COVID-19 response positions it well to support global COVID-19 recovery. Externally, communicating WFP’s role in supporting medium-term responses to the socioeconomic legacy of the pandemic – whether in development or humanitarian contexts – will be key. Examples include helping to build and implement national social protection frameworks, support social cohesion and peacebuilding and develop medium-term responses to climate change. Gender equality is a key dimension of, and opportunity within, recovery. ii. As part of this, it will be useful to clarify internally how a WFP response to structural vulnerabilities can best intersect with WFP’s emergency response role. For example, consideration should be given to how social protection can be used to address medium-term food insecurity and nutrition challenges; whether and where cash transfers are understood and applied as an emergency or medium-term social safety net; and how interventions that contribute to peace can be built into emergency responses.
<p>2. Systems enabler. Building on the reputational capital garnered during its COVID-19 response, WFP may wish to consider extending its role from that of a supporting entity within the humanitarian architecture to that of a systems enabler at both the national and international levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. As a demonstrated systems enabler and humanitarian leader, WFP can expand its services to other actors in the humanitarian system – including governments and other United Nations entities – to help build their emergency expertise and capacity at the national and local levels. This is consistent with both the United Nations development system reform and the humanitarian localization agenda. ii. Defining required capacities in these areas and providing institutional support as required will help confirm WFP’s commitment to becoming a partner of choice in relevant areas. iii. External messaging and communication will need to reflect this positioning and a broader understanding of WFP as a systems enabler in a strategic, as well as operational, sense.

⁹ Structural vulnerabilities are weaknesses in the foundations for lifting people out of poverty and enabling them to make choices and take their lives into their own hands. They include, for example, inadequate education, child nutrition, gender equality, social protection coverage and rural infrastructure. “WFP strategic plan (2022–2025)” (WFP/EB.2/2021/4-A/1/Rev.2).

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>3. Increase advocacy. WFP has increased its advocacy work throughout the pandemic and become increasingly visible in high-level forums. This enhanced visibility can be leveraged for good, building on strong partnerships at the country level in particular.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Using the increased visibility earned through its COVID-19 response, expand WFP's advocacy for the food security and nutrition aspects of socioeconomic recovery, emphasizing in particular political audiences at the national, regional and international levels. ii. Increase advocacy skills training for key staff, especially senior management at the country and regional levels. iii. Leveraging the enhanced partnerships built during the pandemic, engage with cooperating partners on advocacy agendas, identifying common concerns and seeking common messages.
<p>4. Create a shared overview and anticipate management arrangements. The lack of a shared overview of the pandemic, and what was needed for an effective response to it, highlighted the challenges of a globally diverse emergency. It also impeded decision making, with mechanisms set up for a more standard regional or country-level response. Anticipating potential local diversity within large-scale or global emergencies and deciding "how to decide" in such situations will help facilitate the design and implementation of effective responses into any future relevant responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Developing a clear shared understanding of what may be very different local situations within large-scale or global emergencies as a first step should be prioritized in emergency response going forward – including for example in corporate response director terms of reference. ii. Adopting a model of empowered leadership balanced with appropriate delegation of authority will be key to balancing corporate decision making with the flexibility needed to adapt to local conditions.
<p>5. Ensure resilient but adaptive systems. WFP found during the pandemic that many of its systems were able to adapt while others, such as budget revisions for country strategic plans and some internal financial management systems, struggled. Standard systems need to be adaptable when a large-scale emergency strikes, and flexibility must be built in and stress tested.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The key systems that require adaptation, particularly during an emergency with diverse features across locations, are financial systems, adaptations to strategic plans (global and national); human resources; and management arrangements. ii. Contingency planning and stress testing will help support preparedness in these areas. iii. Enhancing knowledge management systems to ensure that flexibility and adaptation are firmly and consistently grounded in previous experience will help to ensure an evidence-based response.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>6. Adopt an ethos of staff care. Beyond a people policy or staff wellness, how can WFP best support its staff, confirm their identity as part of the WFP family and make them feel a sense of organizational commitment to their well-being? Staff care takes systems – contractual arrangements, progression guarantees and others, many of which are out of WFP’s hands – but also workplace culture and management skills, whose limitations have been highlighted during the pandemic.</p> <p>If WFP’s organizational bloodstream is its systems, processes and technical capacities, then its heart is its people. Their experience of, and contribution to, the many intangible elements that constitute a humanitarian response should be maximized at all levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Building on commitments in the strategic plan for 2022–2025 to improve workplace culture by fostering management skills, both for duty of care (wellness) and managing performance remotely, will help provide the supportive management that WFP employees need. It will also enhance the workplace culture and foster the two-way loyalty between WFP and its employees on which emergency responses depend. ii. Reflect on (and improve if possible) the availability of fixed-term, continuing and permanent contracts, both international and national. iii. Capturing the human experience of emergency response – beyond formal counselling – by allowing people to debrief and reflect on their own immediate personal experience is a key part of both valuing individual employees and harnessing their experience for improved organizational learning.

1. Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic created a perfect storm for the humanitarian community. Already under strain from unparalleled demand,¹⁰ humanitarian organizations faced major disruptions with borders closed, supply chains impeded and access to affected populations constrained.
2. Governments across the world were overwhelmed. Many faced complex challenges in protecting their populations while supporting the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The uncertain trajectory of the pandemic, given the unknown pathology of COVID-19, compounded the difficulties.
3. The World Food Programme (WFP) planned to serve 87 million beneficiaries¹¹ across the world in 2020. By midyear, it found itself making major changes to serve increased needs and facilitate the international humanitarian response while functioning under global emergency conditions, including in its Rome-based headquarters.
4. This report reviews how WFP navigated the complexity and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a situation that stress-tested the international system's capacity to respond to its very limits, how did WFP adapt to serve humanitarian needs? The report assesses the organization's response from a systems perspective, with the aim of supporting reflection and review as WFP adjusts to face increasingly complex and multifaceted emergencies.

1.1. EVALUATION FEATURES

5. This report comprises an independent evaluation of the WFP response to the COVID-19 pandemic from February 2020–June 2021. The evaluation asked three questions, all of which aim to explore the adaptive capacity of WFP under pandemic conditions:
 - How well did the enabling environment and organizational assets of WFP adapt to respond to the demands of the COVID-19 crisis?
 - How well did WFP fulfil its role as a partner in the collective humanitarian response?
 - What was achieved, and what was learned?
6. This report primarily addresses the interests, needs and concerns of populations affected by the pandemic. It also seeks to inform the wider humanitarian community. Most directly, its intended users are WFP regional bureaux and country offices as primary deliverers of the COVID-19 response at field level; WFP leadership and senior management at headquarter level; and external stakeholders, including partner governments, United Nations agencies, WFP cooperating partners and other local actors and Executive Board members.

1.2. CONTEXT

1.2.1 Features of the pandemic

7. Despite international warnings of a future pandemic,¹² COVID-19 found the world in 2020 largely unprepared. Its unfolding¹³ presented both **complexity** for global and national response systems and **uncertainty**, while governments and populations struggled to respond to an unknown pathology with no defined trajectory (Figure 1).

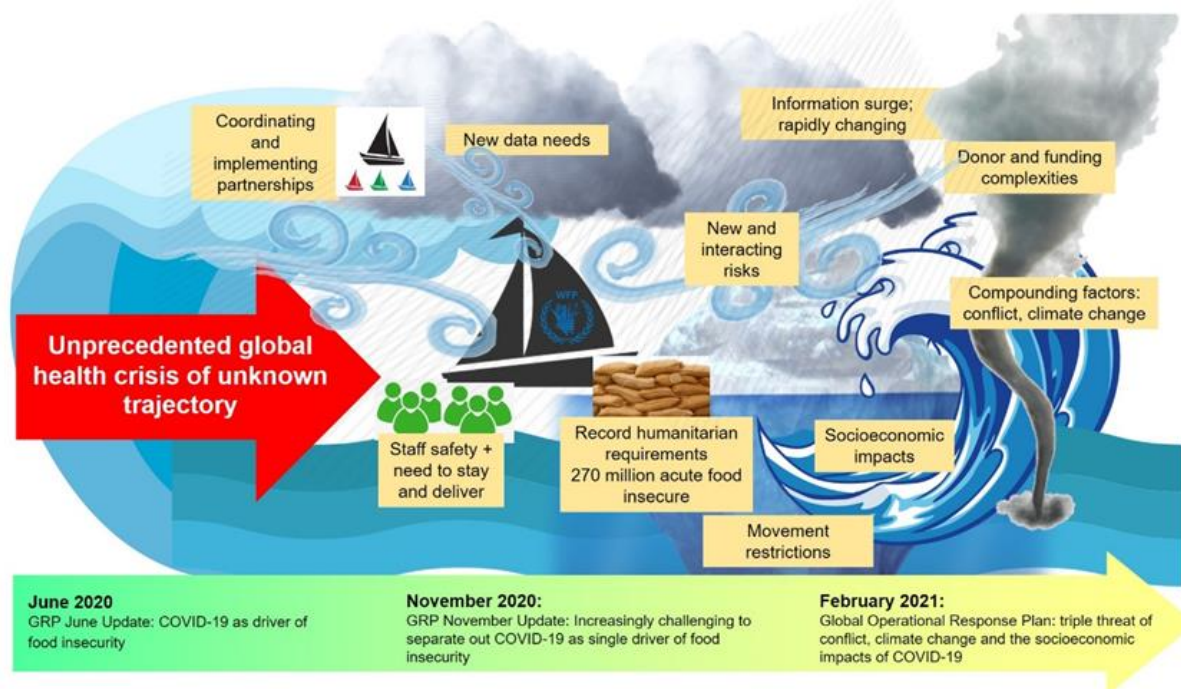
¹⁰ UNOCHA. 2020. Global Humanitarian Overview.

¹¹ WFP. 2020. *Management Plan (2020-2022)*.

¹² See for example Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (2019) *A World at Risk: Annual report on global preparedness for health emergencies*.

¹³ See also for example, World Health Organization, WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19, 11 March 2020; United Nations, 2020. *UN Response to COVID-19*, 25 June 2020.

Figure 1: Complexity and uncertainty

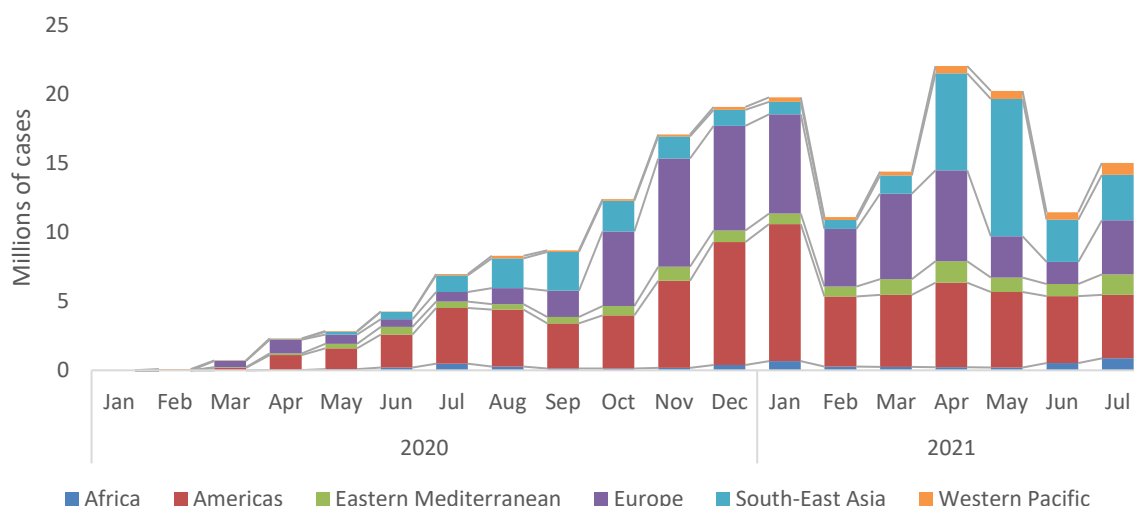


Source: Evaluation team

8. Specific features included:

- **A pandemic in continuous waves** COVID-19 affected different regions and countries at different times. Beginning in East Asia, it rapidly spread to Europe and the Americas, following international travel patterns at the time (Figure 2). Cases were kept relatively low in East Asia in the early stages, while Europe, particularly Italy, and the Americas were badly affected in the first few months. The year 2021 has seen rising rates in Africa, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific.

Figure 2: Global COVID-19 cases February 2020-July 2021



Source: WHO Coronavirus Dashboard, August 2021

- **Unprecedented humanitarian needs.** In early 2020, global humanitarian requirements were already close to United States dollars (USD) 30 billion, with 168 million people needing assistance to

survive.¹⁴ With the addition of newly vulnerable populations due to the pandemic, 270 million people were directly at risk of acute hunger and an extra 83 to 132 million people at risk of becoming chronically undernourished.¹⁵ Global financial requirements for 2020 rose to a record USD 37 billion, and to USD 35.1 billion in 2021.¹⁶

- **Multidimensional needs.** The covariate nature of the pandemic shock rapidly became clear with both the virus itself and the restrictions imposed by governments to control it creating major social and economic effects. Health, employment, food security, education and many other needs and rights were differentially affected as societies shut down and movement ceased. The humanitarian, peace and development landscapes were destabilized, driving human suffering to a staggering scale.¹⁷
- **Deepened inequality.** Even in wealthy countries, inequalities starkly deepened.¹⁸ Women and girls, refugees and the displaced and those living in conflict or with disabilities,¹⁹ as well as those who suffer from stigma, showed least protection to the pandemic's effects.²⁰

Box 1: Intensification of gender inequality and gender-based violence

Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the effects of COVID-19. Since the pandemic, women and girls face an increased risk of hunger and malnutrition; school closures have affected girl children particularly; and the risks of early marriage, adolescent pregnancies and maternal mortality²¹ have increased significantly. Gender-based violence surged worldwide amid lockdowns.²² Economic vulnerability has intensified acutely, with the informal economy particularly badly affected, a sector in which many women are employed. Economic vulnerability has intensified acutely.²³

- **Medium-term effects.** By mid-2020, the medium-term effects of the pandemic were becoming apparent as economies closed and trade across borders ceased. The fourth worst global recession in the past 150 years was predicted, alongside a global economic contraction of 4.9 percent.²⁴ The year 2021 has seen increasing global poverty and hunger, as the socioeconomic hardships created by national lockdowns, declining demand and supply of goods and services and economic contagion come into effect.²⁵

¹⁴ United Nations. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, UN Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020, 26 June 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.; United Nations. 2021. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, UN Coordinated Appeal.

¹⁷ WFP. 2021. Global Operational Response Plan.

¹⁸ The Lancet, January 20th 2021, Volume 6.

¹⁹ ACLED. 2021. A great and sudden change: The global political violence landscape before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

²⁰ UNDP estimated that half of working people could lose their jobs due to the pandemic, with the greatest vulnerability faced by those in the informal sector. UNDP. 2020. Coronavirus vs. inequality.

²¹ UNESCO. 2020. UNESCO COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? Advocacy paper; Save the Children. 2020. The Hardest Places to be a Child: Global Childhood Report 2020; UNESCO.

2021. Adolescent pregnancy threatens to block a million girls across sub-Saharan Africa from returning to school; Chmielewska, B., Barratt, I., Townsend, R., Kalafat, E., van der Meulen, J., Gurol-Urganci, I., O'Brien, P., Morris, E., Draycott, T., Thangaratnam, S., Le Doare, K., Ladhani, S., von Dadelszen, P., Magee, L. & Khalil, A. 2021. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and perinatal outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis: *The Lancet Global Health* 9(6): 759-772

²² UN Women. 2021. explainer: How COVID-19 impacts women and girls.

²³ UN Women. 2020. COVID-19 and gender: What do we know; what do we need to know?

²⁴ International Monetary Fund. 2020. World Economic Outlook: A Crisis like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery.

²⁵ Tandon, Ajay; Roubal, Tomas; McDonald, Lachlan; Cowley, Peter; Palu, Toomas; de Oliveira Cruz, Valeria; Eozenou, Patrick; Cain, Jewelwayne; Teo, Hui Sin; Schmidt, Martin; Pambudi, Eko; Postolovska, Iryna; Evans, David; & Kurowski, Christoph. 2020. Economic Impact of COVID-19: Implications for Health Financing in Asia and Pacific. Health, Nutrition and Population Discussion Paper. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank.

1.3. RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

1.3.1 National responses

9. National governments assumed primary responsibility for managing the pandemic on their territories. No two responses were the same,²⁶ with decisions depending on the timing and nature of the pandemic's unfolding, political and economic factors and experience with pandemic management. In some countries, swift and immediate lockdowns were imposed, with international borders closed and air travel halted; quarantine requirements applied; school and health centres shut; and movement restrictions, social distancing and hygiene requirements imposed. Elsewhere, few if any control measures were put in place.²⁷ Some governments introduced commodity price stabilization measures and/or social protection mechanisms.²⁸

10. Most countries sought to access medical equipment, including personal protective equipment (PPE), mostly from China. This forced an unusual inversion of the standard geopolitical structures for humanitarian response, where donor and aid-recipient countries simultaneously competed for access to medical supplies.²⁹

1.3.2. International humanitarian response

11. **Far-reaching consequences for the humanitarian community and WFP.** The pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for the humanitarian community at all levels. Movement restrictions challenged access to those in need, both to deliver support and to hear their needs, concerns and expectations. Disrupted supply chains constrained the availability and delivery of goods and services, including medical and protective equipment and, for WFP, commodity supplies. Commodity prices fluctuated as imports were reduced or delayed.³⁰ Humanitarian workers were effectively grounded as commercial air traffic ceased and aid agency offices closed. Remote modalities challenged humanitarian teamworking.

12. **A collective response.** A major United Nations effort was launched to coordinate the international response. Key frameworks were in place by April 2020 (Figure 3).

²⁶ Petherick, A., Kira, B., Angrist, N., Hale, T., Phillips, T., & Webster, S. 2020. Variation in Government Responses to COVID-19. *Blavatnik School Working Paper 032*.


²⁷ E.g. Tanzania and Burundi, see for example: HRW. 2020. Burundi: Fear, Repression in Covid-19 Response. Buguzi, S. 2021. Covid-19: Counting the cost of denial in Tanzania. *BMJ* 373(1052).

²⁸ For example: WFP. 2020. Kyrgyzstan Annual Country Report.

²⁹ Burki, T. 2020. Global shortage of personal protective equipment. *Lancet Infect Dis.* 20(7): 785–786. Published online 2020 Jun 24.

³⁰ WFP annual country reports for 32 countries, 2020.

Figure 3: United Nations milestones in the response



30 Jan. 2020	World Health Organization (WHO) declares COVID-19 outbreaks a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) , rapidly followed (3 February) by its USD 675 million Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP). ³¹
11 March 2020	WHO officially declares COVID-19 a pandemic. ³²
25 March 2020 ³³	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) issues a USD 2 billion Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) , ³⁴ targeting nearly 250 million people. Three strategic priorities: (i) contain the pandemic's spread and decrease morbidity and mortality; (ii) decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods; and (iii) protect, assist and advocate for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), migrants, and host communities.
3 April 2020	United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi Partner Trust Fund (MTPF) launched with three funding windows intended to: (i) enable governments and communities to suppress the transmission of the virus (ii) mitigate the socioeconomic impact and safeguard their livelihoods and (iii) recover better.
27 April 2020	United Nations issues a United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 ³⁵ oriented around five pillars: (i) health first; (ii) protecting people; (iii) economic response and recovery; (iv) macroeconomic response and multilateral collaboration; and (v) social cohesion and community resilience. UN Country Teams develop individual country socioeconomic response plans (SERPs).
7 May 2020	GHRP May update ³⁶ (USD 6.71 billion appeal; fragile countries).
16 July 2020	GHRP July update ³⁷ (USD 10.26 billion appeal; the most vulnerable and low-income countries).
25 Nov. 2020	GHRP request revised to USD 9.5 billion. ³⁸ As of September 2021, updated GHRP 40 percent funded. ³⁹
1 Dec. 2020	COVID-19 analyses and responses integrated into Global Humanitarian Overview 2021. ⁴⁰

Source: Evaluation team

1.4 SUBJECT BEING EVALUATED

13. In March 2020, WFP launched a two-pronged response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This comprised: (i) its own strategic and operational response, focused at country level and geared to the food security and nutrition response (Table 2); and (ii) support for the international response, which oriented largely around enabling the international response through the provision of common services.

14. Key elements (i) are presented in Table 1.

³¹WHO. 2020. 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV): Strategic preparedness and response plan.

³²WHO. 2020. World Health Organization, Director-General opening remarks 11 March 2020.

³³UNOCHA. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19.

³⁴UNOCHA. 2020. OCHA, Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April – December 2020.

³⁵United Nations. 2020. A UN framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19, April 2020; UNSDG. 2020. A new normal: UN lays out roadmap to lift economies and save jobs after COVID-19.

³⁶UNOCHA. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020, GHRP May Update, 7 May 2020.

³⁷UNOCHA. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020, GHRP July Update, 16 July 2020.

³⁸UNOCHA. 2021. Integrating the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 into the Global Humanitarian Overview 2021.

³⁹UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service. 2021. COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

⁴⁰UNOCHA. 2021. Integrating the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 into the Global Humanitarian Overview 2021.

Table 1: The WFP response

Date 2020	Action	Finance requested
13 March	WFP Operational Plan. To ensure continued support to populations in need, including the strategic repositioning of three months of food supplies for priority operations. ⁴¹	
27 March	Level 3 crisis declared	None
29 March	Financial “call forward” requested to enable initial response.	USD 1.9 billion of committed/anticipated contributions requested to be frontloaded to support the WFP operational plan.
11 April	Draft global implementation plan to sustain, prioritize and scale up WFP operations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objective 1: Sustain, prioritize and scale up WFP operations Objective 2: Enable the global health and humanitarian response Objective 3: Track impacts & inform decision making. 	Additional fundraising by country offices
24 April	WFP Global COVID-19 Response Plan (GRP) Continued with three objectives of the draft global implementation plan.	Included in ‘Call forward’
1 June	Medium-Term Programme Framework (MTPF) ⁴² <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pillar 1 National social protection systems in support of government Pillar 2: Basic service delivery Pillar 3: Food systems. 	Not designed as fundraising tool
29 June	GRP June update: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pillar 1. Sustain critical assistance to the organization’s 100 million pre-COVID targeted beneficiaries through alternative means of assistance Pillar 2. Scale up to support up to 38 million additional people on the brink of acute food insecurity due to COVID-19 compounded impacts Pillar 3. Support governments and partners in their COVID-19 response. 	USD 4.9 billion requested to support the WFP portfolio across 83 countries. USD 1.7 billion requested to meet additional needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. ⁴³
30 September	GRP September update	Request revised upwards to USD 5.1 billion. ⁴⁴
18 November	GRP November update	USD 7.7 billion total budget including increased needs for COVID-19, but not including common services. ⁴⁵
15 December	MTPF renamed the Socioeconomic Response and Recovery Programme Framework (SERRPF)	
18 February 2021	WFP Global Operational Response Plan 2021 Update #1. COVID-19 integrated into global operational planning, rather than as a stand-alone emergency.	Approved 2021 Programme of Work for 2021 USD 13.5 billion. 2021 funding forecast USD 7.8 billion. ⁴⁶

⁴¹ WFP COVID-19 Situation Report #02, 13 March 2020.

⁴² Later re-named the Socioeconomic Response and Recovery Programme Framework (SERRPF).

⁴³ WIRED. 2021. #1 - 2020 Year-end edition: WFP’s Information Report on Donors, February 2021.

⁴⁴ WFP Global Update on COVID-19: November 2020.

⁴⁵ WFP. 2020. WFP Global Update on COVID-19: November 2020.

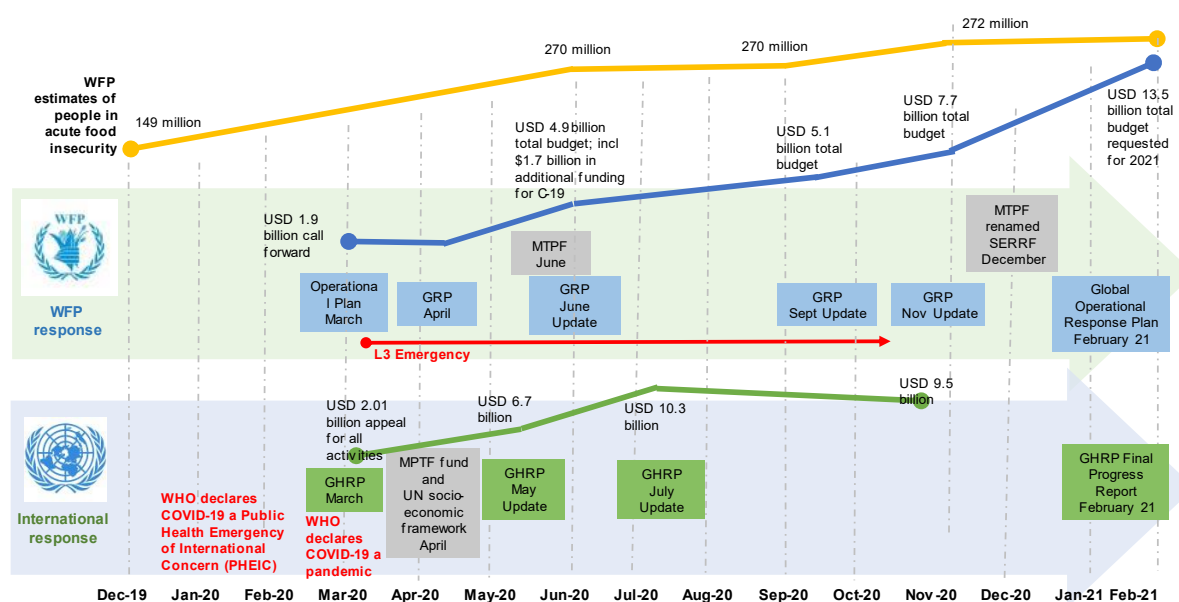
⁴⁶ WFP. 2021. WFP Global Operational Response Plan 2021, Update #1, February 2021.

15. Within the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP), the role of WFP and its resource requests were as follows:

- 25 March 2020: support for provision of common supply chain and logistics services, medevac services, and real-time remote vulnerability monitoring, USD 350 million requested,⁴⁷ excluding costs of response at country level
- 7 May 2020: USD 965 million for common services based on indications of user demands to increase services.⁴⁸ Combined food security sector request of USD 1.4 billion of which approximately 50 percent were requests for WFP⁴⁹
- 18 October 2020: common services funding ceiling (via its trust fund) revised down to USD 316 million in October 2020 as commercial carriers began to resume passenger and cargo operations and the global supply of health items.⁵⁰

16. Figure 4 maps WFP response against the wider United Nations response.

Figure 4: WFP and United Nations response to COVID-19



Source: Evaluation team

17. **Management structures.** Figure 5 illustrates the management structures for the SERRF. Key items under the Level 3 declaration were the following:

- Senior director of operations appointed corporate response director (CRD)
- Director of Emergencies tasked with cross-divisional coordination
- Strategic and operational task forces (STF/OTF) constituted
- Regional bureaux and country offices represented through regional director participation in the strategic and operational task forces.

⁴⁷ UNOCHA. 2020. Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19, United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020.

⁴⁸ Major areas of budgetary increase included requests for air cargo operations which increased from USD 149 million to USD 620 million, and medevac services, which increased from USD 54 million to USD 186 million. WFP. 2020. WFP Global Service Provision Plan, 7th May 2020.

⁴⁹ WFP. 2020. WFP Operational Plan Global Response to COVID-19 May 2020, 4th Briefing to Executive Board; UNOCHA. 2020. May GHRP update, Annex D.

⁵⁰ WFP. 2020. COVID-19 Trust Fund Decision Memo (Draft 18 October 2020).

18. The Operations Centre (OPSCEN) COVID-19 Cell⁵¹ was also established to conduct scanning and real-time monitoring of the pandemic.

Figure 5: COVID-19 management structures



Source: Evaluation team

19. **Donor contributions.** The leading ten donors in 2020, including for the COVID-19 response, were Canada, Germany, Japan, the United States of America, and the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) (see Annex 3). For the first time, private contributions and contributions from United Nations agencies and funds (excluding the CERF) were ranked among the top ten donors to WFP.

1.5. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY, LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

20. The evaluation’s full methodology is described in Annex 2. It was conducted under the conditions of COVID-19, including WFP in full-flow emergency mode at the time of design and implementation; extensive travel and movement restrictions; and a strong imperative to avoid burdening overstretched country offices. A traditional cross-national evaluation design involving a series of field visits was unfeasible.

21. Accordingly, the evaluation, which was scoped and designed through a consultative process, adopts a non-traditional approach, namely a “retrospective developmental” design. This focuses on adaptation in dynamic environments, and prioritizes methodological flexibility and a systems lens.⁵² This applied three principles:

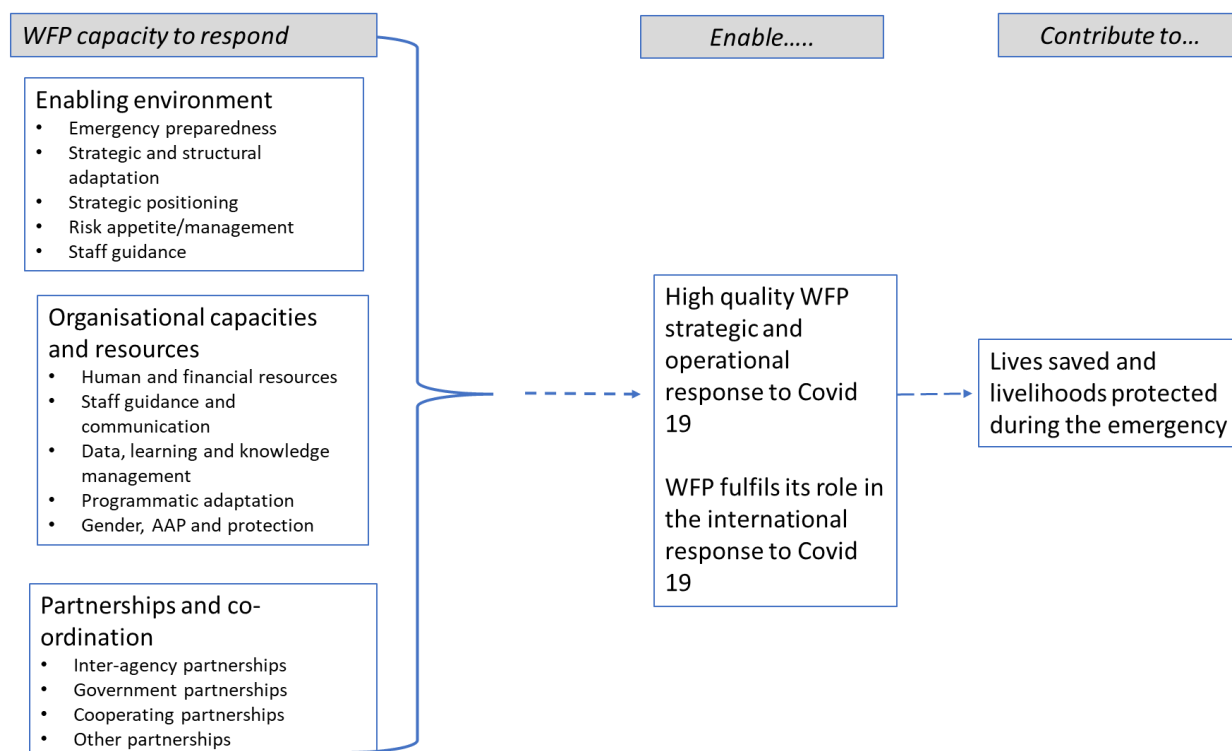
- Prioritizing organizational learning needs rather than adopting standard evaluation orthodoxies
- Ensuring heightened consultation with stakeholders throughout the evaluation process
- Integrating with the surrounding evidence-building environment.

22. To operationalize these principles, the evaluation applied an analytical framework (Figure 6), which organized the WFP response around three areas: (i) the enabling environment or the systems and structures that WFP put in place to enable the response; (ii) its assets and capacities or “things it had to work with” to deliver the response; and (iii) its partnerships. The framework also integrated the results of the response.

⁵¹ The Operations Centre (OPSCEN) is a global HQ capability that supports the entire organization in emergency and its engagement with partners in situational awareness and response. WFP. 2014. Operational Information Management.

⁵² Informed by the work of Michael Quinn Patton. Patton, M. 2010. *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Guilford Press; 1st edition.

Figure 6: Analytical framework



Source: Evaluation team

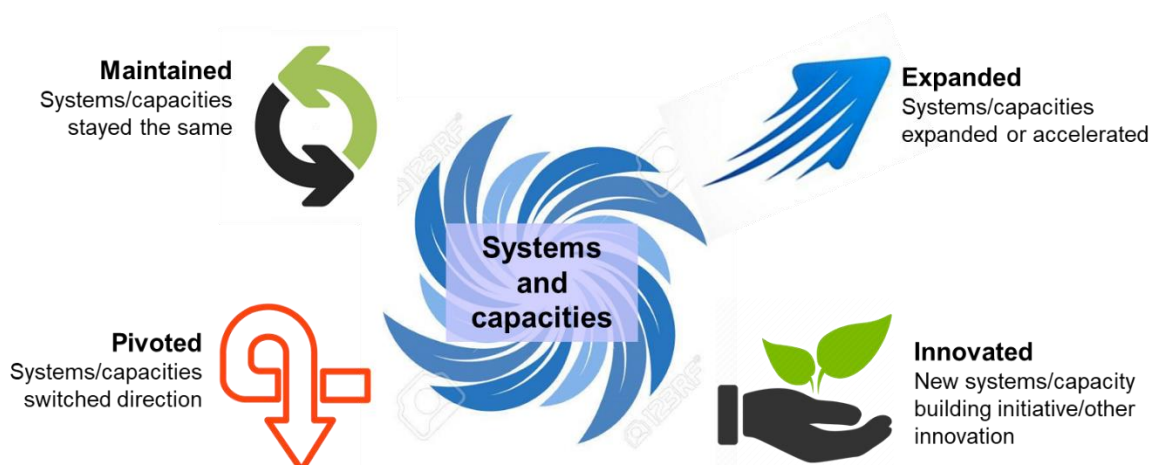
23. As data was gathered, the evaluation produced a series of ten thematic evidence summaries on different aspects of the response (and all aspects of WFP systems and capacities), which were discussed with stakeholders through a series of workshops (Table 2).

Table 2: Evidence summaries

1. Workforce management	6. Programme adaptation
2. Strategic adaptation and management	7. Cross-cutting issues
3. Evidence, data and knowledge management	8. Oversight and risk management systems
4. Financing	9. Emergency preparedness
5. Guidance and communication	10. Partnerships

24. Combining the evidence summaries with other data sources, WFP organizational capacities and systems were analysed according to how they had adapted during the pandemic (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Analysis of change



Source: Evaluation team

25. Data collection mechanisms included analysis of results, including from a broadly representative sample of 24 countries (Annex 9); interviews and consultations with 340 stakeholders from inside and outside WFP (Annex 10), covering 74 of 88 countries with WFP activities and all six regional bureaux; and review of over eight hundred documents (Annex 11, Bibliography). Consultation meetings on ten evidence summaries were held from March–July 2021. Discussions with senior management were held in October and November 2021. Validation meetings on the findings and conclusions, including staff from all six regions, were conducted in November 2021.

26. **Limitations.** Even with a flexible design, the exercise encountered several limitations:

- Travel restrictions combined with the “avoiding burdens” imperative meant that the evaluation team was unable to travel to observe the COVID-19 response *in situ*. Findings relied on analyses of secondary data, complemented with country office, regional bureau and headquarters interviews as well as external stakeholder interviews.
- The avoiding burdens imperative also meant that a limited number of staff per country office could be interviewed and fewer national stakeholders than was optimal. The evaluation’s scope to enquire into individual country-level work was therefore limited.
- In-depth analysis of individual programme areas was unfeasible. Instead, the evaluation adopted a corporate, strategic perspective in line with the scale of its objective.

27. In keeping with its status as a “retrospective developmental” evaluation, no recommendations are presented. Instead, this report presents “issues for consideration” for WFP as it moves forward on its organizational journey.

2. Evaluation findings

2.1. INSTITUTIONAL READINESS: TO WHAT EXTENT WERE WFP SYSTEMS AND CAPACITIES SET UP TO RESPOND TO COVID-19?

"We came into the pandemic with a lot of systems in place, [which] were not necessarily in tune with that level of crisis. It became very clear that we did not have at the global level or, at least in many operations, the capacity to step back and plan differently for this type of crisis."⁵³

Summary

WFP entered the COVID-19 pandemic with a long track record of expertise and professionalism in emergency response, including to the Ebola pandemic of 2014-2015. In early 2020, when the pandemic began, some institutional reforms were ongoing but incomplete, including: emergency preparedness and risk systems; human resources for emergency response; financial management systems; and partnership development. Areas where action was still needed included knowledge management, capacity for gender equality and accountability to affected populations.

2.1.1 Specific challenges of COVID-19 for WFP

28. WFP entered the COVID-19 pandemic as a recognized and professional leader in emergency response. Its leading-edge technical capacities for food security and nutrition analysis and its powerful emergency-response capability, including for rapid scale-up and support to the international system, had been widely praised in independent evaluations and assessments.⁵⁴ Its response to the 2014-2015 Ebola crisis, for example, was praised as demonstrating flexibility, diversity and agility, with its two prongs of food assistance and common service support appropriate and relevant to needs.⁵⁵

29. Nonetheless, the pandemic posed challenges to its operating model. These included:

- **WFP scale and size.** WFP is the largest humanitarian organization in the world, with almost 20,000 staff working across 84 countries.⁵⁶ As the pandemic unfolded differentially across regions, applying organizational decisions on such a large scale posed an immediate challenge.
- **A needs-based organization.** WFP engagement in food security and nutrition is premised on assessment of beneficiary needs, which is also its main resource mobilization tool. The pandemic posed a major threat to needs assessment through access constraints.
- **A mobility-based organization.** The entire *modus operandi* of WFP is based around movement. At any given time, thousands of WFP employees are travelling across borders and within countries, and mobility is a condition of appointment/promotion. Movement of supplies is also a key dimension of the ability of WFP to operate.
- **Rome-based headquarters.** The early grip of the pandemic on Italy, which imposed a full national lockdown on 21 March 2020, placed WFP headquarters in full emergency mode, including remote working. This posed challenges for management and decision making, as well as daily operational work.
- **Differentiated profile across countries.** The WFP operational footprint in different countries is highly varied, ranging from traditional large-scale emergency responses to a more enabling, technical assistance-oriented profile in some middle-income countries. This variability affected the response approach in different contexts.
- **Delivery dependence on cooperating partners.** At country and local levels, much of WFP work is dependent on its cooperating partners. Depending on pandemic conditions and national restrictions,

⁵³ Interview, WFP manager.

⁵⁴ See for example evaluations of the responses to the Ebola (2014-2015); northeast Nigeria (2019) and Syrian Regional Emergency (2018).

⁵⁵ WFP. 2015. Evaluation of WFP's L3 Response to the Ebola virus disease (EVD) crisis in West Africa (2014– 2015); country portfolio evaluations (2021) Lao PDR, Zimbabwe, China, Lebanon, The Gambia.

⁵⁶ As of October 2021. WFP. 2021. Mission. <https://www.wfp.org/overview>

many cooperating partners found their delivery capacity constrained and their operational footprint reduced. Some withdrew their country presence.

30. **Internal changes underway.** In early 2020, several institutional systems and capacities within WFP were undergoing change and development. Some capacities, such as its technical and analytical capacities for emergency response, were mature, while others were still underway (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Status of institutional reform



Source: Evaluation team

31. Specific examples include:

- The 2017–2018 Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) assessment of WFP found an organization with a clear strategic vision and increased gearing towards enabling as well as implementing roles. Approaches to partnerships, workforce planning, knowledge management systems and cross-cutting priorities all required improvement.⁵⁷
- The 2020 Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies found an increased capacity to respond to growing scale and complexity of emergency needs, with WFP supporting United Nations inter-agency efficiency and coverage and strong analytical capacity. However, organizational capacities for emergency response were overstretched and greater expertise and duty of care needed, as well as an organization-wide emergency response framework, a better-defined institutional preparedness framework, more equitable approaches to partnerships, and more effective learning platforms.⁵⁸

32. Areas that were to come to the fore during the COVID-19 response are as follows (paragraphs 33-40):

33. **No global emergency response framework and emergency preparedness systems still being built.** In common with other international agencies, WFP entered the COVID-19 pandemic without a global emergency response framework. The corporate emergency preparedness framework⁵⁹ was geared to country-driven responses, mostly natural hazards/conflict-related events. Institutional preparedness systems and capacities were dispersed, with no guidance available on how to adapt where governments took strong direction over emergency responses.⁶⁰ Following the 2020 Capacity to Respond to Emergencies evaluation, reforms were underway, including improved global surge mechanisms, a new emergency protocol and the launch of the new emergency preparedness and response package (EPRP), but these were not yet complete when the pandemic arrived.

⁵⁷ Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN). 2017-18. Assessments, World Food Programme (WFP). Revised April 2019.

⁵⁸ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies*.

⁵⁹ WFP. 2020. WFP emergency preparedness and response guidance (2020-draft).

⁶⁰ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies*.

34. **Investments in advance financing mechanisms underway.** The main WFP financial framework to fund emergency needs depends primarily on resource-raising for national-level country strategic plans (CSPs). Following the 2020 Capacity to Respond to Emergencies evaluation, WFP had agreed to review its central financial management arrangements for emergency response, such as the Immediate Response Account mechanism. These changes were still underway as of March 2020.
35. **Maturing risk systems.** Reforms to risk management systems were well underway, with a new Enterprise Risk Management (ERM) Division established in 2017, a new Enterprise Risk Management policy published in 2018 and risk management culture and capacities in the process of being built.⁶¹ These changes were not yet institutionalized however, and risk systems remained disconnected.⁶²
36. **Capacity limitations for emergency response.** The organization's heavy reliance on short-term contracts - around 60 percent of employees;⁶³ over-stretched individual capacities; and the lack of an organization-wide strategy to build necessary capabilities⁶⁴ all constrain the WFP ability to respond to emergencies. The year 2020 saw many country offices midway through an internal staff realignment process following the 2016 Policy on Country Strategic Plans and an agreed separation exercise underway for longstanding staff. The new People Policy was still under development and consultation.⁶⁵
37. **Partnerships still being built.** With a long tradition of "going it alone"⁶⁶ under emergency conditions, alongside trusted relationships with governments, recent years have seen a greater prioritization of partnership by WFP. Partly stimulated by United Nations system reforms, cooperating partner relationships have also shifted, for example, with long-term agreements being developed as part of preparedness. The development of private sector partnerships, for example with international financial institutions (IFIs) as WFP upscales its ability to engage on social protection work, has been emphasized.⁶⁷
38. **Weak knowledge management systems.** Gaps in the generation, distillation and use of learning across the organization's emergency response are longstanding and well-documented.⁶⁸ As of early 2020, the 2017 Knowledge Management Strategy remained unfunded and knowledge management mechanisms were largely experiential, informal and unsystematic.
39. **Gaps in gender equality, accountability to affected populations.** Evaluations and reviews report longstanding weaknesses in WFP treatment of gender equality and accountability to affected populations. For gender, gaps include: limited gender analysis; uncertain management commitment; and a focus on "including women" rather than more strategic gender considerations. Accountability to affected population commitments have been impeded by a narrow focus on feedback systems and challenges in large-scale emergency responses.⁶⁹ Despite relevant policy frameworks, human and financial resources to both issues have been consistently low.
40. **Unresolved "dual mandate" balance.** Finally, WFP is beset by longstanding debates – and not a few tensions – regarding its humanitarian/development mandate and the extent to which it prioritizes "saving lives" versus "changing lives". WFP itself makes the "dual mandate" case in its Strategic Plan (2022–2025),⁷⁰

⁶¹ *Enterprise Risk Management Policy* (2018); ERM Newsletters 2020; ERM report, 2020.

⁶² See: WFP. 2020. Initial Audit Risk Assessment of WFP's COVID-19 Response, July 2020.

⁶³ WFP HR statistics November 2020, The People Strategy evaluation 2020 commented on the long-term use of short-term contract modalities for both local and international employees. Overall, the proportion of employees categorized as "staff" versus "non-staff" has not changed significantly since 2014 (in 2014, 61 percent of all employees were non-staff, compared to 59 percent in 2018).

⁶⁴ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies*.

⁶⁵ WFP. 2020. *Evaluation of the WFP People Strategy (2014-2017)* and management response.

⁶⁶ WFP. 2017, 2018. Operations Evaluation Synthesis, From Implementing to Enabling and Partnerships for the Future.

⁶⁷ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of Funding WFP's Work*.

⁶⁸ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP Capacity for Emergency Response (2020)*; the 2013 and 2017-2018 Multilateral Organization Performance Assessments Network assessments; WFP. 2018. *Evaluation of the WFP Response to the Syrian Regional Crisis (2014-2017)*.

⁶⁹ See for example evaluations of the Gender Policy (2021); evaluations of responses to the Ebola (2014-2015); northeast Nigeria (2019) and Syrian Regional Emergency (2018); country strategic plan evaluations (2021) of China; El Salvador; Lebanon; The Gambia; Zimbabwe.

⁷⁰ WFP (2021) Strategic Plan 2022-2025

but there is limited consensus among its partners or internally, with the case for WFP development work remaining unproven for many.⁷¹ This debate was live in early 2020, at the point when the pandemic hit.

2.2. HOW DID WFP ADAPT ITS CORPORATE SYSTEMS FOR THE RESPONSE?

Summary

WFP – like most international agencies – entered COVID-19 unprepared for a pandemic on a global scale. Its initial global emergency declaration was not expeditious, but strategic frameworks were quickly developed, including for the medium-term aspects of the pandemic. Needs estimations were generated, and resource requests swiftly issued, with internal financial systems adapted to help manage and deploy finances to country offices. Increased flexibility was brought to bear on workforce management, with a global surge response launched and human resource/staff well-being systems adapted. Remote working proved both a challenge and a major innovation for the future. Throughout, and at all levels, WFP staff bore very considerable strain; the cost to WFP staff was extremely high, especially at field level.

Balancing risk concerns with a “no regrets” approach threw up challenges but was ultimately navigated on the basis of procedural respect. While WFP adopted several mechanisms to support internal consistency, different vantage points at headquarters, regional and country levels placed a strain on organizational cohesion.

The production of data and analytics expanded to serve both the WFP and wider international response as a public good, and internal systems pivoted to capture real-time learning and experience. With some exceptions, however, learning from the past through knowledge management systems remained unsystematic, with knowledge transfer largely experiential and person-to-person.

External stakeholders expressed appreciation for the high degree of consistency in the external positioning of WFP and its narrative.

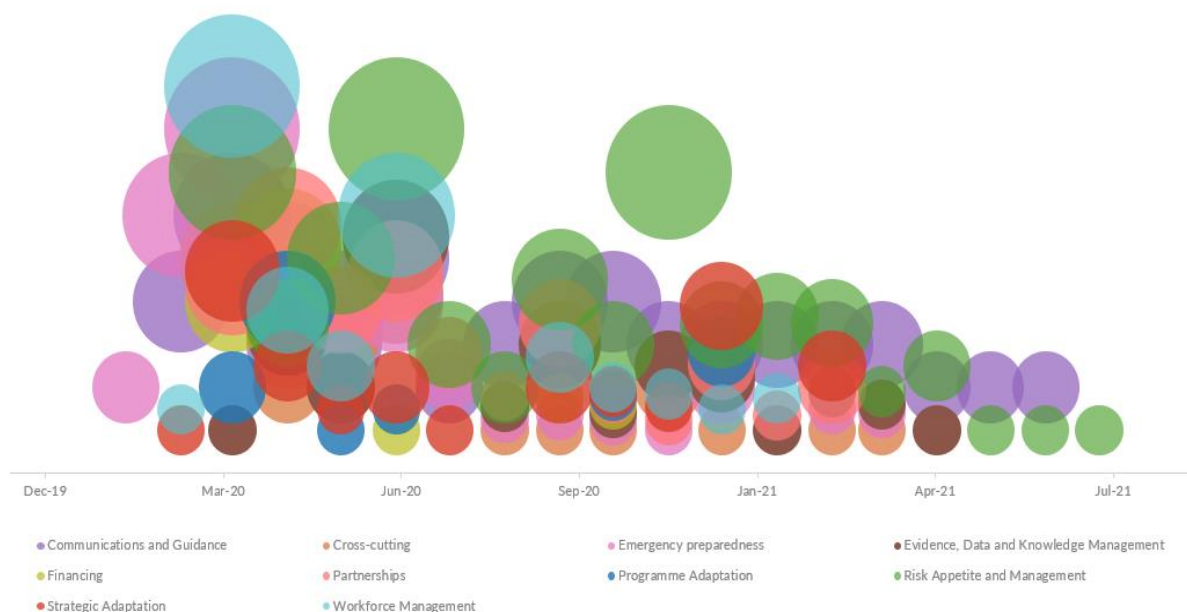
41. **A large density of adaptive activity.** From March 2020, WFP embarked on a vast range of internal shifts and adaptations to generate strategic and operational frameworks for the response and to adapt its activities at all levels of the organization and across all areas of work. A significant density of adaptation occurred from March–June 2020 (Figure 9).

42. Staff at all levels and in all locations of the organization spoke of the period March–July 2020 being the most intense and challenging of the response. “We are an emergency organization; we are used to high demands and stress, but this was a whole other level.”⁷² Figure 9 identifies the intensity of activity during the time period December 2020–July 2021, in the areas studied for the evaluation.

⁷¹ Interviews with/written feedback from seven donor partners. See also WFP (2021) “Summary report on the joint evaluation of United Nations Rome-based agency collaboration” WFP/EB.2/2021/6-B.

⁷² Staff member interviewed

Figure 9: Adaptation and change



Source: Evaluation team, based on a timeline across ten areas of institutional activity. Size of circle broadly represents density and degree of activity



2.2.1 Strategic frameworks and management structures

43. For the first time in its history, WFP had to rapidly establish and implement a corporate response framework to guide activity at all levels - at the same time as responding to 16 ongoing Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies.⁷³

(i) Emergency declaration

44. With conditions rapidly changing, WFP implemented its standard emergency response systems, albeit with some adaptations. The declaration of a Level 3 emergency was followed by the development of two new strategic frameworks to address the short- and medium-term aspects of the response respectively.

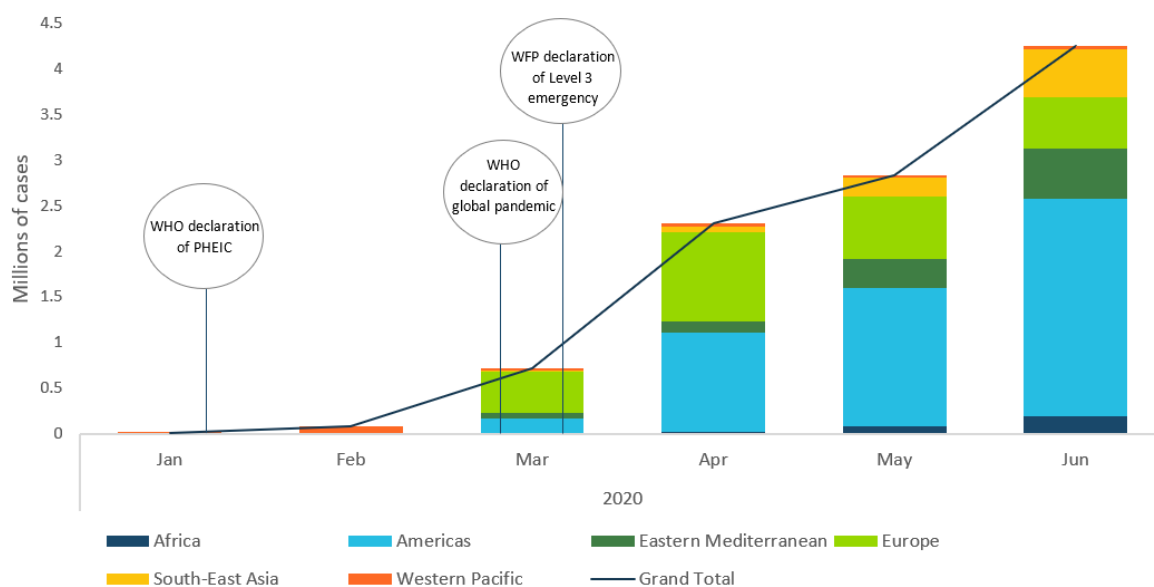
45. **Not an expeditious Level 3.** The instigation of a Level 3 declaration opens up: (i) the no regrets approach through which WFP mobilizes excess capacity and resources rather than risk failing to meet those in urgent need; and (ii) the pre-emptive action approach to reduce operational lead times and to ensure effective surge capacity.⁷⁴ The COVID-19 Level 3 declaration was issued on 27 March 2020,⁷⁵ two weeks after WHO declared a global pandemic (11 March 2020). At this point, particularly in Europe and the Americas, COVID-19 was gaining significant momentum (Figure 10) and governments across Asia had implemented large-scale restrictions. WFP headquarters was in full emergency mode under Italy's national lockdown.

⁷³ WFP. 2020. Annual Performance Report.

⁷⁴ Interim WFP Emergency Activation Protocol for Level 2 and Level 3 Emergencies, Executive Director's Circular, 2018.

⁷⁵ Though this had been requested earlier by the Director of Emergencies Operations Division.

Figure 10: Timing of Level 3 declaration and progression of the pandemic



Source: Evaluation team using WHO data and regional designations

46. The declaration was broadly in line with the declarations of some United Nations agencies, such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), but it did come after those of some others.⁷⁶ It was not therefore expeditious - and indeed, from some regional vantage points, such as Asia, it was considered late.⁷⁷

47. Management structures and decision making adapted but strains on decision making.

Adaptations made to the standard Level 3 structures, such as the appointment of the senior Director of Operations as Corporate Response Director (CRD), were appropriate for a global emergency. However, it soon became clear that, even with these adaptations, the plunging of 84 country offices, six regional bureaux and Rome-based headquarters into emergency mode at the same time placed a considerable strain on the standard chain of command and affected decision making. Issues included:

(i) Diverse perspectives on decision making. The “confident familiar”⁷⁸ of response management structures, which had worked so successfully for WFP in regional- and country-level emergencies, was strongly tested by the geographic, political and temporal variability of a global emergency. Different perspectives arose, with headquarters and the six regions experiencing the emergency in different ways at different times. Greater trust and more autonomy in regional and country authorities were requested.⁷⁹

(ii) Unclear responsibilities and accountabilities in practice. Responsibilities and accountabilities of the strategic task force and the operational task force in practice lacked clear strategic and operational boundaries, with the role of the Leadership Group in decision making equally unclear. Referring decisions to the level up caused delays – for example, from the operational task force to the strategic task force, or from the strategic and operational task forces to the Leadership Group – even though membership of the Leadership Group and the strategic task force was essentially the same.⁸⁰

(iii) Sub-optimal location and decision making power of the Corporate Response Director.

Appointing the Senior Director of Operations as Corporate Response Director was a logical initial

⁷⁶ UNHCR declared a global Level 2 emergency on 25 March 2020; UNICEF declared an L3 emergency on 20 April. However, the WHO Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 was issued on February 4th 2020 and IOM launched its Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) also in February 2020. The IASC “System-wide scale-up protocols adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic” were endorsed on 17 April 2020.

⁷⁷ Interviews with 14 headquarters, country office and regional bureaux staff.

⁷⁸ WFP. 2016. *Annual Synthesis of Operations Evaluations (2015-2016)*.

⁷⁹ WFP, Lessons Learned Exercise - meeting with headquarters directors and key take-aways. December 2020. Annexes to COVID-19 Lessons Learned exercise; interviews with six regional directors.

⁸⁰ OED 2018/013; OED 2020/017.

response for the emergency phase of the pandemic but proved challenging as events unfolded. On one hand, the Corporate Response Director lacked full empowerment, with some key decisions regarding operational direction, including in relation to financial and surge-capacity issues, elevated to the strategic task force and Leadership Group.⁸¹ This impeded timeliness.⁸²

48. On the other hand, locating significant decision making power within the Emergencies Division provided a heavy emergency “flavour” to the response. This proved advantageous in the early stages as the response focused on immediate issues (surge, scale-up, common services, etc.)⁸³ but subsequently limited the line of sight to the medium-term effects of the pandemic, and its implications for adaptation of WFP systems and broader operations over time.⁸⁴

49. **Headquarters in emergency mode.** The effects of a headquarters operating under emergency conditions, specifically under remote working, also impeded decision making. Staff interviewed at all levels of the organization described a “highly stressed” headquarters. “I wouldn’t describe it as panic, but it was not far off.” This posed significant challenges for decision making, including accustoming and equipping management to take highly pressurized decisions remotely, generating effective mechanisms for information sharing and ensuring an inclusive approach to decisions across response structures.⁸⁵

50. **An enabling environment.** Nonetheless, the Level 3 declaration, once in place, helped provide an enabling environment for the operational response in three important ways:

- **Galvanizing attention and financing.** The declaration of a Level 3 global emergency formally put WFP, its management and its staff, onto an emergency footing to address the needs created by COVID-19. This firmly averted any sense of complacency; it also alerted donors to WFP emergency needs in responding to the pandemic.
- **Enabling surge deployment.** The Level 3 declaration mobilized scope for surge deployment to support under-strain country offices where required as well as facilitating flexible human resource arrangements at country level (see Section 2.2.6).
- **Supporting internal financial management.** Although not directly a result of the Level 3 declaration, the global emergency footing meant that new internal financing instruments could be developed and existing ones adapted (see Section 2.2.4).

51. Internal reflection considered the tools and instrument of the Level 3 declaration appropriate for helping to drive operational expedience. It noted the importance of continuing with the elements of the framework beyond the pandemic response.⁸⁶



(ii) Developing new strategic frameworks

52. **Relatively swift production of strategic frameworks.** With internal systems and mechanisms in place, following the Level 3 declaration, WFP issued in short succession its two strategic frameworks for the response, designed to respond to short-term and medium-term needs respectively:

- **Global Response Plan (GRP):** The Global Response Plan was issued 24 April 2020, one month after the Level 3 declaration. It defined the two-track approach to the WFP pandemic response and specified the role of WFP in monitoring the global response. It was heavily operational in nature,

⁸¹ Analysis of minutes from STF/OTF meetings March–September 2020; interviews with 14 headquarters and regional bureau staff. For example, requests regarding cost office improvements were escalated to the Leadership Group. (OTF NFR #11, July 2020).

⁸² Interviews with 11 regional bureau management and staff. WFP internal reflections acknowledged this, proposing for the future a more “streamlined the decision making process, in a ‘telepass’ manner whereby WFP fast-tracks decision making with the CRD to enable quick turnaround on operational and financial decisions”. WFP. December 2020. Lessons Learned Exercise- meeting with headquarters directors and key take-aways. Annexes to COVID-19 Lessons Learned exercise.

⁸³ Analysis of minutes from STF/OTF meetings March–September 2020.

⁸⁴ Analysis of minutes from STF/OTF meetings March–September 2020; interviews with 14 headquarters and regional bureau staff.

⁸⁵ Interviews with 22 headquarters staff.

⁸⁶ COVID-19 Strategic Task Force Note for the Record, 23 September 2020.

setting out the WFP short-term emergency response plans and providing consolidated information on field-level operations.

- The operational focus of the Global Response Plan was considered a major success factor in guiding WFP field-based work to address immediate emergency needs.⁸⁷ “It prompted a lot of the planning within country offices that otherwise we would not have seen at the same rate [and] timeframe, across the regions.” Its form and content were also well received by external stakeholders, particularly donors. “Because it was so detailed, with all the activities and financial needs by country, we could clearly see where to engage.”⁸⁸
- **MTPF/SERRPF:** The Medium-Term Programme Framework (MTPF) (later renamed the Socioeconomic Response and Recovery Programme Framework [SERRPF]) followed swiftly on the heels of the Global Response Plan, having been issued on 1 June 2020. It provided an explicit corporate recognition/statement of the medium-term dimensions of the pandemic, linked in both language and content to the April 2020 Immediate Socioeconomic Response Plan of the United Nations. The three pillars of the MTPF (1. national social protection systems; 2. basic service delivery and 3. social protection) spoke to all three dimensions of the WFP response. The inclusion of social protection was prescient in reflecting the prevailing strategic direction of many governments.⁸⁹ However, it was not designed as a fundraising tool and was not accompanied by a request for resources.

53. **Limited interconnections between plans.** The Global Response Plan and the MTPF were not sequential documents, with updates to the Global Response Plan overlapping with the MTPF in June, September and November 2020. Moreover, the plans did not speak fully to each other in either their content or production. Few internal references link the two documents and limited interaction occurred during their development.⁹⁰ External stakeholders voiced concerns about the lack of clear interrelationships between them.⁹¹

54. **Diverse understanding and ownership.** Internally, there was some confusion around the respective roles and functions of the two instruments. The Global Response Plan was praised both internally and externally for its utility as a communication tool, but there was mixed feedback on the MTPF, with some feeling that this was well understood by WFP stakeholders and reflective of reality at regional level, and others perceiving insufficient buy-in from headquarters divisions and units.⁹²



2.2.2 Estimating needs

55. **New territory for projections.** An early focus of the response was to estimate food security needs under COVID-19, in order to inform planning, to raise resources and to respond to requests from the international community. Despite the longstanding expertise of WFP in food insecurity analytics, no previous experience was available to guide this analysis, particularly given the pandemic’s uncertain trajectory and varying restrictions by national governments. Moreover, WFP was being asked to generate a one-time figure in a situation that was constantly evolving.

56. **Pivoting to use “best available” but imperfect datasets.** Nonetheless – and under rising pressure from donor demands – WFP pivoted to adapt its own systems to project global food security needs. An analytical model was developed, which applied three component data sets: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) data, International Labour Organization (ILO) job loss data and World Bank remittance loss data. In April 2020, despite considerable technical challenges⁹³ (and although lacking validation by

⁸⁷ Interviews with 29 country office staff.

⁸⁸ Interviews with nine donor representatives.

⁸⁹ World Bank. June 12, 2020. Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures “Living paper” version 11.

⁹⁰ Interviews with 13 headquarters staff.

⁹¹ Interviews with six donor representatives.

⁹² Interviews with 14 headquarters and regional bureau staff.

⁹³ Including (i) ILO methodology reflects formal labour markets and does not account for the informal labour market or “gig economies”, which form critical sectors in countries of WFP engagement; (ii) ILO estimates a reduction in working hours to calculate an equivalent full-time jobs loss. ILO, 2021, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work, Seventh Addition. Updated estimates and Analysis; WFP, 2020, Food insecurity Projections.

national governments) WFP was able to project almost a twofold increase in acute food insecurity by the end of 2020, from 149 million people in need to 270 million (Table 3).

57. **Estimating WFP needs.** To establish its own global planning figures, WFP undertook its more standard two-stage process of estimating (i) total needs in its own countries of operation for 2020 (121.5 million people)⁹⁴ and (ii) the proportion of these needs which it could serve⁹⁵ (38 million). Latin America and the Caribbean, followed by West and Central Africa and Southern Africa, were the three regions with the highest proportional projected increase in food insecurity compared to pre-COVID-19 baselines (Table 3).

Table 3: WFP food insecurity estimates for relevant regions pre- and post-COVID-19 (June 2020)

	Pre-COVID-19 Estimates of food insecure ⁹⁶ (millions)	Projected increased food insecurity as a result of COVID-19 ⁹⁷	Additional food insecure people due to COVID-19	Total ⁹⁸	Percent change	Planned WFP scale up as a result of COVID-19 (millions) ⁹⁹	Total number of WFP planned beneficiaries for the region (millions) ¹⁰⁰
Asia & the Pacific	27.1	83%	22.5	49.6	83%	5.2	20
Middle East, Central Asia & North Africa	41.1	29%	11.9	53.0	29%	9.4	28
West and Central Africa	24.5	135%	33.0	57.6	135%	8.9	20
Southern Africa	27.6	90%	24.8	52.4	90%	7.2	23
East Africa	24.0	73%	17.5	41.6	73%	3.9	27
Latin America & Caribbean	4.3	269%	11.7	16.0	269%	3.5	6
Grand Total	148.7		121.5	270.2	82%	38.1	124m

Source: WFP, 2020 Needs analysis informing the WFP Global Response Plan to COVID-19 – June 2020/ Annual Performance Report 2020

58. **Early disjuncts in projections.** Some confusion arose with food insecurity figures generated by WFP and those generated in other arenas and/or by partners such as FAO. For example, the 2020 Global Report on Food Crises, in which WFP is a partner, signalled 135 million people in 2020 to be in food crisis or worse (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification/Cadre Harmonisé Phase 3 or above) across 55 countries.¹⁰¹ WFP issued an explanatory note to explain the distinctions,¹⁰² but the technical detail of the explanation was not widely appreciated by donors, who would have valued a single, jointly agreed, set of figures.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ WFP. 2020. Needs analysis informing the WFP Global Response Plan to COVID-19-June 2020.

⁹⁵ Figures were generated by applying the global food insecurity analytical model developed at country office-level, with country-level figures then aggregated. DPRK was excluded due to lack of data. Countries with limited WFP operational presence were also excluded: Iran, Morocco, India, Bhutan and the Pacific region.

⁹⁶ The number of acute food insecure people prior to COVID-19 was based on the latest food security information available for 2020. It also included refugees who are food insecure or dependent on food assistance.

⁹⁷ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19, June Update.

⁹⁸ WFP. 2020. Needs analysis informing the WFP Global Response Plan to COVID-19 – June 2020 Methods and key findings – 6 July 2020.

⁹⁹ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19, June Update.

¹⁰⁰ Global Operations Overview, 17/02/21.

¹⁰¹ Global Report on Food Crises (2020).

¹⁰² WFP (2021) People in Food Crisis or Worse: Numbers Explained states that “The numbers of people facing acute food insecurity reported in the GRFC and the WFP Global Response Plan (GRP) are not directly comparable due to differences in time references, countries covered, and population groups—such as refugees and urban populations partially or fully covered. In addition to covering fewer countries, the GRFC only covers areas with IPC/CH or equivalent analysis and excludes refugee and urban populations in many countries.”

¹⁰³ Interviews with nine donor representatives.

59. **Predicting vulnerability.** WFP internal analysis¹⁰⁴ also pointed to likely increased vulnerability among different categories of people such as: households who were already acutely food insecure; nutritionally vulnerable groups and people with chronic illness; households dependent on income from the informal sector and remittances; smallholder farmers; informal casual labourers in rural areas; and migrants and displaced populations likely to be left out of national social protection systems. Other categories, such as women and girls and persons with disabilities, were not reflected in this analysis (though were included elsewhere).¹⁰⁵



2.2.3 Raising and deploying resources to respond to need

60. **A new approach to resource raising.** WFP has no global fundraising strategy; resources are mostly raised through the country strategic plan vehicle. With beneficiary numbers so dramatically increased, however, it was clear that new global-level resources would be quickly needed.

61. The WFP fundraising approach was both novel and responsive to needs. The initial call forward request, which was issued two days after the Level 3 declaration, did not request new resources, with food security projections as-yet uncertain. Instead it aimed to preposition food for three months, recognizing procurement and transport constraints that might occur because of the pandemic. New financial requests came with the June update of the Global Response Plan, once needs estimations were in place. Meanwhile, in April 2020, the common services appeal for USD 350 million was issued through the UNOCHA-coordinated GHRP.

62. **Overall success in raising resources.** The results of these actions were successful, with over 80 percent of requested funds secured (Table 4). Overall, WFP raised USD 8.5 billion in confirmed contributions in 2020 compared with USD 8.05 billion in 2019.¹⁰⁶ Contributors spoke of their “trust” and “confidence” in WFP to deliver the Global Response Plan.¹⁰⁷

Table 4: Resources raised

WFP Request	Funds raised
“Call forward” USD 1.9 billion	Fully met within three months ¹⁰⁸
GRP June 2020 update- USD 4.9 billion	USD 4 billion in contributions (82 percent of funds requested). ¹⁰⁹

Source: Evaluation team based on WFP weekly contribution data (10 January 2021)

63. Four funding-related challenges did arise (paragraphs 64-67 below):

64. **(i) Variable country-level resource-raising success.** By mid-June 2020, more than half of call forward funds received were earmarked to five large-scale emergency operations (Bangladesh, Somalia, South Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen). Twenty-six countries had the equivalent of less than one month’s funding at that time.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ WFP. 2020. Needs analysis informing the WFP Global Response Plan to COVID-19 – June 2020 Methods and key findings – 6 July 2020.

¹⁰⁵ For example, WFP, 2020, WFP Global Response Plan to COVID-19 September Update.

¹⁰⁶ WFP. November 2020. *WFP Management Plan (2021-2023)* - Resource, financial and budgetary matters. Executive Board Second regular session, Rome.

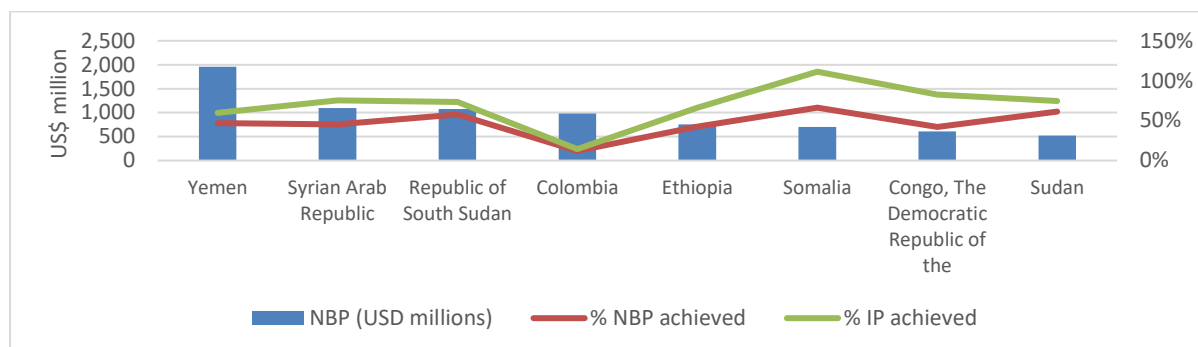
¹⁰⁷ Interviews with/feedback from seven donor representatives.

¹⁰⁸ WFP. November 2020. *WFP Management Plan (2021-2023)* - Resource, financial and budgetary matters. Executive Board Second regular session, Rome.

¹⁰⁹ WIRED. 2021. #1 – 2020 Year-end edition - WFP’s Information Report on Donors.

¹¹⁰ WFP. 2020. WFP Global Response to COVID-19: June 2020.

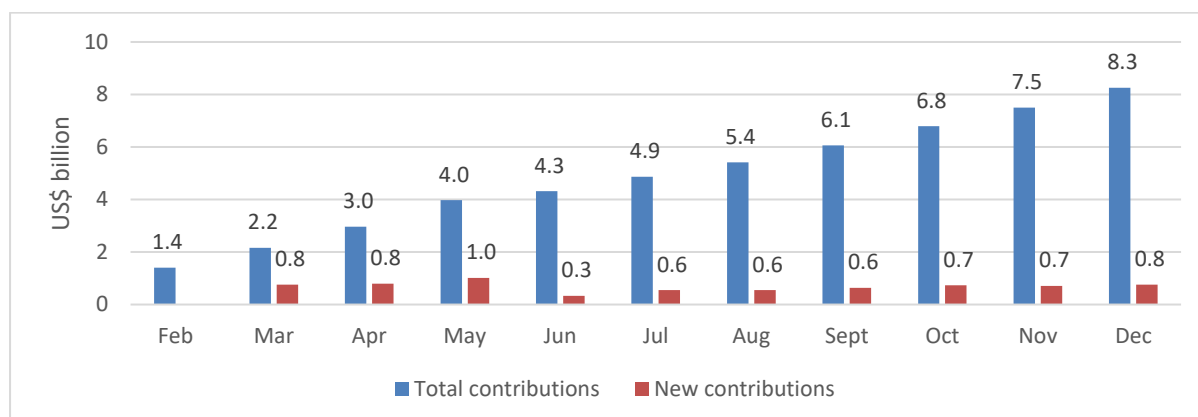
Figure 11: Proportion of needs-based requirements and implementation plan requirements met by donor contributions for Priority 1 countries with highest needs-based plan in 2020



Source: Evaluation team calculations based on WFP weekly contribution data (10 January 2021) and pipeline data (24 March 2021)

65. **(ii) Delayed contributions.** New contributions arrived from March 2020, but slowed after May (Figure 12). By September 2020, some country offices were deferring plans to scale up and were reducing rations. For example, by October 2020, funding gaps forced cuts in food and cash transfers in East Africa, affecting over 2.7 million refugees.¹¹¹ Five months into the WFP six-month operational plan, only around half of the USD 4.9 billion requested in June had been received though contributions increased from November 2020.¹¹²

Figure 12: Total funding contributions to WFP Feb-Dec 2020¹¹³



Source: Evaluation team calculations based on WFP weekly contributions data

66. **(iii) Little increase in flexible funding.** Despite WFP requests for maximum flexibility,¹¹⁴ just USD 482 million in flexible funding was received in 2020,¹¹⁵ a 14 percent increase on 2019 but a relatively small volume in relation to total resources of USD 8.5 billion.¹¹⁶ Requests for extensions and changes of activities within existing grants were however mostly (but not always) met positively.¹¹⁷

67. **(iv) Most funding for emergency response.** Funding under the crisis response programming pillar grew by 15 percent between 2019 and 2020 (Figure 13). However, funding for resilience building continued its decline and funding for activities tagged as “root causes” remained at 3 percent of contributions to WFP in 2020.

¹¹¹ WFP. 2020. WFP Global Update on COVID-19: October 2020.

¹¹² WFP. 2020. COVID-19: Sustain & Scale-Up WFP Operations: Cross-Functional Global Analysis, October 2020.

¹¹³ Note that data for December is reported up to 27 December and therefore does not represent the final total for 2020.

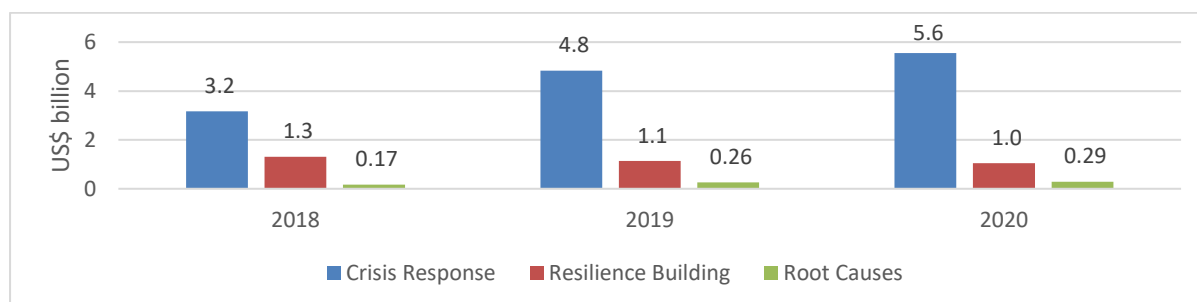
¹¹⁴ WFP. 2020. Covid-19 PPR Messages, 10 April 2020.

¹¹⁵ WFP. 2021. Monthly Donor Contributions Statistics 23 March 2021.

¹¹⁶ WFP. 2021. Weekly donor contributions statistics 15 March 2021.

¹¹⁷ Interviews with 12 country offices.

Figure 13: Funding contributions by focus area tag 2018-2020¹¹⁸



Source: Evaluation team calculations, based on WFP Monthly Donor Contributions statistics 23/03/2021

68. **Increased contributions from international financial institutions.** The year 2020 saw substantial acceleration of contributions from host country governments, often financed wholly or in part with loans and grants from international financial institutions. Such contributions grew by 174 percent in 2020, reaching a record peak of USD 348 million.¹¹⁹

69. **Ambitious common services requests unrealized.** More broadly, the WFP nearly USD 1 billion updated request for common services under the GHRP was considered over-ambitious or at least based on an unclear rationale by many stakeholders. The subsequent reduction in the trust fund ceiling to USD 316 million – even given the justification of reduced demand – was considered a needed reality check by donor partners particularly.¹²⁰ For 2020, WFP received USD 261.5 million through the GHRP,¹²¹ far short of the large-scale earlier request.



2.2.4 Managing financial resources

70. **Creation of new internal financial instruments.** Trying to manage these financing challenges, particularly smoothing out available financing across country offices with different needs, required considerable ingenuity. By the end of March 2020, WFP had created a special account, transferring USD 15 million of internal funds,¹²² and a corporate trust fund to receive donor contributions for GHRP common service contributions, including for medevac.¹²³ Multilateral funds of USD 4 million and USD 10 million were allocated to the trust fund and special account respectively,¹²⁴ critical for smaller country offices struggling to attract bilateral funding.¹²⁵



71. **Adapting use of current internal financial instruments.** WFP used its existing advance-financing mechanisms to support the early response. The internal project lending (IPL) facility supported the early surge and scale-up and the internal resource allocation instrument responded to a record number of requests in 2020.¹²⁶ The global commodity management facility (GCMF)¹²⁷ facilitated the delivery of food with a value of USD 831 million in 2019, a record year, without needing to activate its USD 100 million reserve. The Strategic Resource

¹¹⁸ Based on WFP Monthly Donor Contributions statistics 23/03/2021.

¹¹⁹ WFP. 2020. WFP Global Response to COVID-19: September Update; WFP. 2020. COVID-19: International Financial Institutions Guidance Note, Prepared by the Strategic Partnerships Division, 31 March 2020; WFP. 2020. Briefing note to facilitate country-level engagement with the World Bank, April 2020.

¹²⁰ Interviews with seven donor representatives. The fact that GHRP funding requests for WFP were rolled in with food security programming requests from other agencies caused confusion in clarifying WFP funding requirements.

¹²¹ Figures supplied by WFP Supply Chain Operations Division, September 2020. Excludes: Aviation cost recovery funds (USD 8.5 million); Multilateral funding allocated to GHRP (USD 0.6 million); Multilateral funding allocated for third-party agreement (WFP cost share stands at USD 7.7 million). As of September 2021, an additional USD 2.2 million had also been provided.

¹²² WFP. 2020. From Outbreak to Action: How WFP Responded to COVID-19 (October 2020).

¹²³ The Trust Fund had an initial budget ceiling of USD 380 million. WFP (2020) COVID-19 Trust Fund Decision Memo (Draft 18 October).

¹²⁴ WFP. 2020. Public Partnerships and Reporting (PPR) COVID-19 messages (internal) dated 10 April 2020.

¹²⁵ Budget & Programming Division (CPP-RMB) Emergency Preparedness and Response: WFP's Advance Financing Mechanisms Supporting Response to COVID-19.

¹²⁶ WFP Operational Plan – Global Response to COVID-19 March 2020. 2nd Briefing.

¹²⁷ In mid-April 2020 the GCMF was estimated to have sufficient stocks to meet country office requirements until the end of Q3.

Allocation Committee (SRAC), which recommends the allocation of funding sources and instruments over which management has discretion, also helped to address some critical financing gaps by allocating the limited volume of multilateral funds available.¹²⁸

72. These mechanisms were set up to manage smaller volumes of money, and under COVID-19, pre-existing challenges, such as the limited volumes available to be deployed through the internal resource allocation and the transparency/prioritization of decision making for the SRAC, were magnified.¹²⁹ Overall, however, their deployment helped to balance gaps in the coverage and sequencing of funding that result from the heavily earmarked and voluntary funding base of WFP.¹³⁰

Box 2: Country use of internal financing mechanisms

The Country Strategic Plan Evaluation of the **Gambia** reported that country offices in the West Africa region managed to articulate quick responses to the COVID-19 crisis thanks in large part to WFP alternative financial mechanisms to respond to emergencies.¹³¹

In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, although it lacked a crisis response focus area, WFP was able to rapidly respond to shocks including COVID-19 in 2020 through immediate funding from the Strategic Resource Allocation Committee and the Global Logistics Cluster (at headquarters).¹³²

2.2.5 Identifying and managing risks

73. **A high-risk and high-stakes environment.** With million-dollar contributions flowing into the organization to support the COVID-19 response, WFP faced the dilemma of balancing the no-regrets ethos that lies at the heart of the humanitarian imperative with the demands of accountability to partner governments, donors and other investors that supported and financed its activities.

74. These complexities were intensified by WFP variable-risk appetites for different functions. For strategic and operational risks, WFP defines itself as risk-hungry, with the priority to meet food security needs and enable the humanitarian sector's activities.¹³³ By contrast, WFP fiduciary risk appetite is risk-averse.¹³⁴



75. **Prioritizing risk.** With risk systems being revised (see paragraph 35), and sensitive to WFP status as a voluntary-funded organization, risk was prioritized from the start. WFP conducted early corporate-level risk analysis¹³⁵ and strategic and operational task forces discussions focused on risk issues from an early stage, including issues such as staff health and well-being, finance, supply chains, programmatic disruption, procurement and cooperating-partner country withdrawal.¹³⁶ Dedicated risk exercises were also commissioned by WFP leadership (see Annex 6 for a full listing). All country offices and regional bureaux undertook COVID-19-related risk mapping from March 2020, though approaches varied¹³⁷ and capacity challenges were felt.¹³⁸

¹²⁸ Budget & Programming Division (CPP-RMB) Emergency Preparedness and Response WFP's Advance Financing Mechanisms supporting Response to COVID-19 (EME).

¹²⁹ COVID-19 Lessons Learned Meeting, 7 December 2020 (meeting summary); see also WFP (2020) Strategic Evaluation of Funding.

¹³⁰ WFP. 2020. WFP Global COVID-19 Response Plan, 24 April 2020; L3 Emergency Response Review, Annex C: Resources and Financial Tools; Interviews with six headquarters staff.

¹³¹ WFP. 2021. *Country Strategic Plan Evaluation: The Gambia*.

¹³² WFP. 2021. *Country Strategic Plan Evaluation: the People's Democratic Republic of Lao*.

¹³³ WFP. 2018. Enterprise Risk Management Policy: interviews with 13 headquarters, regional bureau and country office staff.

¹³⁴ WFP. 2018. *Enterprise Risk Management Policy*.

¹³⁵ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19 Risk Register, March 2020; and WFP (2020) COVID-19 Global Security Assessments, March & April 2020.

¹³⁶ WFP. 2020. WFP COVID-19 Strategic Task Force Meeting Notes for the Record #1- #10; WFP. 2020. COVID-19 Level 3 Emergency OTF Notes for the Record #1- #20.

¹³⁷ Some country offices reported updating the risk register at the start of the pandemic around March-April 2020, while others documented updates during the mid-term review of annual plans.

¹³⁸ The ERM Division identified 11 country offices with concerning risk profiles that also had a lack of risk and compliance support capacity. WFP. 2020. ERM Division Country Office Risk Analysis and Risk Profile Mapping: Global Analysis, October 2020.

76. The second half of 2020 saw an increasingly detailed focus on regional risk concerns,¹³⁹ reflecting the varied pace of the impacts of COVID-19 across regions and countries. The convergence of different risks also came into focus as new challenges relating to the compounding effect of other emergencies and contextual factors became clear.¹⁴⁰ Into 2021, WFP prioritized the identification of the medium-term risks presented by the pandemic.¹⁴¹

77. **Risk management.** To manage COVID-19 risks, WFP expanded its standard Three Lines model, with controls implemented at each level (Table 5).

Table 5: Risk management – adapting the Three Lines model for the COVID-19 response

Line	Controls implemented
First line: Achieve: implement controls to manage risks related to its operations	Example controls implemented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote working arrangements for staff (all country offices) • Biosecurity measures for programmes • Pre-positioning supplies in case of supply chain disruption (corporate/regional level) • Due diligence procedures to identify new financial service providers (all country offices) • Remote monitoring (42 country offices by July 2020) • Non-biometric measures for beneficiary identification.
Second line – Advise: provide guidance and advice to the first line on risk management and related controls and compliance with corporate rules and regulations	Guidance and support available from regional/headquarters-level risk and compliance focal points ¹⁴² May 2020 - Minimum Control Standards: Managing Third Party Risks during Emergencies issued June 2020 – corporate guidance materials on the completion of COVID-19-related country office risk registers and on monitoring security, digital authorizations and fraud prevention ¹⁴³ issued March 2020 - Risk register templates provided to help country office planning for risk management.
Third line – Assure: independent assurance on WFP effectiveness of management of risk and control	Adjustments in standard assurance processes for conditions of the pandemic. For example, Office of Evaluation and Office of Internal Audit (OIGA) adapted workplans; OIGA conducted series of real-time assurance reviews and the Office of Evaluation adjusted its evaluation programme for more remote management. ¹⁴⁴

Source: Evaluation team

¹³⁹ Examples include: concerns for staff mental health due to extended periods of lockdown (RBP) or rising infections (RBD); risks due to insufficient funding for refugees (RBN); requirements for support to support government discussions on hosting humanitarian hub (RBJ) COVID-19 Level 3 Emergency OTF Notes for the Record #10 - #20.

¹⁴⁰ Such as locusts, hurricane season in Latin America, migrants in South America, security in Nigeria, coup in Mali, monsoons in Asia, and the Beirut explosion. COVID-19 Level 3 Emergency OTF Notes for the Record #10 - #20.

¹⁴¹ WFP (2021) Presentation on behalf of the inter-agency risk forum to the High Level Committee on Management (October 2021)

¹⁴² For example, the regional bureau in Cairo (RBC). 2020. Guidance for brainstorming on the impact of COVID-19 on the residual risks of WFP country office and RBC operations. RBC/RMCU/G/2020/02.

¹⁴³ WFP. 2020. ERM Newsletter April-May 2020.

¹⁴⁴ OIGA adjustments included: ten country office audits not undertaken; Virtual audits begun in 2021. The Office of Evaluation: - Five cancelled evaluations of which three were country strategic plan evaluations and two decentralized evaluations; and 13 postponed evaluations: three country strategic plan evaluations; nine decentralized evaluations and one inter-agency humanitarian evaluation (WFP, 2021, Annual Evaluation Report 2020).

78. **Gradual intensification of oversight.** Assurance and oversight systems gradually solidified from a largely advisory second-line approach in the early few months of the response to an increasing focus on compliance by August 2020.¹⁴⁵ From June 2020 onward, third-line (assurance) processes stepped up in pace and intensity¹⁴⁶ in part to assure external stakeholders.

79. **Overall, a managed balance.** Some tensions did occur between the no regrets ethos and risk-management procedures. First-line holders at country level, for example, reported frustrations with tools such as due diligence processes for new financial service providers (FSPs), and their constraints on operational agility.¹⁴⁷ Overall, however, risk tolerance did not increase and respect for WFP procedures was sustained.¹⁴⁸ Staff reported that their main concern was to implement procedures as swiftly as possible, so that the greater humanitarian risk of failure to deliver did not arise.



2.2.6 Managing human capacities to respond

80. **Challenges to business continuity.** A major risk to continuing operations was sustaining WFP human capacity to deliver. June 2020 saw staffing gaps estimated at 42 percent against the revised implementation plan,¹⁴⁹ with a 53 percent staffing gap anticipated in hardship duty stations. The problem was especially acute in smaller country offices.¹⁵⁰

81. **Early action and a real-time approach.** Reflection on human resource systems was already underway, following the 2020 Evaluation of the WFP People Strategy and the Evaluation of the Capacity to Respond to Emergencies, both of which pointed to shortcomings in WFP human resourcing systems (see paragraph 36). With planned reforms incomplete, WFP launched several strands of activity to address its workforce needs for the pandemic response: (i) adapting existing human resource systems and rules; (ii) providing global and regional surge to support country-level response; and (iii) shifting staff duties at country level as programming profiles adapted.

82. **(i) Adapting human resource systems.** By adapting its human resourcing guidelines in real time, WFP hoped to add flexibility to workforce management at country level. A series of seven human-resource guidance notes was issued March 2020–January 2021 (see Annex 5 for a full mapping). The first pre-empted the Level 3 declaration by around two weeks, issuing on 5 March 2020. For some regions, particularly Asia and the Americas, even this timing caused an early information gap, with staff seeking guidance and information.¹⁵¹ However, the pace rapidly increased, with three further adaptations produced in March and April 2020 and three more in May and September 2020.

83. A wide range of flexibilities was introduced, with versions produced for “staff” (in WFP lexicon, those on fixed-term contracts) and efforts to extend provision as far as feasible to “non-staff” (the vast majority of staff on short-term contracts). Critically, decision making was devolved to country office and regional levels. Flexibilities included mechanisms to extend some short-term contracts and medical insurance coverage,¹⁵² permit distance working and many others. Rest and recuperation (R&R) entitlements for employees in hardship duty locations were challenging given their system-wide nature. Here, country managers at first took their own decisions, with some requiring employees to remain in-country, to maximize the staffing

¹⁴⁵ Concerns about the challenges to oversight were raised at corporate level for example in OIGA initial risk assessment of the response and through the ERM Division inputs at an OTF meeting. OTF Meeting Minutes August 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Between July 2020 and November 2020, a series of ten rapid real-time assurance reviews were undertaken by OIGA providing live assurance and management advice. The first, related to early release guidance, was completed in July 2020. Areas for review were identified by consultations with WFP management and a risk assessment conducted by OIGA.

¹⁴⁷ WFP developed and endorsed a financial service provider (FSP) emergency contracting process, to speed up approval from May–December 2020, 22 country offices contracted FSPs through this mechanism. However, this was reported to be still a time-consuming process.

¹⁴⁸ Interviews with 22 country offices, regional bureau and headquarters staff.

¹⁴⁹ WFP. 2020. Opportunities and Barriers to COVID-19 Response Scale-Up: Strategic Task Force – 24 June 2020 Strategic Task Force notes.

¹⁵⁰ WFP. 2020. STF Notes for the Record March–September 2020.

¹⁵¹ Interviews with 28 country office and regional bureau staff.

¹⁵² HR Guidance adaptation version 4, non-staff version, April 2020.

complement in advance of travel restrictions, while others found themselves with key personnel located outside the country when restrictions hit.¹⁵³ System-wide guidance finally became available in June 2020.¹⁵⁴

84. The various changes were largely welcomed by country- and regional-level staff and management, though some perceptions persisted of inequalities between contract types.¹⁵⁵ Subsequent changes in 2021 aimed at placing some interim solutions on a more permanent basis.¹⁵⁶

Box 3: Managing staff in Lao People's Democratic Republic

In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, WFP took measures to ensure staff safety during COVID-19 including: (i) allowing staff to work from home; (ii) permitting field staff to travel back home; (iii) providing staff with a printer/scanner to work from home; (iv) organizing all-staff meetings twice per week and later once per month through Microsoft Teams; (v) providing staff with internet SIM cards; (vi) sharing daily updates on the COVID-19 pandemic; (vii) providing guidance on how to cope with COVID-19 for staff and how to work from home; (viii) offering support from the Vientiane office with back-up from the regional bureau and headquarters; (ix) travel outside the country required approval by the country director; and (x) adhering to national regulations of 14 days quarantine for staff returning to the country.¹⁵⁷



85. (ii) **Adapting to remote working.** Prior to COVID-19, WFP had no policy framework in place for remote working. Its teleworking policy¹⁵⁸ was directed at international staff who work from their home country. Remote working was moreover not available in policy terms for the 80 percent of WFP employees who are locally recruited.

86. Nonetheless, in common with all United Nations agencies, WFP found itself entering the realm of mass remote working. This phenomenon was voiced by WFP employees as a combination of the “biggest challenge and greatest learning” of the response, intensified by the challenging operational geographies of WFP locations. Practical difficulties included high temperatures, power and connectivity/fluctuations, poor physical conditions, cultural/family responsibilities and, in some sectors, paper-based systems. More systemically, staff reported a prevailing culture of “presenteeism” or “showing up to deliver” among WFP managers, alongside management styles unaccustomed to setting targets and deliverables to be produced within a short time and monitoring their delivery.¹⁵⁹

87. Where possible, WFP addressed the practical concerns through its logistics expertise, providing home-working equipment and solar-based power boxes where available,¹⁶⁰ applying rotas and reprofiling duties in many countries. Regional bureaux and headquarters delivered management training on generating outputs and targets as well as time management. Communication modalities, including WhatsApp groups, were implemented in all country offices interviewed. While struggles were considerable, staff reflecting on the experience were largely positive, describing remote working as “a revelation”, “a new discovery” and “surprisingly, the way forward for the future”.

88. (ii) **Global surge.** The Evaluation of the Capacity to Respond to Emergencies concluded that, while WFP had successfully invested in surge mechanisms, a sustained and long-term approach to building

¹⁵³ Interviews with four country offices and regional bureau personnel.

¹⁵⁴ UN (2020) Guidance note: Options for R&R duty stations with COVID-19 travel restrictions: Human Resources Network Standing Committee on field duty stations.

¹⁵⁵ Interviews with 32 country office and regional bureau staff.

¹⁵⁶ The WFP People Policy was approved as of June 2021 (WFP (2021) People Policy (WFP/EB.A/2021/5-A). Additionally, as of September 2021, the new WFP Staffing Framework has set in place the following changes: 1. no use of short-term contracts for the same post or functions after a maximum of four years (two years for Special Services Agreements (SSAs)); 2. all recruitment via a competitive selection process, regardless of contract type; 3. a new fixed-term contract in the International Professional category, which can be used to cover non-rotational and timebound staffing needs for up to four years, without a break in service; and 4. breaks in service harmonized for short-term and affiliate contractual modalities. (ED Circular ED/2021/017)

¹⁵⁷ WFP. 2020. *Evaluation of Country Strategic Plan: Lao People's Democratic Republic*.

¹⁵⁸ Union of General Service Staff commended the WFP teleworking policy, which had allowed staff to balance family and work during the COVID-19 crisis. WFP. 4 November 2020. WFP. 2021. Draft summary of the work of the 2020 annual session of the Executive Board.

¹⁵⁹ Interviews with 24 country office staff and 8 headquarters staff.

¹⁶⁰ For example, Afghanistan, Malawi and Burundi.



capacity within WFP and access to skills externally was required.¹⁶¹ This led to changes, with a global surge office constituted and procedures under review. Nonetheless, producing a surge response to serve all 84 WFP country offices with the entire organization in simultaneous emergency mode, presented an unprecedented challenge, particularly given the limited (10 percent of the workforce)¹⁶² pool of international staff available for mandatory deployment.

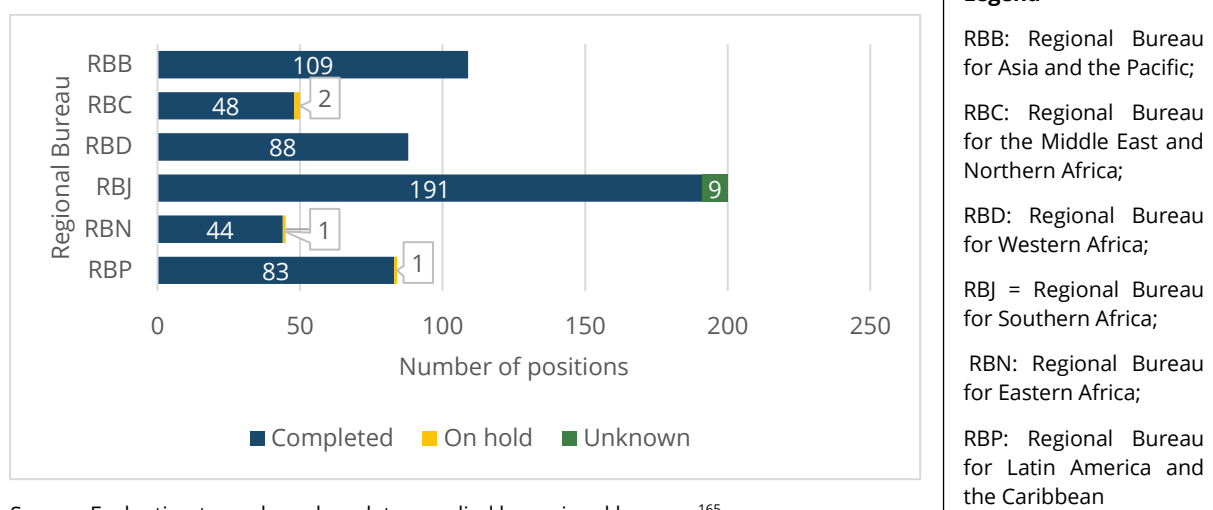
89. WFP responded with the first global surge call in its history. A July 2020 directive of the Executive Director required all headquarters staff to be available for deployment, or to provide a justification for unavailability. Special Account funding of USD 5 million was made available in support. However, the process was far from smooth, with early barriers, including the following:

- Managers' reluctance to release staff due to heavy workloads at headquarters
- Structural gaps in the WFP staffing profile of those available to deploy, such as fewer women and French-speaking experts
- Limited availability until after the European summer (from September 2020), when most immediate needs from country offices had passed
- Six-month deployment period requested for COVID-19, compared to three months for standard emergencies.¹⁶³

90. These challenges, along with movement restrictions, meant extended times to fill posts, with an average of 61 days in the first quarter of the pandemic. This improved to 21 days by the end of October 2020.¹⁶⁴

91. **Achievements.** Nonetheless, 518 surge deployments were conducted from March–September 2020, mostly for supply chain and programme staff. Most central deployments were placed in the Southern Africa and Asia-Pacific regions, followed by West Africa (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Surge deployments by regional bureau as of September 2020



Source: Evaluation team, based on data supplied by regional bureaux¹⁶⁵



92. (iii) **Adaptations at country and regional levels.** In many cases, country offices either could not wait for global surge deployments or found it necessary to modify their programming profile quickly. A variety of mechanisms were therefore adopted. All six regional bureaux supplied staff to country offices in need, mainly on short-term temporary duty assignments (TDYs), though no specific figures were available.¹⁶⁶ Staff spoke of their

¹⁶¹ WFP. 2020. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies*.

¹⁶² WFP. 2020. *People Strategy Evaluation*.

¹⁶³ WFP. 2020. STF meeting notes June 2020.

¹⁶⁴ WFP. 2020. *WFP Global COVID-19 Response Plan*, 24th April 2020; L3 Emergency Response Review, Annex A Surge, emergency staffing, wellness.

¹⁶⁵ Figures supplied by regional bureaux in December 2020 of total surge deployments in their region, including centrally-managed and other deployments.

¹⁶⁶ No systematic figures were available but all six regional bureaux stated that they had done this.

willingness to “go where needed” under the commitment to the humanitarian ethos, despite often considerable personal sacrifice.¹⁶⁷ Where country office programmes were sufficiently broad-based, roles were reprofiled. For example, in Mozambique and the Syrian Arab Republic, school-feeding suspensions allowed for staff redeployment to other activities.¹⁶⁸ This was less feasible for small country offices, however.

2.2.7 Sustaining staff well-being

93. WFP staff at all levels reported experiencing – and continuing to experience – very high levels of strain and stress, exacerbated by the challenging operational environments of WFP. Some staff found themselves locked down in compounds in conflict zones, while others – often national staff - were trapped in remote suboffices, unable to move out. Anxiety levels were acute: “It was a disaster, a black hole. You see people breaking down.” “This was psychological trauma, pure and simple.”¹⁶⁹ Sadly, 29 WFP staff lost their lives to coronavirus disease February 2020-December 2021.¹⁷⁰

94. At all levels of WFP, many women staff were particularly affected by the strains of attempting to combine home-based work with caregiving and home-schooling responsibilities.¹⁷¹ In the regional bureau in Panama, a gender group was formed to provide internal support and to raise the issue to management’s attention.



95. **Protecting physical and mental well-being.** WFP recognized the likely challenges early, declaring staff well-being a priority under the operational task force in March 2020.¹⁷² It also had three important institutional advantages: (i) it co-chaired the United Nations Medical Directors’ group, which meant immediate access to/influence on wider relevant United Nations decisions; (ii) it had an autonomous medical and well-being division, including its own content management system for staff wellness; and (iii) it had recently upscaled its staff counselling capacity, with 22 counsellors available globally in 2020. A variety of actions were taken to protect the physical and mental well-being of WFP staff.

96. **(i) Physical well-being.** WFP provided PPE, with 3.5 million face masks and office hygiene items being shipped from March–June 2020.¹⁷³ Procurement took some time to get underway, largely given global supply scarcity and in the meantime, some country offices – notably emergency-focused offices with well-developed supply chain/procurement functions such as Chad and Sudan – took the initiative to procure their own supplies rather than wait for the corporate process.

97. In some locations, WFP established (sometimes jointly with United Nations organizations) medical services to serve affected staff (beyond the construction of field hospitals under GHRP commitments). Examples include:

- A five-bed facility in Bangladesh
- A telemedicine facility in Malawi
- A wellness centre in South Sudan to conduct health check-ups.

Box 4: Health facilities in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, WFP set up a ten-bed COVID-19 clinic with an intensive care unit in partnership with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to allow the stabilization of United Nations agency staff and their dependents. The clinic hosted 15 staff from WFP alone, and was a crucial part of emergency health support, particularly as the options for medevac were very limited during COVID-19 and the main United Nations clinic did not open until 2021.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Interviews with 53 country office and regional bureau staff.

¹⁶⁸ Interviews with 12 country office staff.

¹⁶⁹ Interviews with country office staff.

¹⁷⁰ As reported to WFP’s Medical and Wellness Division as of December 15th 2021.

¹⁷¹ Interviews with 24 country office and 6 regional bureau staff.

¹⁷² WFP. 2020. OTF notes for the record March 2020.

¹⁷³ Executive Director End of Week Message to all employees, June 2020.

¹⁷⁴ WFP (2021) Country Strategic Plan Evaluation, triangulated by interview with country office staff.

98. Staff described such facility development as essential, not only for direct medical care but for reducing anxiety.



99. **(ii) Mental well-being.** Actions taken to support staff mental health and well-being included:

(i) **Guidance and support.** Wellness guides were rapidly provided on a range of issues.¹⁷⁵ Headquarters and regionally based staff counsellors provided 398 webinars and trainings on well-being and stress management over the course of 2020.¹⁷⁶ However, many staff spoke of being over-stretched and under acute strain during 2020 and early 2021.

(ii) **Counselling.** The up-scaled counsellor resources served increased needs of 8,800 contacts in 2020, compared to 5,900 in 2019,¹⁷⁷ with issues raised including anxiety, burnout and health concerns.

(iii) **Extended rest and recuperation.** With rest and recuperation unfeasible in many locations and no United Nations change in status to adjust requirements, WFP took the decision in May 2020¹⁷⁸ to allow country directors to approve a five-day paid leave for every 30 days worked as a form of rest and recuperation entitlement. This permitted a more extended period of leave for recovery once travel became feasible again. WFP employees¹⁷⁹ welcomed these changes but regretted that they had taken until May 2020, by which point, some had spent more than three months locked in hazardous locations.

99. Despite these actions, and continuing into 2021, staff almost universally described experiencing immense strain, particularly as many other agencies re-located staff to home countries.¹⁸⁰ "I was struggling, I couldn't really cope, but I couldn't tell them." "Other agencies went, but we're humanitarians, we have to stay."¹⁸¹ The ethos of "stay and deliver" – while it enabled WFP to meet its humanitarian commitments and serve those in need – therefore came at a high cost to staff.



2.2.8 Organizational cohesion

100. With highly diverse conditions across the world, the challenges of providing a fully cohesive response were immense. WFP adopted several mechanisms to support internal consistency, but different vantage points and experiences at headquarters and regional and country levels constrained a cohesive view.

101. **Harnessing communications.** Weekly communications issued from the Executive Director and/or Deputy Executive Director,¹⁸² provided reassurance on health, safety and well-being and travel and work arrangements. These adopted a tone of reassurance and made frequent references to "stay and delivery" and the "WFP family". Nonetheless, some staff at headquarters and country level felt that communication had been insufficiently consistent and proactive.¹⁸³

102. **Gatekeeper function.** In an effort to focus demands on WFP field offices, and following a de-prioritization exercise, a "gatekeeper" function was introduced in July 2020. This filtered headquarters requests to country offices by requiring relevant headquarters divisions¹⁸⁴ to submit requests to the Office of the Chief of Staff,¹⁸⁵ who then decided whether to release the communications. For many, particularly at

¹⁷⁵ For example, managing stress; explaining COVID-19 to children; balancing home-schooling; and returning to work. WFP. 2020. Wellness Division Guidance Notes April-September 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Figures supplied by Staff Wellness Division, January 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Figures supplied by Staff Wellness Division, January 2021.

¹⁷⁸ WFP. 2020. HR Guidelines version 4, staff and non-staff version (May 2020).

¹⁷⁹ Interviews with 24 country office staff.

¹⁸⁰ Interviews with 32 country office; see also Independent Commission for Aid Impact (UK Government) The UK aid response to COVID-19 A rapid review, October 2021.

¹⁸¹ WFP staff interviewed.

¹⁸² For a comprehensive list of ED messages refer to: <https://newgo.wfp.org/collection/ed-messages>

¹⁸³ Interviews with 12 HQ staff.

¹⁸⁴ Oversight functions such as audit and evaluation were exempt.

¹⁸⁵ Specifically, HQ Directors were requested to (i) submit to the Chief of Staff's office all urgent and time-sensitive requests for trainings, workshops, reviews, meetings and data requests submitted to the country offices and/or regional bureaux since 20 July; and (ii) submit all major foreseen requests or those with a medium-term deadline for the remainder of 2020.

country and regional levels, the gatekeeper addressed a long overdue reduction of demands on field offices with headquarters requests.¹⁸⁶ However, its usefulness in the latter stage of the response became less evident and questions were raised about how filtering was decided upon and managed.¹⁸⁷ The gatekeeper function was phased out as part of Level 3 deactivation, on 31 October 2020.

103. **Locating regional bureaux as interlocutors between headquarters and country offices.** As part of their role in corporate management structures for the response, regional bureaux were tasked to relay communications/information from headquarters to country offices, and in turn pass country-level questions, information and feedback up to headquarters. In practice, this role as recipient, interpreter and communicator of headquarters/country office information flows, while logical, placed major burdens on regional-level staff, alongside their day jobs: “It was physically impossible; I literally could not keep up.” “Just opening the email made me feel sick.”¹⁸⁸

104. **Cross-functional coordination.** One factor that did support internal cohesion was cross-divisional coordination systems, particularly those focused on data and analytics. Aside from the strategic and operational task forces (themselves key cross-functional vehicles), the OPSCEN cell and Cross-Functional Analytical Group provided valuable forums for consolidation and validation: the former on the evolution of the pandemic with highly valued monthly situation reports;¹⁸⁹ the latter through coordination of analytical products. Such coordination also extended to some areas of programming, with for example, a joint social protection and cash coordination group formed.

105. **Different vantage points constraining organizational cohesion.** Throughout 2021, as the pandemic unfolded across regions and as national responses evolved, a disjunct emerged between the view from headquarters and regional/country vantage points, themselves diverse.¹⁹⁰ It became apparent that limited shared understanding existed of the pandemic’s current or future effects, or the optimal corporate response, reflecting the pandemic’s variations across regions. Respondents described a tension between the continued emergency focus of some areas of the organization, and regional- and country-level experience during the latter months of 2020, where COVID-19 was increasingly understood as a compounding factor to ongoing humanitarian needs, rather than a discrete emergency in itself.¹⁹¹

Box 5: The pandemic as a compounding factor

- **Afghanistan:** The pandemic compounded the already daunting challenges Afghanistan faced and quickly escalated from a public health emergency into a food and livelihood crisis. The pandemic further entrenched the economic vulnerability of already impoverished households, with households relying on casual labour, petty trade, remittances or aid particularly affected.
- **Yemen:** COVID-19 was a compounding factor to food insecurity, mainly due to limited work opportunities and lower wages and reduced remittances from abroad, which further eroded local purchasing power amid high food prices.¹⁹²

106. However, by February 2021, a more cohesive picture had emerged, with the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 corporately re-stated as part of the “triple threat” (along with conflict and climate change) to food security and nutrition.¹⁹³

107. **External cohesion** Finally, external stakeholders, particularly those at a senior level, spoke of their appreciation for the consistency of external dialogue provided by senior-level WFP representatives in, for example, inter-agency forums. Noting that, during COVID-19, internal confusion in some agencies provided

¹⁸⁶ Interviews with staff in all 6 regional bureaux.

¹⁸⁷ Interviews with 14 HQ and regional bureau staff.

¹⁸⁸ Interviews with 11 regional bureau staff

¹⁸⁹ WFP. 2020. STF and OTF notes for the record, March–September 2020; interviews with 14 HQ staff.

¹⁹⁰ Interviews with 32 HQ, regional bureau and country office staff.

¹⁹¹ Interviews with 43 regional bureaux and country office staff. The “compounding” nature of COVID-19 was recognized in the MTPF in June 2020, but was not widely appreciated at the time, with the emergency-focus of the GRP still predominant.

¹⁹² WFP. 2020. Afghanistan and Yemen Annual Country Reports 2020 triangulated with interview with country office staff.

¹⁹³ WFP. 2021. Global Operational Plan February 2021.

for different external positioning at different times, stakeholders expressed appreciation for the high degree of consistency in the external positioning and narrative of WFP.¹⁹⁴



2.2.9 Ensuring an evidence-based response

108. Ensuring that the response was evidence-based had three dimensions: (1) generating real-time food-security data and analytics; (ii) using evidence and learning from the past to inform current operational action; and (iii) generating systems-related learning as the response unfolded. WFP has systems in place for all these dimensions, but they adapted to varying degrees.

109. **(i) Generating real-time food security data and analytics.** As well as generating its initial food security projections to inform its resource raising requests, WFP needed to update these on a regular basis as conditions changed. It also faced requests from the international community for analysis and data as the pandemic moved across the world.

110. Despite challenges, including the supply of data from country offices,¹⁹⁵ the organization's well-recognized capacities here came to the fore, with internal systems such as DOTS expanded and updated. Notable products, presented as public goods, included:

- Analytical products generated for and presented to the United Nations Security Council to inform decisions¹⁹⁶
- Detailed monthly situation reports produced by the COVID-19 cell from March 2020–February 2021, which included: analyses of the operating environment for COVID-19 including security and stability; changes in needs and plans, based on pipeline requirements/additional beneficiaries; budget revisions – summary of status; fundraising – overview and progress; implementation – beneficiaries reached to date (in comparison with 2019); and countries of concern for the next six-month period
- Programmatic and other analyses generated by the Cross-Functional Analytical Group¹⁹⁷
- COVID-19 supply-chain monthly updates, produced from April 2020–December 2020.¹⁹⁸

111. A vast range of studies and assessments were conducted at country level. Examples include a rapid assessment of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in the Gambia; rapid COVID-19 impact and food security assessments in Lao People's Democratic Republic, Kyrgyzstan and Sri Lanka;¹⁹⁹ gender analyses in Honduras, Burundi, Nigeria, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Lebanon and the Central African Republic (CAR);²⁰⁰ and protection analyses in Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Lesotho, Nigeria, Burundi, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Central African Republic and South Sudan.²⁰¹ In some countries, for example, Kyrgyzstan, these analyses formed the baseline to inform the short- and medium-term planning by governments and partners.²⁰²

112. **Remote food security monitoring.** These analytical products were in large part generated by the use of remote data collection in crisis response, which had been gaining momentum since 2018, following its use in Nigeria, Yemen and the Syrian Arab Republic.²⁰³ By January 2021, 38 countries were collecting near

¹⁹⁴ Interviews with 12 UN stakeholders.

¹⁹⁵ Reported by Emergencies Division.

¹⁹⁶ For example: WFP. 21 April 2020. Statement to UN Security Council. <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council> and WFP Warns UN Security Council that Economic Effects of Pandemic could Plunge Millions into Hunger; WFP. 17 September 2020 (accessed 07-09-21).

¹⁹⁷ These included analyses of the operating environment for COVID-19 including security and stability; changes in needs and plans, based on pipeline requirements/additional beneficiaries; Budget revisions – summary of status; Fundraising – overview and progress; Implementation – beneficiaries reached to date (in comparison with 2019) and countries of concern for next six-month period. WFP. 2020. Internal analysis produced by Cross-Functional Analytical Group.

¹⁹⁸ WFP. 2020. Supply Chain updates April 2020-December 2020.

¹⁹⁹ WFP. 2020. Country Strategic Plan Evaluation: Lao PDR; WFP Sri Lanka and Kyrgyzstan ACRs, triangulated with country office interviews.

²⁰⁰ Interviews with 9/18 country offices; annual country reports 2020 for Honduras, Burundi, Nigeria, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Palestine, the Lebanon and CAR.

²⁰¹ Interviews with 18 country offices; annual country reports 2020 for Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Lesotho, Nigeria, Burundi, Pakistan, Lebanon, CAR and South Sudan.

²⁰² Kyrgyzstan ACR triangulated with country office interview.

²⁰³ WFP. 2019. Corporate Emergency Evaluation of WFP's Response in North-East Nigeria (2016-2018).

real-time food security data.²⁰⁴ In addition, data systems were adapted to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on market functionality and school attendance, as well as on health.²⁰⁵ The resulting data were made available for the benefit of the humanitarian community through the WFP HungerMap live site²⁰⁶ as a public good.



113. **(ii) Some use of prior learning but unsystematic.** A wide body of evidence from previous emergencies was available to support the COVID-19 response,²⁰⁷ including the Strategic Evaluation of WFP Capacity to Respond to Emergencies²⁰⁸ and a 2019 Review of Support to Health Emergencies.²⁰⁹

114. Lessons were applied in guidance to country offices. For example, cash-based transfers guidance applied learning from the Syrian regional, Somalia and North-East Nigeria crisis responses,²¹⁰ while school feeding guidance drew explicitly on lessons from the Ebola health emergency (Box 6).

Box 6: Learning from experience in school feeding

Over the years, WFP has developed considerable expertise and experience in the area of school feeding, and particularly from the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014/2015. Building on this learning, in 2020 WFP released COVID-19 guidance, which drew explicitly on learning from the Ebola health emergency.²¹¹ Lessons included the need for flexible management of stocks, needs-based planning, coordination, and targeting all children to avoid stigma, as well as converting school meals to take-home food rations.²¹²

115. Some regionally based or thematic learning initiatives arose from pandemic responses. For example, in Nairobi, the regional bureau launched a social protection learning facility in response to COVID-19, to support country offices in liaison with governments on social protection response plans, mobilizing academic experts for technical advisory calls, webinars and learning reports. Staff reported that this helped position WFP social protection work in the region as part of the pandemic response. Overall, however, rather than formalized “lesson-learning” as part of a corporate approach to knowledge management, the use of prior learning was driven by the WFP culture of building on lived experience – as has been widely documented elsewhere.²¹³ Ultimately, this constrains its adaptive capacity from being grounded in solid foundations of learning.

116. **(iii) Generating systems-related learning as the response unfolded.** Finally, several WFP divisions embarked on learning exercises as the pandemic unfolded. As per normal process, following a directive from the strategic task force in September 2020, Emergencies Division launched a Level 3 lesson learning exercise for COVID-19, undertaken from November 2020–April 2021. It subsequently combined with an extensive systems and process review.²¹⁴ Other forms of ongoing lesson learning included the Internal Audit Division’s use of real-time assurance exercises and the Enterprise Risk Management Division’s

²⁰⁴ MVAM. 2021. MVAM: The Blog. <http://mvam.org>

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ WFP. 2021. Hunger Map. <https://hungermap.wfp.org>

²⁰⁷ Between 2011 and 2018, 116 evaluations, at least 44 lessons- learned exercises and 94 internal audits or inspections had been undertaken by WFP. WFP, 2020, *Strategic Evaluation of WFP’s Capacity to Respond to Emergencies Evaluation Report: Volume I*.

²⁰⁸ WFP. 2019. *Strategic Evaluation of WFP’s Capacity to Respond to Emergencies Evaluation Report: Volume I*.

²⁰⁹ WFP. 2019. *Review Exercise of WFP Support in Health Emergencies*, Final Report.

²¹⁰ For example: WFP. 2020. *The Power of Choice – effects of unrestricted cash transfers on Syrian refugee households*; WFP. 2020. *Gender and Cash - WFP Study*; WFP (2019) *Cash transfers and vouchers in response to drought in Mozambique*; Somalia Inter-Agency Cash Working Group (2017) *Joint Evaluation of Cash-Based Response*.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² WFP, FAO and UNICEF. 2020. *Interim Guidance, Mitigating the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutrition of school children*.

²¹³ Including the *Strategic Evaluation of WFP Capacity for Emergency Response* (2020), and the 2013 and 2017-2018 Multilateral Organization Performance Assessments Network assessments.

²¹⁴ WFP. 2020. *Concept Note Review of L3 System, Processes and Tools to Institutionalize or Discontinue*.

management assurance project²¹⁵ as well as the evidence summaries generated by this evaluation. The Office of Evaluation also engaged in systems-wide learning from the global COVID-19 response, including joint United Nations evaluations/lesson-learning exercises on the GHRP and MPTF respectively,²¹⁶ as well as participating in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Develop Assistance Committee's (OECD-DAC) network of independent evaluation units. It has developed evidence-based learning products as data has emerged.²¹⁷

2.3. HOW DID WFP ADAPT ITS PARTNERSHIPS AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING?

Summary

The global scale of the pandemic required collective action. WFP needed to position itself strategically in the international response, at both country and global levels.

Internationally, WFP has won plaudits for its role in facilitating the global response to COVID-19 through common services. Working to its traditional strengths, it provided cargo and passenger transport, and medical and medevac facilities with an agility and capability that has earned it the respect of partners around the world. Some early-stage tensions arose in some bilateral United Nations agency partnerships, particularly where sister agencies' emergency instinct and capability were less mature than that of WFP. However, these were addressed over time, and in many cases have laid foundations for future collaboration.

WFP aligned behind national government responses, though these sometimes took it well beyond its comfort zone, for example, into urban targeting or working with unfamiliar ministries or national focal points. Partnerships with United Nations agencies found their feet, despite some early strains, and private sector partnerships expanded. Those with cooperating partners underwent adjustment, as WFP increasingly recognized its dependency on them for delivery.

WFP also expanded its global advocacy in 2020, becoming a more visible presence in international forums for the pandemic response. In many countries, WFP leveraged its national partnerships for advocacy with governments, particularly on access and movement for humanitarian workers.

117. **Far-reaching consequences for strategic positioning and partnerships.** The Evaluation of the WFP Capacity to Respond to Emergencies had indicated relationship development with partners, including governments and others, as an area for needed capacity-strengthening in the future.²¹⁸ With the scale of the pandemic requiring a fully collective response, WFP needed to define its strategic positioning within the response, as well as its existing partnerships and relationships.

118. To this end, WFP deployed five areas of added value identified in its 2022–2025 strategic planning documentation:²¹⁹ resources; knowledge; policy and governance; advocacy; and capability (Table 6).

²¹⁵ WFP. 2021. Consolidated report of real time assurance reviews, January 2021; WFP. 2021. Internal audit of business continuity and remote working arrangements in WFP, February 2021; WFP. 2021. Management assurances project draft report, February 2021.

²¹⁶ United Nations (2021) Early lessons and evaluability of the UN COVID-19 response and recovery MPTF, April 2021: United Nations (2021) Draft terms of reference: evaluation of the GHRP, version September 2021.

²¹⁷ The OECD-DAC network developed four short documents on lessons from evaluations to support the COVID-19 response, on food security, cash transfers, gender equality, gender in education, and climate resilience and small island developing states. In addition, OEV engaged in the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance synthesis on Epidemics, Pandemics and Humanitarian Challenges: Lessons from a number of Health Crises produced in March 2020.

²¹⁸ WFP. 2020. Evaluation of the WFP Capacity to Respond to Emergencies.

²¹⁹ WFP Strategic Plan Partnerships, July 1 2021 (PowerPoint presentation), produced to support the 2022-2025 strategic planning process.

Table 6: Strategic positioning and partnerships for the COVID-19 response

Areas of WFP added value	System-wide responses	National responses
Resources (human, financial and technical)	Providing technical support for COVID-19 responses including common services, school feeding and nutrition. Cluster system engagement where relevant.	Providing technical support for COVID-19 responses including cash-based responses and social protection, logistics and supply chain services. Provision of tangible logistics assets and services and access to global supply networks. Technological innovations such as: providing connectivity in remote areas; remote monitoring and engagement with populations; use of technology for cash-based responses ²²⁰
Knowledge (information, evaluation and analysis)	Providing data to the international humanitarian system and the Security Council; providing national-level data and analytics. OEV engagement in system-wide knowledge products and processes	Provision of: food security and nutrition data and analysis; market analysis; support on targeting, including urban targeting; logistics/supply chain – both assets and technical capabilities
Policy and governance	Policy advice on social protection, re-opening schools	Policy advice on COVID-19 response strategies and on social protection, health, education and food systems
Advocacy	Advocating on behalf of the United Nations re: humanitarian access and for access to medical services/vaccination; global advocacy on food security dimensions of the response, including through GHRP; joint donor advocacy with UNHCR for support to refugees	Advocating for humanitarian access and access to medical services/vaccination; advocacy for food security inclusion in national development plans
Capability (designing and implementing programmes and operations)	Providing the common services response, including establishment of eight humanitarian hubs and the medevac service	Expanding food security and nutrition programming including for urban populations; supply chain and procurement support, including for government-led food security/protection/emergency response programmes; strengthening national disaster management capacity; social protection schemes; urban programming; emergency response/disaster management. Adapting school feeding programmes to adopt take-home food rations, often as part of social protection programming



119. **Expanding global advocacy.** Advocacy proved a growing part of the COVID-19 response as WFP increased its visibility over time. This occurred at both global and national levels. WFP engaged with key international forums about the response including the United Nations Security Council and the G7, Permanent Missions to the United Nations, the Secretary General’s office and other United Nations system communications briefings.

120. WFP presence and voice were considered to have significantly upscaled compared to pre-COVID-19,²²¹ bringing attention to the food security aspects of the pandemic. Interviewees linked this in part to the role of WFP leadership, considered as providing highly effective public advocacy for the food security dimensions of the response,²²² but also to the formation of a Global Advocacy Unit in 2019. For example, through its Advocacy Unit and Executive Director, WFP initiated an open letter on the challenges posed by the limited response to the common services aspects of the GHRP appeal. Issued through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the letter called for the donor community to provide financial contributions.²²³

²²⁰ See Evaluation of WFP’s use of technology in constrained environments (draft report, September 2021).

²²¹ Interviews with 14 UN and donor representatives.

²²² Interviews with 15 UN and donor representatives.

²²³ Principals of FAO, IFRC, IOM, OCHA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and the WHO signed the letter; three of the leading NGO networks also signed. Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), and InterAction.

These actions drew international attention and concern to the issue, as well as creating an enabling environment for funding.

121. **Advocacy with governments.** WFP was frequently requested by partners to leverage its standing with national authorities to advocate for issues including the movement for humanitarian workers and access to medical facilities and equipment. Humanitarian access was particularly important for support provided in refugee camps and success in several countries was particularly strongly appreciated by cooperating partners interviewed (Box 7).²²⁴

Box 7: Enhanced global and country advocacy

In **Kenya** and **Tanzania**, WFP successfully advocated for the lifting of movement restrictions for humanitarian workers. “One role that WFP has played that has been really helpful has been brokering/leveraging with governments. For example, liaising with government to secure a ‘special services’ pass for humanitarian workers in Kenya so that operations could continue, for example, in refugee camps. Also, in Tanzania, where government was initially reluctant to allow workers into camps due to disease spread risk - but WFP and UNHCR negotiated protocols so that operations could continue. WFP has the leverage with government, NGOs do not.”²²⁵

In **Burkina Faso**, early discussions between the country office and the Government regarding the effects of border and travel restrictions on trade and food availability led to a regional consultation in May 2020. Eight national governments, three regional governance institutions, six international organizations, seven regional associations, a key private sector actor, and two international non-government organizations, along with WFP including its regional bureau, agreed to coordinate policies in the region regarding transport, trade and COVID-19-related border restrictions, to try to mitigate some of the worst effects of the pandemic.²²⁶



2.3.1 Supporting the system-wide response: United Nations partnerships

122. **Common services.** Amid severe global concerns about the disruption of humanitarian action due to global shutdowns and movement restrictions,²²⁷ the recognized comparative advantages and long track record of WFP in supply chain and logistics came to the fore. Its main contribution within the GHRP was its large-scale common services offer.

123. In opting to focus its GHRP role to common services and leaving other actors to take forward food security,²²⁸ WFP arguably limited its scope for more prominent positioning within the collective food security response.²²⁹ However, this choice provided WFP with greater freedom to pursue (and raise funds for) its food security objectives beyond the GHRP, a choice which ultimately proved successful (see Section 2.2.3).

124. Scaling up common services posed new demands for WFP. It had never provided these services on a global scale before and had no strategy in place to do so. Nonetheless, it developed a proposed operational plan (Figure 15) in time for the first GHRP issued in March 2020. The plan proposed cargo and passenger transport services, to be provided on a free-to-user basis through a set of strategic consolidation hubs.

²²⁴ Interviews with 23 cooperating partner representatives.

²²⁵ Interview with cooperating partner.

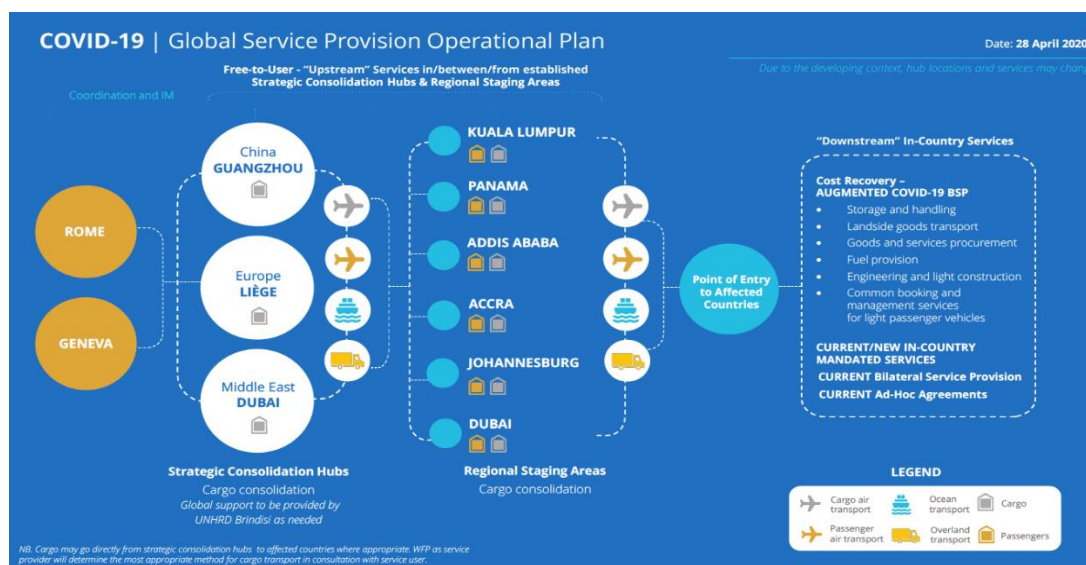
²²⁶ Information supplied by former WFP staff in the region.

²²⁷ OCHA. 2020. *Global Humanitarian Response Plan*.

²²⁸ A decision taken collectively by senior management including Emergencies Division and Regional Directors (interviews with four HQ interlocutors).

²²⁹ An aspect recognized by many of WFP's senior management interviewed. Interviews with six HQ staff.

Figure 15: Global Service Provision Operational Plan



Source: WFP (2020) WFP COVID-19 Response Global Service Provision Plan, 9 June 2020

125. **High levels of time efficiency.** WFP began to scale up its common services even as the GHRP was being developed. By the end of March 2020, the Special Account was set up to receive contributions, and the Addis Ababa consolidation hub and emergency procurement procedures had all been established/implemented. By April 2020, the Liege hub was set up and the first cargo flight conducted (see Annex 8 for a full timeline).²³⁰

126. **Widespread praise for coordination and delivery.** Appreciation and praise for the WFP role in facilitating international response to COVID-19 through common services was universal and extensive from all sides.²³¹ "No other agency could have achieved what it did." "I can't praise them highly enough. They were remarkable." "They kept the whole system going, literally. The entire global response would have crashed without them." WFP participation in the many inter-agency coordination forums (see Annex 4 for a full mapping) was also praised despite some early-stage tensions as different institutional practices, priorities and ways of working took time to be ironed out.²³² "They must have been frustrated at times, but they never showed it." "I really admired their patience. I hadn't expected that from them."

127. However, overall success masked a steep learning curve in many areas – as follows.

128. **(i) Humanitarian response hubs.** Of the eight humanitarian response hubs, four were created specifically for COVID-19 response (China, Ethiopia, South Africa and Belgium) and four (United Arab Emirates, Panama, Malaysia and Ghana) leveraged the existing United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) hub network.²³³ While the pre-existing hubs were already fit-for-purpose, the four newly commissioned staging areas took time to establish, with challenges including protracted negotiations with some host governments and United Nations partners, in addition to burdensome administrative issues.²³⁴ These were eventually resolved, however, and all eight hubs were utilized during the response.

129. **(ii) Expanded cargo transport.** Cargo transport volumes took time to accelerate, with significant peaks in August, November and December 2020 (Figure 16).

²³⁰ WFP. 2020. From outbreak to action: How WFP responded to COVID-19.

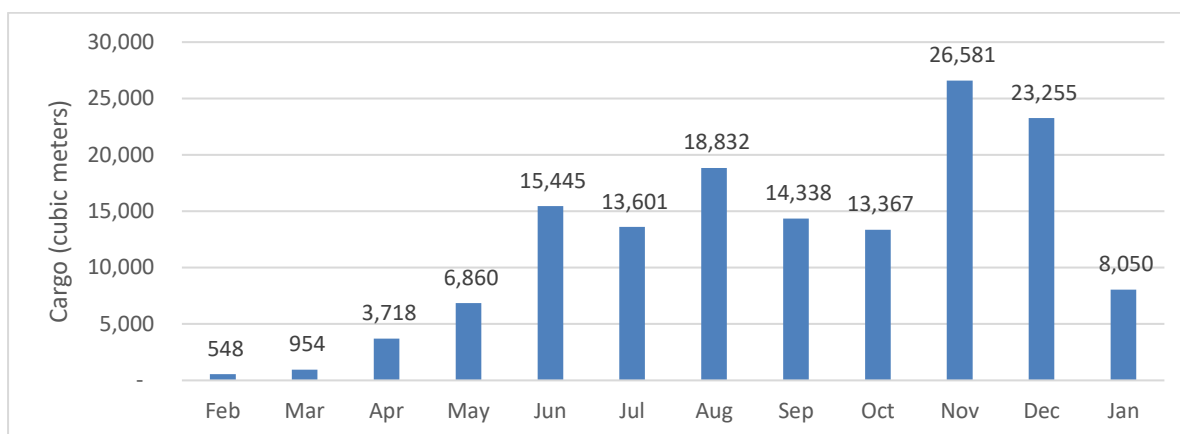
²³¹ Interviews with nine donor representatives, 16 United Nations stakeholders and 23 cooperating partners.

²³² Cited for example in relation to the UNHRD in Brindisi and the Supply Chain Inter Agency Co-ordination Cell. Interviews with 14 HQ interviewees and 8 United Nations representatives.

²³³ UNHRD. 2021. Humanitarian Response Depot.

²³⁴ Interviews with 8 HQ staff and 6 United Nations representatives.

Figure 16: Monthly cargo dispatch trend (1 February 2020 – 31 January 2021)



Source: WFP Common Services, Situation Report #7, 31 January 2021

130. In 2020, WFP transported 135,000 cubic metres (m³) of cargo to support the global humanitarian response,²³⁵ with a major scale-down in 2021 as commercial transport became available (54,500 m³ January-October 2021). The Emergency Service Marketplace, a one-stop shop online interface, proved valuable,²³⁶ with 48 organizations booking transport through it in 2020.²³⁷ Feedback from (mostly United Nations) users was universally positive, emphasizing the critical role of the hubs in ensuring the supply of medical supplies and equipment at a time of significant stress to global supply chains²³⁸ and WFP “generosity” and “common spirit” in providing the hubs as a public good. Non-governmental organization partners reported more limited use, due to their mostly regionally based procurement.²³⁹

131. **(iii) Constructing medical treatment centres.** Faced with national restrictions on accepting COVID-19 patients due to strains on national health services, WFP set out under its common services commitments to construct five medical treatment centres for humanitarian workers in Addis Ababa and Accra, with plans for three other locations also developed. By June 2020, construction in Addis Ababa and Accra was underway. However, the initiative met both logistical and practical challenges, not least negotiating agreements with national authorities on the use of the services for country nationals. Eventually only those in Addis Ababa and Accra were utilized as intended.

132. **(iv) Providing air passenger services.** The scaling up of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) to transport humanitarian workers was considered one of the most valuable aspects of the WFP role. “It was a lifesaver, quite literally.” “We could never have continued without them.”²⁴⁰ Minor concerns did arise about initial booking challenges however.²⁴¹

133. Overall, from March 2020 – January 2021, WFP transported nearly 30,000 health and humanitarian personnel from 415 organizations to 68 destinations through UNHAS, with a peak in July 2020²⁴² (Figure 17). Thereafter, as commercial air transport picked up again, numbers stabilized at around 1,000 per month.

²³⁵ WFP. 2020. Annual Report 2020.

²³⁶ WFP. 2021. Quarterly report on private sector partnerships and fundraising strategy, Quarter 4: September – December 2020, March 2021.

²³⁷ WFP. 2020. Annual Performance Report.

²³⁸ Interviews with 12 United Nations representatives.

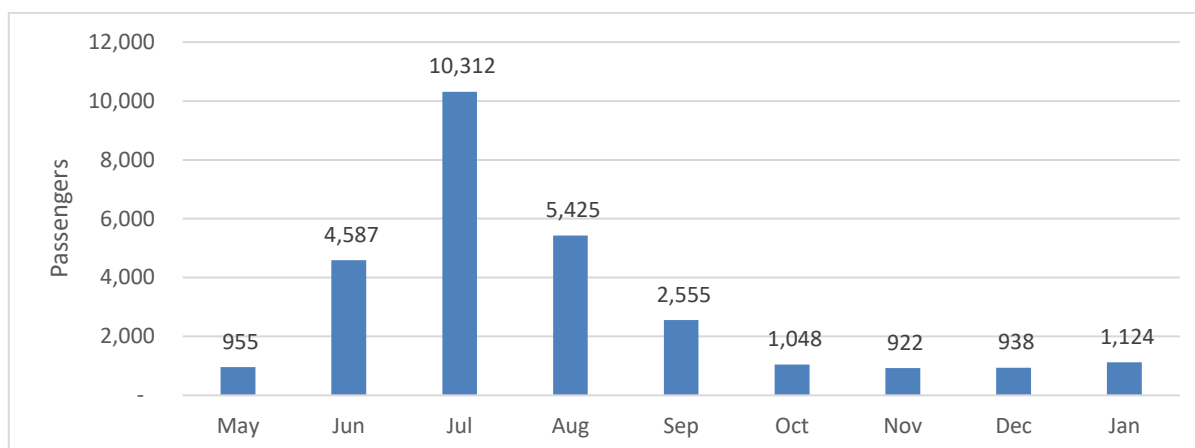
²³⁹ Interviews with 23 cooperating partners.

²⁴⁰ Interviews with 12 United Nations and 23 cooperating partner stakeholders.

²⁴¹ Interviews with 12 United Nations and 23 cooperating partner stakeholders.

²⁴² WFP. 2021. “Annual Performance Report for 2020, annual session of the Board”, (WFP/EB.A/2021/4-A), Rome, 21-25 June 2021.

Figure 17: Number of passengers transported per month (1 May 2020–31 January 2021)



Source: WFP Common Services, Situation Report #7, 31 January 2021

134. **(v) Providing medevac.** WFP role in medevac services proved the most challenging aspect of the common services response. Co-led with the United Nations Department of Operational Support (UNDOS),²⁴³ its early days were far from smooth, partly as system-wide discussions took place on entitlements; partly as the two agencies organized roles and responsibilities, including the use of their air assets;²⁴⁴ and partly due to countries closing borders, thus restricting access to health services. “In our region, medevac was a potential nightmare. All countries were closed. There was no way out.” “It was terrible. I was literally praying for no medevacs.”

135. It was only in September 2020²⁴⁵ that a United Nations system-wide agreement was reached for staff on short-term contracts and other employee categories to be covered by the medevac service. By the end of 2020, 110 COVID-19 medevacs had been conducted of which 69 were done by WFP.²⁴⁶

136. **The cluster system.** WFP co-leadership with FAO of the food security cluster and its leadership of the logistics cluster and the emergency telecommunications cluster also proved valuable elements of the collective COVID-19 response (Table 7).

Table 7: Cluster activities and public goods

Food security cluster
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical guidance on emergency distribution, livestock interventions, urban targeting, food market-based approaches²⁴⁷ • Advocacy on food security, the free flow of fresh produce, access to food for the most vulnerable, improving food use, utilization and production systems.²⁴⁸
Logistics cluster
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership of the Global Humanitarian Logistics Continuity Working Group established to address global supply chain constraints generated by COVID-19 • Provision of transport services including for cargo • Dissemination of logistics information including the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian logistics²⁴⁹ • Country-level support to 543 partners in 20 countries,²⁵⁰ for example, for PPE provision and COVID-19 response items, storage facilities, provision of transport services including airlifts, and developing vaccine preparedness plans. For example, in South Sudan, WFP through the

²⁴³ UN. 2020. COVID-19 Medical Evacuation Framework, 16 July 2020.

²⁴⁴ Interviews with six WFP and four United Nations representatives.

²⁴⁵ HR Guidelines adaptation, version 6, September 2020.

²⁴⁶ WFP. 2021. WFP Supply Chain Update: January 2021.

²⁴⁷ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19: September Update.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19: June and September Updates.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

logistics cluster co-lead the Operational Support and Logistics Pillar of the National COVID-19 Response Plan;²⁵¹ in **Malawi**, WFP, as co-lead of the cluster, augmented logistical support in line with the government-led COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan, by providing storage, transport, and light engineering.²⁵²

Emergency telecommunications cluster

- Risk communication and operational scale-up in **Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Libya, Nigeria, the Pacific, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen**²⁵³
- Support provided to health authorities, mapping of resources and equipment, information management.²⁵⁴

137. The work of the logistics cluster and emergency telecommunications cluster was widely praised at both country and global levels. “Efficient and effective- we could not have asked for more.” Commentary on the food security cluster was more reserved, with pressures on WFP and FAO in the early phase of the pandemic perceived as having limited their focus on the cluster, and challenges balancing the long- and short-term effects of the pandemic. The advocacy capacity of the food security cluster was also considered to require strengthening.²⁵⁵

138. **Bilateral United Nations partnerships.** Some early tensions were also reported in bilateral United Nations partnerships, particularly where partner agencies lacked the mature emergency instinct and capacity of WFP. Partnerships with FAO, WHO and UNDOCS were particularly noted here, with challenges arising, for example, over food security datasets (FAO), supply chain management (WHO) and the construction of medical facilities and air transport (UNDOCS).²⁵⁶ Nonetheless, all partners agreed that willingness and commitment on both sides had mostly “ironed out” early tensions, with working arrangements functioning smoothly by mid-2020,²⁵⁷ and the foundations for greater future coordination laid, for example, with WHO.²⁵⁸

Box 8: Cooperating on refugees with UNHCR

Under agreements with UNHCR,²⁵⁹ WFP assumed responsibility for the provision of refugee food assistance. However, in 2020, concerns arose that WFP was unable to meet its commitments here due to funding constraints, with refugees in East Africa particularly vulnerable.²⁶⁰ Discussions took place between the two agencies on prioritization of different groups, and joint donor briefings were ultimately conducted to attempt to raise additional funding to address these needs, particularly in the light of a shift in attention and funding to vulnerable urban communities.²⁶¹

139. At the country level, the WFP partnership ethos within the United Nations system was mostly considered positive,²⁶² often as part of wider, improved United Nations coordination, as for example in

²⁵¹ WFP. 2020. South Sudan Annual Country Report triangulated through interview.

²⁵² WFP. 2020. Malawi Annual Country Report triangulated through interview.

²⁵³ ETC. 2020. Global ETC COVID-19 Sitrep, August – October 2020, 25 October 2020.

²⁵⁴ ETC. 2020. ETC COVID-19 response, October 2020.

²⁵⁵ Interviews with five WFP, four United Nations and six cooperating partner representatives.

²⁵⁶ Interviews with 17 WFP and 9 United Nations representatives.

²⁵⁷ Tightened working relationships among the Rome-based agencies, particularly FAO and WFP through policy and analytical provision to support the global COVID-19 response was also noted in external assessment. Turner, S. et al (2021) Joint evaluation of collaboration among United Nations Rome-based agencies: draft evaluation report, June 2021; IFAD. 2021. Update on the implementation of the Rural Poor Stimulus Facility and the IFAD wider response to COVID-19, April 2021.

²⁵⁸ A technical agreement is underway with WHO.

²⁵⁹ UNHCR 2011. Memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and WFP, January 2011.

²⁶⁰ UNHCR. 2021. The Refugee Brief – 5 March 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/the-refugee-brief-5-march-2021/>; interviews with three United Nations representatives. As of May 2021, it was estimated that as many as 5 million refugees who WFP has a responsibility to feed are not receiving full rations due to funding shortfalls.

²⁶¹ WFP. 2020. UNHCR and WFP warn refugees in Africa face hunger and malnutrition as COVID-19 worsens food shortages.

²⁶² Interviews with 22 country offices; WFP (2020) country strategic plan evaluations: Afghanistan, Honduras, El Salvador, Mozambique, the Gambia, Lao PDR and Zimbabwe.

Afghanistan, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and the Gambia.²⁶³ There were some nuances, however: in several contexts, WFP reported struggling to prompt early action from sister United Nations agencies as the pandemic began,²⁶⁴ and consequently started responding independently. This placed an initial strain on relationships, but once the urgency was recognized, collective action was galvanized. Staff also reported struggling under the “great weight” of coordination forums at country level. There was broad praise for the WFP “risk-appetite, no-regrets” approach and response-focus. “It is great working with them, they are very proactive, roll up their sleeves and do the work.”²⁶⁵

2.3.2 Supporting national responses: government and other national partnerships

140. **Diverse requests.** Aligning behind government responses to COVID-19 was prioritized in both the Global Response Plan and the MTPF/SERRPF.²⁶⁶ However, diverse WFP strategic and operational roles in the countries it serves, combined with strong national ownership over responses, required careful strategic positioning. Government requests for WFP engagement were shaped by several factors:

- The depth and scale of the pandemic/its effects in the national territory
- The politics and nature of/capacities for the national response
- Pre-existing United Nations/WFP government strategic and operational cooperation
- Government perceptions of WFP agility, ability to respond quickly and at scale and understandings of WFP technical competence.²⁶⁷

141. Where existing national capacities were high, WFP was often requested to fill gaps such as expanding to new beneficiary populations (for example, the urban poor in Kenya),²⁶⁸ sometimes taking it beyond its traditional operational areas and comfort zone, or to provide support at a local/regional level (for example, provincial governments in Pakistan).²⁶⁹

Box 9: Government partnerships

- In **Kyrgyzstan**, at the Government’s request, WFP co-led the Food Security Working Group on behalf of the Development Partners Coordination Council, supporting the development of the national UN COVID-19 Socioeconomic Response Framework for a long-term response to the COVID-19 pandemic and social protection programmes.
- In **Chad**, as part of the national response plan, WFP, the Ministry of Planning and the National Office for Food Security agreed to closely coordinate food assistance responses, developing a complementary plan to cover identified needs. This provided the opportunity to launch in 2021 a more structured and comprehensive technical assistance work plan, aligned with the WFP strategy for capacity strengthening.
- In **Malawi**, following a joint After-Action Review of the 2019/2020 lean season response, which included the response to COVID-19, WFP and the Government designed a joint response to address the economic effects of COVID-19 and the needs for the 2020/2021 lean season.²⁷⁰
- In **South Sudan**, the WFP Innovation Accelerator worked with the Country Office to source local innovators working on specific challenges resulting from the Covid19 response in four areas: domestic food production, supply chain, data collection and programme delivery. Three pilot projects were embedded in WFP field operations in 2021.

²⁶³ WFP. 2020. Country strategic plan evaluations Afghanistan, the Gambia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

²⁶⁴ Interviews with 12 country office staff.

²⁶⁵ Interviews with eight United Nations stakeholders.

²⁶⁶ COVID-19 L3 global implementation plan, Draft 11 April 2020; COVID-19 Level 3 Emergency OTF Note for the Record #04, 23 April 2020.

²⁶⁷ Interviews with 18 country office staff; 23 cooperating partners and 6 United Nations representatives; WFP. 2021. WFP’s Work in Enabling Social Protection Around the Globe: Highlights of the World Food Programme’s Contributions to Social Protection in a New Normal.

²⁶⁸ WFP. 2020. Annual Country Report Kenya, 2020, triangulated with country office interview.

²⁶⁹ WFP. 2020. Annual Country Report Pakistan 2020 triangulated with country office interview.

²⁷⁰ WFP. 2020. Analysis of 24 Annual Country Reports 2020, triangulated with country office interview.



142. **Building new relationships.** Pre-existing government relationships provided the main platforms for engagement as WFP was asked to expand its existing programmes (Section 2.4.3), even though lockdowns and movement restrictions impeded partnerships.²⁷¹ Elsewhere, new government partners such as Ministries of Health or Social Protection proved more challenging entry points, with neither prior relationships nor any common narrative in place. Here, staff reported a more gradual process of engagement-building, sometimes working through other United Nations agencies such as WHO.²⁷² The inability to physically meet and establish new government relationships under COVID-19 – and having the skills to do so – was at times reported as a major constraint (for example, in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic).²⁷³

143. **Managing the impetus for speed.** At times, the need to remain patient in countries whose governments had limited crisis-response experience and a lack of emergency coordination experience required some careful balancing. Depending on the features of the context, WFP either: (i) opted to wait and follow a government’s lead rather than proceed and risk alienating national stakeholders; or (ii) proceeded to engage under the humanitarian imperative, prioritizing the “no regrets” ethos in contexts where political or legitimacy challenges beset national authorities, while recognizing the risks.²⁷⁴

2.3.3 Cooperating and private sector partnerships

144. Delivering the WFP response at country level required a high level of dependence on its partners, specifically cooperating and – increasingly – private sector partnerships. Both relationships underwent change during COVID-19.



145. **Cooperating partners.** The 2020 Evaluation of Capacity to Respond to Emergencies had recommended more equitable approaches to partnerships in emergency responses, as well as partner participation in response design and capacity.²⁷⁵ Cooperating partners reported a change in dynamics during the pandemic, including greater openness, flexibility and willingness to listen from WFP. “The power dynamics changed.”²⁷⁶ Many attributed this shift to a WFP realization of its dependence on cooperating partners for continued delivery and expressed hope that the positive shift in relationships could continue.

146. Partners particularly highly valued: (i) the flexibility that WFP provided for programme adaptation during the pandemic; (ii) the provision of material support for activity delivery (particularly of PPE);²⁷⁷ (iii) the provision of information and data on food security and nutrition; and (iv) WFP advocacy with governments to permit humanitarian access.²⁷⁸ Partners stressed the continued need for WFP to strengthen its focus on capacity-building of local actors, in line with the grand bargain and internal commitments.²⁷⁹



147. **Private sector partnerships.** Private sector partnerships were an area of intended expansion from 2020 onwards.²⁸⁰ As well as engagement with international financial institutions, this came to fruition during the pandemic, benefitting both the organization’s own programmatic activity and the delivery of common services (Box 10).

²⁷¹ Interviews with 21 country office staff; analysis of 32 annual country reports.

²⁷² Interviews with 12 country office staff.

²⁷³ WFP. 2020. Country Strategic Plan Evaluation: Lao PDR; interviews with three country office staff.

²⁷⁴ Interviews with 19 country office staff.

²⁷⁵ WFP. 2020. Evaluation of the WFP Capacity to Respond to Emergencies.

²⁷⁶ Interviews with 23 cooperating partner staff.

²⁷⁷ This is particularly noteworthy given the findings of the capacity to respond evaluation regarding the frequency with which WFP transfers risk to its partners. See WFP (2020) *Strategic Evaluation of WFP’s Capacity to Respond to Emergencies, Evaluation Report: Volume 1*.

²⁷⁸ Interviews with 23 cooperating partner staff.

²⁷⁹ Interviews with 23 cooperating partner staff; WFP (2019) *WFP and the Grand Bargain*, May 2019; 2018 corporate guidance for the Management of NGO Partnerships. In 2021, ODI reported that the grand bargain’s aim of a “participation revolution” was not met in practice. HPG and ODI. 2021. *The Grand Bargain at five years. An independent review*.

²⁸⁰ WFP. 2020. *Private Sector Partnerships and Fundraising Strategy, (2020-2025)*. Q1 Results – presentation to the Executive Board, May 2020.

Box 10: Private sector partnerships during COVID-19

- The provision of a treatment and isolation centre for humanitarian workers (Takeda Pharmaceutical Company)
- The transportation of humanitarian cargo (Temasek Foundation, through Singapore Airlines)
- The development of the Emergency Services Marketplace (Tableau and Palantir).

“The Emergency Service Marketplace offered WFP’s humanitarian partners a range of logistics services through an online interface, whose data visualization tool was built by leveraging partnerships with Tableau and Palantir. Once approved, requests placed by partners and external organizations through the Marketplace were passed to the control tower (partly funded through a multi-year partnership with Takeda), which was responsible for the planning, dispatch, and end-to-end monitoring of shipments.”²⁸¹

148. These partners played critical roles in supporting the WFP response to the pandemic, including its ability to transport COVID-19-related cargo and humanitarian personnel, and keep track of those movements. Overall, private sector partners praised WFP commitment and efficiency. However, WFP legalities and due diligence requirements for in-kind collaborations – particularly during pandemic conditions – placed a strain on engagement, and in at least one case, threatened to jeopardize partnership potential.²⁸² Considerable difficulties were also experienced by some country offices in negotiating with headquarters over the inclusion of non-traditional private sector partners, such as diaspora communities and associated companies, which for some countries had the potential to make significant country-level contributions to the COVID-19 response.²⁸³

2.4. HOW DID WFP ADAPT PROGRAMMING TO MEET NEEDS?

Summary

Country strategic plans adapted to meet new conditions as the pandemic unfolded, though struggled under the weight of the budget revision process. Major changes included: an increased emergency focus, particularly for those WFP countries delivering largely technical advice and capacity strengthening; adapting targeting to meet new needs, including in urban areas; increased use of cash transfers and, linked to this, expanded engagement in social protection measures. WFP also expanded its capacity strengthening and technical advice to governments, alongside logistics and supply chain support for the pandemic response.

WFP showed flexibility and agility when adapting its existing activities for COVID-19 safety, with adaptations made across the range of activities. However, movement and access restrictions caused delays and temporary suspensions. Systems were implemented to manage its own flow of commodities for in-kind operations, but disruption inevitably occurred, with a high level of regional variability of stocks, requiring country-level commodity substitution.

Significant efforts were made to sustain contact with beneficiaries, using technological capabilities, despite a major increase in demand as programmes expanded. No additional resources were committed to gender equality, despite evidence of growing gender-related inequalities, but country offices (variably) pivoted to address contextually arising gender concerns.



2.4.1 Adapting country strategic plans

149. **Pivoting country strategic plans through budget revisions.** To meet needs at the national level and in light of new requests, many country offices had to rapidly pivot country

²⁸¹ WFP (2021) Quarterly report on private sector partnerships and fundraising strategy, Quarter 4: September – December 2020, March 2021.

²⁸² Interviews with two private sector partners.

²⁸³ Interviews with three country office staff.

strategic plans. Aside from contingency arrangements, which are not mandatory or consistently applied,²⁸⁴ the main internal mechanism for this process is the budget revision.

150. The degree of adaptation is reflected in a high volume of budget revisions in 2020. In total, 111 were approved during the year, of which 66 were specifically related to COVID-19, compared to a global total of 67 in 2019. Budget revisions requested USD 4.3 billion of COVID-19-related additional resources (Table 8).²⁸⁵

Table 8: Budget revisions associated with COVID-19

Budget revisions 2020	RBP	RBD	RBJ	RBC	RBN	RBB	TOTAL
Total amount in USD millions	875	855	1,017	3,894	2,299	668	9,608
Amount in millions USD fully or partially associated to COVID-19	271	539	41	2,220	713	601	4,385
Percentage of total amount (in millions of USD) of BR fully or partially associated to COVID-19	31%	63%	4%	57%	31%	90%	

Notes: RBB Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, RBC Regional Bureau for the Middle East and Northern Africa, Regional Bureau for Western Africa, RBJ Regional Bureau for Southern Africa, RBN Regional Bureau for Eastern Africa, RBP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Source: 2020 Budget Revision Tracker – Annual Report

151. **Timescale challenges with budget revisions.** Budget revisions, however, involve up to 120 separate steps and have an average duration of four to five months, including approval.²⁸⁶ Timescales were therefore badly out of sync with country office needs, and required a large burden of work at a time of considerable pressure.²⁸⁷ These challenges were widely recognized,²⁸⁸ and a proposal was briefly issued to reduce timescales by introducing a blanket waiver for country office budgets. Following Executive Board concerns, the budget revision tool continued to be the main instrument for adjusting country planning throughout the pandemic, when contingency arrangements were not in place. Staff however reported that they routinely tried “all other routes” to avoid budget revision requests.²⁸⁹

152. **Rapidly issued operational guidance for adaptation.** The Capacity to Respond to Emergencies evaluation had signalled the need for new guidance in light of WFP evolving roles in emergencies, alongside United Nations reforms and the updating of the Emergencies Handbook.²⁹⁰ For the COVID-19 response, over 120 pieces of guidance were issued from March 2020 across the range of WFP activities/modalities. These included adapting existing programmes to ensure biosecurity measures; and proposing forms of technical adaptation where needed. Guidance spanned the range of WFP activity types, including general distribution, cash-based transfers, resilience/livelihoods programming, social protection and school feeding. Guidance was clear and specific, though country office staff spoke of feeling overwhelmed by its extensive volume, resulting in not all being taken up and applied.²⁹¹

²⁸⁴ For example, the evaluation of the Gambia Country Strategic Plan (WFP 2021) reported that the Gambia had contingency plans in place, which enabled rapid engagement of funds and programmatic adaptation – but that other countries in the region lacked these arrangements.

²⁸⁵ WFP. 2020. WFP Global Update on COVID 19: November 2020.

²⁸⁶ The Strategic Evaluation of WFP’s Capacity to Respond to Emergencies; Review of L3 Emergency Response: Workstreams, Preliminary Findings and Timeline, January 2021 (PowerPoint presentation).

²⁸⁷ Interviews with 8 HQ, 11 regional bureau and 19 country office staff.

²⁸⁸ The December 2020 COVID-19 Directors’ meeting in the Lessons Learned exercise is unequivocal in its recommendation to “fix the time lag to approve a budget revision” COVID-19 Lessons Learned Meeting, 7 December 2020 (meeting summary).

²⁸⁹ Interviews with 24 country offices.

²⁹⁰ WFP. 2020. Strategic Evaluation of WFP’s Capacity to Respond to Emergencies; WFP. 2020, Emergency Field Operations Handbook, Revised April 2020.

²⁹¹ Interviews with 26 country offices.



2.4.2 Adapting existing activities for biosecurity

153. Risks of COVID-19 transmission meant that the full spectrum of WFP activities required adaptation to prevent transmission. In April 2020, the WFP Global Response Plan set out planned control measures.

154. **Swift implementation of biosecurity measures.** Guidance on biosecurity was issued in March 2020.²⁹² Biosecurity protocols followed WFP/United Nations guidance and national government requirements.²⁹³ Measures included the use of masks and PPE, the installation of handwashing facilities, body temperature checks and social-distancing measures at activity sites. Standard operating procedures (SOPs) used by cooperating partners were revised to reflect these measures. PPE was also provided to staff and partners.

155. According to country office staff interviewed, making programme adaptations significantly increased the costs of activities, although offices also reported that donors were generally understanding and willing to adapt budgets to accommodate these costs (see Section 2.2.3). Specific actions taken by country offices to ensure COVID-19 safety²⁹⁴ for key programming areas are detailed in Table 9.

Table 9: Adaptations for COVID-19 safety

Actions	Examples
General food assistance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiplying the number of distributions sites/use of cluster locations • Pre-packaging of food items, rather than scooping of food rations • Loading E-cards in batches to avoid crowding; installing additional automated teller machines (ATMs) • Extension of distribution days • Switching to household/individual level from group/communal distributions • Structuring the timing of distributions to serve the most vulnerable first • Increasing transfer values and reducing frequency • Suspending biometric verification • Closure of prepared meals element and transfer of beneficiaries to other assistance • Providing at-home distributions to the most vulnerable. 	<p>In Somalia and Venezuela, prepared meals activity closed, and beneficiaries transferred to cash-based transfers.</p> <p>In the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, WFP expanded the number/range of distribution sites. In Lebanon, WFP undertook batch-loading of electronic cards to avoid ATM crowding.</p> <p>In the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone WFP served the most vulnerable beneficiaries first, to reduce risks of social contact.</p> <p>In the Central African Republic, at-home distributions were provided to the most vulnerable beneficiaries.</p> <p>In Palestine, WFP developed a card-free system that could be activated at shops by using a seven-digit code sent to beneficiaries' cell phones.</p>
School feeding	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of take-home food rations where authorized by government²⁹⁵ • Use of cash transfers • Use of a combination of take-home food rations/cash transfers • Technical assistance to government programmes, for example, safe return to schools. 	<p>In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen the school feeding programme was modified to take-home rations.</p> <p>In Honduras, WFP worked with the Government to provide take-home rations for 1.25 million children.</p>

²⁹² WFP. 2020. Immediate Guidance (produced across programming areas), March 2020.

²⁹³ Guidance notes for modalities such as in-kind distributions, CBT, food assistance for assets (FFA) and school feeding incorporated this. Interviews with 13 sample country offices all confirmed that biosecurity measures applied to programmes also reflected government control measures.

²⁹⁴ Based on analysis of 32 annual country reports and interviews with 32 country office staff.

²⁹⁵ This applied in all countries examined other than Mozambique, where the Government did not permit the use of take-home rations (WFP, 2021, *Country Strategic Plan Evaluation Mozambique*).

Asset creation and livelihoods/resilience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application of biosecurity control measures including social distancing • Shift from communal to household level asset creation such as home gardens. 	<p>In the Syrian Arab Republic and Niger, WFP supported the conversion of communal asset creation to household level.</p> <p>In Zimbabwe, home gardens were supported.</p>
Nutrition	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift from delivery through health centres to community-based interventions • Use of nutrition programming at community level to disseminate messaging on COVID-19 prevention. 	<p>In Myanmar, WFP supported the shifting from health facilities to community service delivery.</p> <p>In Guinea Bissau, WFP disseminated health messaging through radio on National Nutrition Day.</p>

Source: Analysis of annual performance reports

156. Sometimes, solutions were agreed with national governments. In Cuba, for example, the Government continued with meal distribution but arranged for social workers to distribute meals prepared at WFP-supported community canteens to households.²⁹⁶ This way, social distancing could be maintained without disrupting distributions.

2.4.3 Activity or modality adaptation

157. Country strategic plan evaluations conducted during the COVID-19 response in Afghanistan, Mozambique, Honduras, El Salvador, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Zambia, Peru and the Gambia all found that WFP had responded to COVID-19 with agility and flexibility – aspects highly valued by its national partners.²⁹⁷ The ability of WFP to flex swiftly and decisively, building on existing relationships with national authorities, deploying its network of cooperating partners and acting responsively to changing conditions, were all praised in evaluations.²⁹⁸

158. Where rapid adaptation - at either country strategic plan or operational level - was needed, the most frequently occurring reasons²⁹⁹ were the following, expanded in paras 159-185:

- i. Shift to an emergency focus
- ii. Adapting targeting of food assistance to meet new or emerging needs
- iii. Increasing use of cash-based transfers
- iv. Scaling up of social protection-related activities
- v. Expanding capacity strengthening and advisory support (entering policy spaces)
- vi. Providing supply chain and logistics services to governments.



(i) Shift to an emergency focus within country strategic plans

159. **Pivoting to emergency response.** Where WFP activities focused mainly on technical support, root cause and resilience work, and where country strategic plans contained no emergency or contingency element, pivots to include emergency responses in support of government responses were often needed, particularly in the early phase of the pandemic (Box 11).³⁰⁰

Box 11: Shifting to emergency conditions

- In **Peru**, until March 2020, WFP had focused exclusively on government capacity strengthening to enhance nutrition, social protection and disaster risk management policies and programmes. An evaluation of the country strategic plan in 2021 found that as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, the country office adapted with flexibility and agility, adding two new crisis response strategic outcomes to reactivate direct food assistance through cash transfers,

²⁹⁶ Interview with country office.

²⁹⁷ WFP, 2021, country strategic plan evaluations of Afghanistan, Honduras, El Salvador, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Peru, Zambia and the Gambia

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ As reflected in a combination of budget revisions, annual country and operational reports and as confirmed by interviews

³⁰⁰ Analysis of 32 annual country reports; WFP (2021) Evaluation of Country Strategic Plan Gambia; interviews with 23 country office staff.

particularly to Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and to provide direct support for the national humanitarian supply chain to support the Government's emergency response. The evaluation praised WFP agility and opportunism in responding to changing conditions.

- In **Zimbabwe**, the intended strategic focus of the country strategic plan pre-COVID-19 sought to reposition WFP to a more developmental role as the need for crisis response was expected to diminish. However, a succession of shocks, including COVID-19, required an urgent re-evaluation of this strategy – and despite some over-optimism regarding food security and economic trends, the country strategic plan proved sufficiently flexible to rapidly pivot back to a large-scale emergency response.
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, in response to the Government's COVID-19 appeal for support, WFP introduced a fifth strategic outcome to support the early recovery of vulnerable populations.
- In **the Lao People's Democratic Republic**, the country strategic plan lacked an emergency component. However, it was adapted to respond to requests to support the Government's response to flooding and COVID-19 through the provision and use of immediate funding. The evaluation of the country strategic plan pointed out that an explicit space and budget to support emergency response would have provided more opportunities for WFP to develop stronger links between humanitarian and development work. Subsequently, a dedicated strategic outcome on emergency response was included in the new Lao People's Democratic Republic Country Strategic Plan (2022–2026).³⁰¹

160. The shift in emphasis is reflected in expenditure profiles. By the end of 2020, of the 66 budget revisions fully or partially linked to COVID-19, USD 3.6 billion was allocated to crisis-response activities. USD 423 million and USD 18 million were allocated to new activities geared toward resilience and root-cause work respectively.³⁰²

161. Under the complex conditions of COVID-19, the shift did not however reflect a straightforward “de-prioritizing” of resilience programmes over emergency response. A wide range of external factors also influenced the shift, including: government decisions on school closure and the consequent transfer of some beneficiaries to social assistance programmes;³⁰³ the transfer of some beneficiaries of asset creation and livelihoods programmes to unrestricted transfers/programmes; increased government requests for engagement in social protection-linked cash transfers (paragraph 173);³⁰⁴ and donor earmarking (paragraph 71). These “push factors” ultimately shaped much of the response profile.



(ii) Adapting targeting to meet new needs

162. **Identifying new populations in need of assistance.** In many countries, the pandemic saw existing vulnerabilities exacerbated and new ones emerging. By April 2020, WFP had released internal guidance on targeting criteria during COVID-19, stressing the need to recognize socioeconomic-related vulnerability and to identify new populations in need.³⁰⁵

Four main categories of beneficiaries were identified:

- New beneficiaries meeting existing targeting criteria for current WFP food assistance and nutrition programmes. (For example, in both Chad and Nigeria, the caseload for unconditional transfers doubled in 2020 from 2019)³⁰⁶
- Existing beneficiaries meeting criteria for one form of WFP support, for example, resilience/livelihoods programmes, but whose new circumstances under COVID-19 made them eligible for other support, for example, direct transfers, and/or whose programmatic support could not continue in its current form, for example, school feeding
- People currently covered by national social assistance programmes for which governments requested WFP support

³⁰¹ Information supplied by WFP Laos country office

³⁰² 2020 Budget Revision Tracker – Annual Report 2020.

³⁰³ WFP. 2020. Annual report, triangulated with interviews with 24 sample country offices.

³⁰⁴ WFP. 2021. WFP's Work in Enabling Social Protection around the Globe, Highlights of the World Food Programme's Contributions to Social Protection in a New Normal; interviews with 22 sample country offices.

³⁰⁵ WFP. 2020. Targeting and prioritization of impoverished and food insecure populations affected by COVID-19.

³⁰⁶ Chad and Nigeria ACRs 2020 triangulated with country office interview.

- New beneficiary groups not previously targeted by WFP, for example, those rendered vulnerable by movement restrictions such as migrants and those in urban areas.³⁰⁷

163. **Adapting targeting to reach new populations.** Country offices reported adapting to target many different groups of people affected by COVID-19, often at the request of governments (Box 12).³⁰⁸

Box 12: Expanding groups targeted

- In **Cuba**, WFP expanded existing nutrition interventions to provide older persons, those living with disabilities and those on low income with a prepared meal.
- In **Mozambique**, WFP provided food assistance to patients in COVID-19 treatment centres once the number of patients in a treatment centre exceeded a certain threshold.
- WFP served populations on the **Pakistan-Afghanistan** border who were dependent on cross-border trade and affected by border closures.
- In **Guinea, Central African Republic, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Bangladesh** and **El Salvador**, WFP provided food assistance to people in quarantine; in El Salvador to people in isolation, and in the Central African Republic and El Salvador to people ill with COVID-19, in partnership with government and hospitals.
- WFP served migrant workers in **Myanmar**; those stuck in migrant transit and quarantine centres in **Djibouti**; and Venezuelan refugees and migrants in **Peru**.
- In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, WFP provided food assistance to seven quarantine centres, feeding approximately 1,000 people a day, mostly Lao migrant workers returning from Thailand.
- In **Jordan**, WFP distributed ad-hoc food parcels to COVID-19 beneficiaries quarantined in camps who could not access the shops, as well as date packs to vulnerable Jordanians in host communities.
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, WFP provided emergency assistance to orphans, older persons and people living with disabilities, residents of social inpatient institutions and the “newly poor”, particularly returning migrants, and unemployed women and youth. In **Honduras, Peru** and **El Salvador**, WFP extended its coverage to highly vulnerable groups not otherwise reached by social assistance, such as indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and Venezuelan refugees

164. A particular area of expansion was in urban targeting,³⁰⁹ in which WFP had little recent experience, but where governments often requested support (Box 13).

Box 13: Urban targeting

Rising food prices and increased levels of urban poverty meant increased demand for food assistance and nutrition support in urban areas, a relatively new (at least in recent years) area for WFP. Difficulties included the sheer number of people, their proximity to each other, and the potential political ramifications of addressing some specific sectors of the populations.

Prior to the pandemic, WFP also lacked clear, recent³¹⁰ guidance on “how to do” urban targeting, though new guidance was issued in July 2020.³¹¹ Of a sample of 24 WFP country offices, 15 had engaged in new forms of targeting in urban areas, usually at the behest of government.³¹² For example:³¹³

- In **Kenya**, at the request of the Government, WFP launched an urban response in Nairobi's informal

³⁰⁷ Analysis of 32 sample annual country reports; interviews with 24 sample country offices.

³⁰⁸ Analysis of 32 Country office annual reports; triangulated with interview with country offices; country strategic plan evaluations, Peru, Honduras, El Salvador and Lao People's Democratic Republic.

³⁰⁹ According to the United Nations, urban areas have become the epicentre of the pandemic. See UN. July 2020. United Nations Policy Brief: COVID-19 in an Urban World.

³¹⁰ WFP did have two old policies related to urban programming. These were “Urban food insecurity: strategies for WFP programming” from 2002 and “Programming food aid in urban areas” from 2004.

³¹¹ Good nutrition for vulnerable urban populations in the context of COVID-19: WFP Interim Guidance. July 2020.

³¹² Kenya, Madagascar, Zambia, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Palestine, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Sudan, Bangladesh.

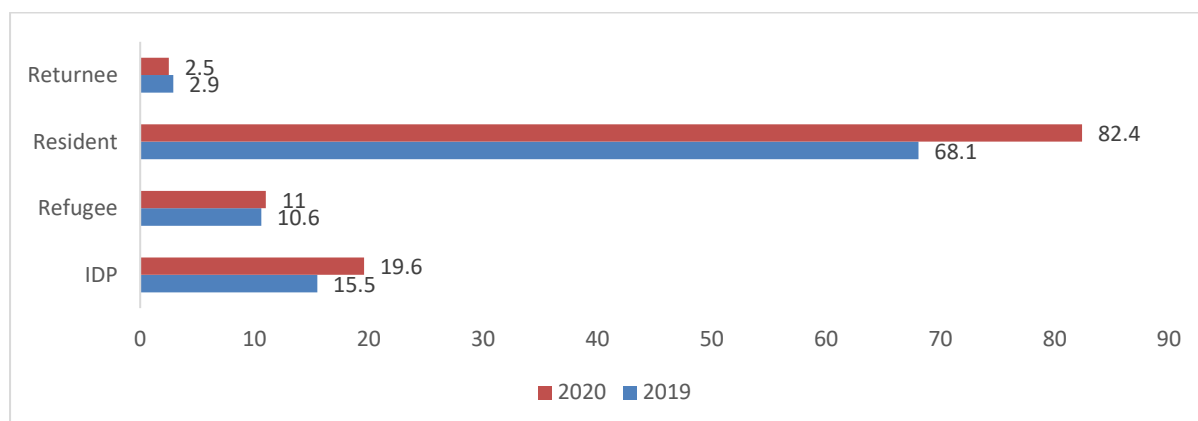
³¹³ Analysis of 24 annual country reports, triangulated with country office interviews.

settlements and Mombasa to assist 478,000 people adversely affected by the pandemic with cash and nutrition support

- In **Zimbabwe**, adaptation to COVID-19 included scale-up of its urban assistance by more than fivefold, to reach 550,000 people through April 2021
- In **Afghanistan**, WFP assisted families with a short-term two-month supply of cash-based assistance to 1.2 million vulnerable people, focusing on urban areas
- In **South Sudan**, WFP scaled up shock-responsive urban safety net programming, supporting 185,000 urban residents with cash and food assistance
- In **Sudan**, WFP provided one-time food assistance to 1.8 million vulnerable urban/peri-urban people in support of the Government’s initiative to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 containment measures
- In **Zambia**, the Government and its partners, including WFP, launched the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer (C-19 ECT) programme in July 2020, serving over 300,000 people, mostly in urban areas
- In **Lesotho**, WFP launched emergency cash interventions for the first time in five urban councils, targeting 52,500 people and complementing the Government’s horizontal expansion of its social assistance programme
- In **Malawi**, at the end of 2020, WFP initiated its support to the Government’s COVID-19 Masterplan, which aimed to provide cash transfers to 54,000 people in seven district towns and to 110,000 people in seven districts under the 2020/2021 lean season response.

165. While COVID-19-specific data were not available, overall data for 2020 indicated that refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and resident beneficiaries – who usually reside in urban areas – all received more support than in 2019 (Figure 18).³¹⁴

Figure 18: Number of beneficiaries assisted by residence status



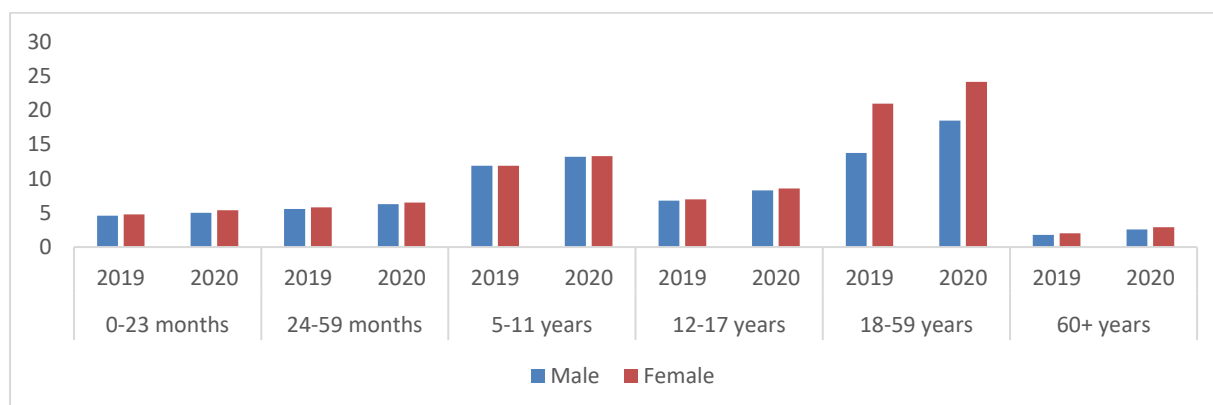
Source: WFP 2019 and 2020 annual performance reports

166. However, there was no significant shift in the number of women and girls assisted, which rose only 3.9 percent from 2019, despite the increased effects of the pandemic on gender inequality (Figure 19).³¹⁵

³¹⁴ WFP. 2020. Annual Performance Report.

³¹⁵ FAO. 2020. Gendered impacts of COVID-19 and equitable policy responses in agriculture, food security and nutrition. <http://www.fao.org/policy-support/tools-and-publications/resources-details/en/c/1276740>; World Bank. 2021.

Figure 19: Disaggregated beneficiaries - 2019 and 2020



Source: WFP 2019 and 2020 annual performance reports



(iii) Increased use of cash-based transfers

167. **Initiating and scaling up cash-based transfers.** With vulnerabilities increasing alongside constrained supply chains for in-kind support and governments requesting increased social protection support, WFP needed to shift to/upscale its cash transfer provision in many countries. This fell into two main categories:

- In some countries, as in Egypt, a shift from in-kind provision to cash was already planned and required acceleration³¹⁶
- In others, cash was already being used and required scale-up through the use of new service providers, for example, in Afghanistan, Kenya and Zimbabwe.

168. The expansion of cash-transfer programmes placed a significant strain on smaller country offices particularly. New financial services providers had to be identified and due diligence processes implemented; distribution networks set up and tested; and monitoring officers appointed. The Zambia country office reported having to hire over 100 new field monitors due to an expansion in cash transfers, mainly in urban areas.³¹⁷

169. Where transfer mechanisms were already in place, adaptive action was also needed to sustain the supply chain. In Iraq, for example, WFP refugee beneficiaries were unable to leave their camps to purchase commodities from retailers outside the camps - and no retailers functioned in the camps themselves. WFP therefore organized a home delivery service that delivered packaged commodities at household level by contracting “mobile traders”. In Somalia, WFP linked a home-delivery service with its e-Shop app, reducing the risk to beneficiaries of visiting retailers.³¹⁸

Box 14: Cash transfer adaptation

In **Lebanon**, WFP implemented a series of measures that have supported partners to maintain the relevance of cash and voucher activities in the face of challenges, including:

- Staggering the uploading of e-cards to allow for ATM replenishment and to avoid ATM overcrowding and maintain social distancing
- Deploying monitors to hotspot ATMs to organize crowds and ensure social distancing
- Closely monitoring ATMs to ensure timely replenishment
- Working with the Banque Libano-Francaise to install additional ATMs in areas with coverage gaps
- Expanding the number of contracted shops participating in the voucher programme.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ WFP. 2020. Annual Country Report, Egypt.

³¹⁷ Interview with country office staff.

³¹⁸ WFP. 2021. Supply Chain Cash-Based Transfer Global Update 2020 Overview.

³¹⁹ WFP. 2021. *Lebanon Country Strategic Plan Evaluation*.

170. The increase in the use of cash is reflected in: (i) the upscaling of social protection programming (see paragraph 172, below); (ii) corporate-level data, which showed a 37 percent increase in the use of cash in 2020, increasing to USD 1.7 billion distributed in the first nine months of 2021;³²⁰ and (iii) output data for 2020,³²¹ which showed large increases in unrestricted (cash or in-kind) transfers, to 82.9 million people served, up from 60.8 million in 2019.³²²

171. However, some country offices also reported difficulties when shifting from cash to different types of in-kind support, such as donations from supermarkets for home deliveries rather than standard food parcels, or adapting cash-based assistance in camps to supply commodities under movement restrictions. Challenges included supply chain requirements for forward prices, which proved difficult for seasonal items, and quality standards requirements. Thus, the need for adaptive capacity to switch between modalities, including when these take different forms, was emphasized.³²³



(iv) Expanding social protection-related activities

172. **Increased demand for social protection.** With the economic fallout from the pandemic gathering momentum from early 2020, many governments found themselves with significantly increased demands on national social protection programmes, either in the form of existing beneficiary groups expanding and/or new beneficiary groups requiring support. International financial institutions (for example, the World Bank) had made resources available but often lacked implementation capacity.³²⁴

173. WFP social protection support had been expanding in recent years, including support to build national social protection architectures and enhance knowledge and learning activities, as well as programmatic support and implementation for governments.³²⁵ The year 2020 saw no increased corporate investment here,³²⁶ but WFP faced increasing demands from governments as new vulnerabilities arose, often linked to needs in urban areas (see Box 13 above)³²⁷ and the availability of resources from international financial institutions.

174. For programmatic support, where national social protection mechanisms were already in place, WFP usually supported governments by providing either: (i) vertical expansion to top up existing transfers; or (ii) horizontal expansion, expanding the coverage of existing social protection systems through direct implementation, in line with agreed government priorities (Box 15).³²⁸

Box 15: Expanding existing national social protection systems

- In **Niger**, WFP worked with the World Bank and UNICEF to scale up the national Adaptive Social Protection (ASP) system, to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities.
- In **Mozambique**, WFP supported the provision of unconditional cash transfers to vulnerable households affected by the economic fallout of the pandemic, targeting new urban areas in northern Mozambique.
- In **Cambodia**, WFP repurposed its school feeding programme to provide take-home food rations for households registered in the Government's national poverty identification system.
- In **Djibouti, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Niger, and Somalia**, WFP expanded the coverage of existing national social protection programmes, to support government planning.
- In **the Gambia**, the national school feeding programme (the largest safety net in the country) was used to assist vulnerable households affected by COVID-19 to distribute household food rations.

³²⁰ Figures were stable from 2019, at USD 2.1 billion, but include a nearly USD 500m uplift when discounting for the handover of the USD 490-million emergency social safety net (ESSN) programme in Turkey. Annual Performance Report.

³²¹ Annual performance reports 2020 and 2019.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Interviews with 22 country office staff.

³²⁴ Interviews with 11 headquarter and regional bureau staff.

³²⁵ WFP. 2021. *Social Protection Strategy 2021*.

³²⁶ Internal data supplied by Social Protection unit at HQ.

³²⁷ Interviews with 21 sample country offices; WFP and Social Protection (2021); Internal data on government requests supplied by Social Protection Unit.

³²⁸ Analysis of 24 country office annual reports, triangulated with country office interviews

- In **Palestine**, WFP supported the Ministry of Social Development in formulating an emergency response plan for the most vulnerable and scaling up cash-based support to 84,000 new beneficiaries.
- In **Ecuador**, WFP complemented the Government's social protection programme through two types of cash-based transfers as a nutritional support bonus to ensure that basic food needs of vulnerable households were met during the pandemic.

175. WFP also helped governments develop policy frameworks and provided technical support, including to refine targeting. Example activities are detailed in Box 16.³²⁹

Box 16: Expanding technical support for social protection

- The development of national frameworks for shock responsive social protection and expanding policy frameworks in **Niger, Nigeria, Somalia** and **Cambodia**
- Providing technical assistance in **Jordan** to the Government's National Aid Fund to digitize its cash assistance programme
- Contributing to the design of the Unified Social Registry in **Chad**, to deliver safety nets and serve as a platform to activate shock response during emergencies
- Helping develop a coordinated strategy for social protection engagement with the United Nations system and national authorities in the **Syrian Arab Republic**
- Coordinating United Nations support to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in **Kenya** to strengthen the social protection sector and expand transfers, including accelerating the enhancement of the Single Registry to enable humanitarian actors to link their support to the Ministry.

176. Overall, WFP supported governments in 65 countries to scale up or adapt existing social protection measures in response to COVID-19.³³⁰ This ranged from direct delivery, including cash-based responses, in 42 countries, to governance, capacity and coordination support in 50.³³¹ Engaging in social protection was considered by some WFP staff to have further strengthened relationships with government and opened up opportunities for the future, for example, in Kenya.³³² The increased work on social protection also contributed to increased private sector contributions in 2020.



(v) Expanding capacity-strengthening and advisory support; entering policy spaces

177. **Expanding country capacity-strengthening.** Country capacity-strengthening (CCS) has historically formed a relatively small part of the WFP portfolio, though approaches have been found inconsistent and incomplete.³³³ In some relevant contexts, such as Peru, country strategic plans were already framed around country capacity-strengthening.³³⁴ Country capacity-strengthening was however an important modality identified in the MTPF as part of the medium-term COVID-19 response, and a country capacity-strengthening investment fund for facilitating capacity-strengthening activities was piloted in 2020 in Burundi, Colombia, Jordan and the Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean.

178. In 2020, requests were mediated by national government understandings of WFP capacities and expertise as well as the status of national capacities and political dynamics, including openness to engaging with United Nations agencies in specific areas (see Section 2.2.3). Where the WFP service offer was clear and communicated and where governments were open to receive support, reporting indicated that

³²⁹ WFP. 2021. *WFP's Work in Enabling Social Protection around the Globe, Highlights of the World Food Programme's Contributions to Social Protection in a New Normal*, triangulated by annual country report analysis and interviews with country offices.

³³⁰ WFP. 2021. *WFP's Work in Enabling Social Protection around the Globe, Highlights of the World Food Programme's Contributions to Social Protection in a New Normal*.

³³¹ Data supplied by Social Protection Unit, September 2020.

³³² Country office interview.

³³³ WFP. 2021. Synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations.

³³⁴ This includes CSPs in many countries in the RBP region, such as Colombia, and the Gambia, China and others.

capacity-strengthening activities formed an important part of the WFP emergency response, though it was not always corporately reported as such, being often embedded in programmatic activities.

179. Support spanned the spectrum of WFP technical capacities and expertise, including supply chain, logistics, food security monitoring and analysis, and programme design. WFP staff also reported being invited to engage in new policy spaces, for examples in school feeding and social protection. Examples are detailed in Box 17.³³⁵

Box 17: Expanding capacity strengthening support to governments

- In **Myanmar**, WFP provided technical support to help the Government design its cash-based response to COVID-19, including feasibility assessments, electronic cash transfers, design and implementation of rural cash-for-work interventions, joint monitoring, and supervision, and establishing community development plans
- In **Sri Lanka**, WFP entered into a partnership with a local university and a university in the United States of America to develop methodologies to enable accurate targeting in urban areas
- In **Burkina Faso**, WFP provided training to support the Government in vulnerability assessment and targeting and in the management of procurement and distribution systems
- In **Iraq**, with school feeding activities paused, WFP focused on providing capacity strengthening activities, for example, training on digital skills, communication and data collection for education personnel
- In **Burundi**, country capacity strengthening resources enabled the Burundi Red Cross to implement its COVID-19 response plan, including the establishment of an emergency communication cell and the launch of the forecast-based financing approach
- In **the Gambia**, WFP seconded technical support to the National Disaster Management Agency to assist with the COVID-19 response
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, WFP was appointed to coordinate the Food Security and Logistics Sector within the Disaster Response Coordination Unit to support the Government's response plan to COVID-19.

180. In 2020, budget revisions for 17 WFP country strategic plans related to the COVID-19 response requested increased resources for institutional capacity-strengthening,³³⁶ with a funding amount of USD 168 million.³³⁷



(vi) Providing supply chain and logistics services to governments

181. **Critical role in supply chains.** Disruptions to the international supply chain placed a major strain on governments, as the price and availability of commodities on international and regional markets fluctuated. Even where commodities were available, channelling supplies through transport corridors was highly challenging.

182. Across all countries of operation, WFP led or co-led with governments the coordination of the logistics and supply chain aspects of the United Nations response. This involved: providing technical support and advice on supply chains; providing storage and handling for humanitarian and health cargo; playing a direct role in supporting the procurement of goods and services; providing supply chain and transit; and supplying “tangible” logistics assets and services, including isolation units, mobile storage units, transport services and medical supplies to support government prevention and treatment capabilities.³³⁸

183. In some cases, WFP worked via its leadership of the logistics cluster (see paragraph 136). However, key examples of providing supply chain and logistics are given in Box 18.³³⁹

³³⁵ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report for 2020; review of 32 annual country reports; WFP (2020) country strategic plan evaluations: the Gambia, China and Lao People's Democratic Republic: staff interviews in 22 countries.

³³⁶ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report 2020 including Annex 6. Budget revisions fully or partially linked to COVID-19.

³³⁷ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report, Annex 6. Budget revisions fully or partially linked to COVID-19.

³³⁸ WFP. 2020. Global Response to COVID-19: June Update; interviews with 19 headquarters and country office staff.

³³⁹ Analysis of 24 country office annual reports, triangulated by interview; WFP, 2020, Evaluacion de Honduras Plan Estrategico Pais de PMA, (2018-2021).

Box 18: Providing supply chain and logistics services to governments

- In **Guatemala**, WFP provided procurement and transport services for the Government's Food Support and Prevention Programme, procuring approximately 89,500 metric tons of commodities with which the Government planned to reach over one million households impacted by COVID-19.
- In **Yemen**, WFP bilateral service provision supported the health response across the country. Key activities included support to a humanitarian air bridge for the transport of COVID-19 supplies, the provision of fuel to health facilities and the coordination of cargo flights and shipments on behalf WHO and UNICEF to transport medical equipment.
- In **Chad**, WFP transported medicine and other medical equipment and materials on behalf of partners; used its own staff to install ten mobile storage units to serve as medical reception centres and clinics across eight provinces, with 60-bed availability; and provided information technology services for the benefit of other United Nations organizations.
- In **Burundi**, WFP supported the establishment of screening and isolation units for the Government and humanitarian partners. It also provided ambulances and technical support for quarantine processes at the airport, capacity strengthening in stock management, transport planning, storage assessments and optimization for the national pharmaceutical warehouse.
- In **Ecuador**, WFP launched logistics coordination and information management systems for the humanitarian community, and transported COVID-19 prevention kits to 23 provinces.
- In **Malawi**, WFP supplied storage for partners' PPE and other COVID-19 supplies; transported oxygen cylinders and other supplies on behalf of the Government; provided engineering support for treatment and isolation units; and deployed mobile units/tents at health centres or points of entry.
- In **Honduras**, the Government requested WFP support for the entire supply chain, including cash-based transfer delivery channels and procurement and distribution of commodities. WFP also worked with local authorities to strengthen logistics capacity.
- At a regional level, WFP has been approached by the African Union Commission to provide supply chain and logistics support for the procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines across Africa. This includes: supply chain tools; capacity augmentation; training and knowledge-sharing; and logistics coordination.³⁴⁰

184. However, country offices reported³⁴¹ that they lacked a place to locate these activities under country strategic plan objectives, finally siting them under Partnerships.

2.4.4 Timeliness of activities

185. **Delivery delays in the context of swift adaptations.** While no systematic evidence was available on the timeliness of WFP activities implemented at country level, external praise for the swift adaptations of WFP at country level was high.³⁴² For in-kind activities, WFP undertook a number of actions to ensure the timely availability of commodities (Box 19).

186. Nonetheless, review of annual country reports and interviews³⁴³ found recurring and sometimes significant delays or temporary activity suspensions, commonly to put in place biosecurity measures/respond to government restrictions/react to supply chain constraints. Country strategic plan evaluations in Afghanistan, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, the Gambia and China reported the same, with delays extending to several months in the Gambia and China. In Afghanistan, a combination of border closures, export bans and the blockage of goods transport from Karachi to Afghanistan for several months meant that the COVID-19 response was implemented as cash-only. New activities in many countries also required time to develop the relevant systems; prepare new partnerships, for example, for financial service providers; and engage with relevant stakeholders.

³⁴⁰ Information supplied by WFP African Union Global Office.

³⁴¹ Interviews with 11 country offices.

³⁴² Interviews with 12 donor representatives; WFP. 2020. Evaluations of country strategic plans, the Gambia and China.

³⁴³ Analysis of 32 annual country reports, all of which reported delays or suspensions, triangulated with country office interviews and evaluations of country strategic plans in Afghanistan, Mozambique, the Gambia and China.

Box 19: Maintaining the in-kind supply chain for timeliness

At the same time as supporting governments with supply chain technical advice, WFP had to sustain its own flow of commodities for in-kind operations as needs expanded. Early actions included:

- **Forward purchasing and increased local purchase.** Financed through Global Response Plan-raised resources, WFP forward-bought three-month stocks of food and established three-month financing capacity to support cash transfer programmes
- Activating **regional supply chain coordination** for example, in East Africa
- **Pre-positioning food resources** in or near the most fragile countries in order to reduce the risk of disruption to food supply chains
- **Reinforcing critical corridors** with assets such as specialized overland transport and technical assistance to ensure the continued flow of humanitarian cargo. This included adjusting processes at warehouses and ports; diverting vessels and commodities; switching to new corridors where available.³⁴⁴

What was achieved? At aggregate level at least, the WFP supply chain for in-kind assistance was largely maintained. By the end of 2020, the amount of food in the supply chain remained stable compared to March 2020, with approximately 2.41 million metric tons of stock in warehouses or in transit, representing 3.4 months of WFP global requirements. Regional availability of inventory was however variable, with RBJ and RBB having lower commodity volumes in stock than RBN and RBD.³⁴⁵ Some commodities were also in short supply, for example, specialized nutritious foods.³⁴⁶ These shortfalls were reflected in pipeline breaks, with substitutions needed in many countries.

Supply chain costs largely stable. Adaptive actions taken helped maintain direct support cost (DSC) expenditure on food and cash-based transfers in 2020 at similar levels to 2019, even as the volume and amounts of distributions increased.³⁴⁷

2.4.5 Addressing gender equality in the COVID-19 response

187. **Lack of reactivity to the gender dimension.** The global effects of the pandemic on inequality began to be recognized in mid-2020 (see paragraph 8), particularly the increased vulnerability of women and girls. Despite this, WFP did not scale up its corporate human or financial resources to address gender equality, nor re-prioritize to ensure greater attention to or visibility of the issue.³⁴⁸ Public leadership statements³⁴⁹ reflected little mention of the issue in COVID-19 references beyond annual joint statements on gender equality in relation to International Women's Day.



188. **Country-level pivoting.** Context-specific analyses indicated the severe effects of the pandemic on women and girls. Despite the lack of corporate investment, some country- and regional-level responses adapted to respond³⁵⁰ (Box 20).

Box 20: Pivoting to address gender needs at country/regional level

- Adapting targeting to prioritize women and girls/other vulnerable groups (**Palestine, Congo, Pakistan, Peru, Bolivia and Colombia**)
- Awareness raising and referral systems in response to increased incidents of domestic violence and gender-based violence as a result of lockdowns (**Congo and Nigeria**)
- Conducting behaviour change activities around gender norms in nutrition programmes (**India**)
- Providing information packages about gender, food security and COVID-19 (**Ecuador, Peru,**

³⁴⁴ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report 2020.

³⁴⁵ WFP. 2020. Cross-Functional Global Analysis 17/12/2020.

³⁴⁶ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report 2020, triangulated by review of annual country reports for 32 countries.

³⁴⁷ WFP. 2020. Annual Performance Report 2020.

³⁴⁸ No additional positions (either long-term or temporary) for gender were created or filled during the pandemic.

However, a review of budget revisions in a sample of 18 country offices revealed increased demand for programmatic resources, particularly at field level, due to the context-related needs arising from COVID-19.

³⁴⁹ All documents by Executive Director | WFPgo/ Ask David: the Executive Director Answers Your Questions | WFPgo/ All news by Executive Director | WFPgo.

³⁵⁰ Analysis of 32 annual country reports/interviews with 18 country offices.

Nigeria, Palestine, Guatemala, and Honduras)

- Providing social and behaviour change communication messaging on education promotion (**Afghanistan** and **Pakistan**)
- Using the pandemic as an opportunity to develop income-generating activities for women for example, production of face masks (**the Central African Republic**), food items linked to WFP school feeding programmes (**Congo**), and contracts with women suppliers for the provision of cooked meals in COVID-19 quarantine centres (**Myanmar**)
- Providing guidance on gender-sensitive assessments and gender-disaggregated monitoring of the pandemic to governments (**RBB, RBC, RBJ, RBP**)
- Developing specific initiatives with national gender machineries to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on economically vulnerable women (**the Gambia**).

189. Reflecting findings elsewhere,³⁵¹ staff also reported that attention to gender equality within the COVID-19 response varied according to management interest and commitment, including at regional level; the seniority of the gender adviser or focal point in-country; and resources available.³⁵²

190. In 2020, WFP reported that 55 out of 60 countries that tracked results on improved decision making at household level for the use of food, cash and vouchers met their gender-related targets.³⁵³ However, evaluations in 2020 found gender analysis to be weak,³⁵⁴ raising the concern that actions were not directly targeted at or responding to specific gender needs and arguably limiting the potential for transformative gender change.



2.4.6 Ensuring accountability to affected populations

191. **Successful maintaining of communication channels to hear needs, expectations and concerns.** Despite physical access constraints, WFP adapted³⁵⁵ during the pandemic to keep the flow of communication open with affected populations. Its technical expertise proved advantageous here: strategies applied included third-party monitoring, toll-free hotlines and remote monitoring through call centres.³⁵⁶ Efforts were also made to maintain community feedback mechanisms, though with a higher reliance on remote methods of communication and technology than before.³⁵⁷ In some locations, the required adaptation was considerable. In Colombia, for example, calls to the WFP beneficiary helpline reached 12,000 in June 2020, up from 780 in February 2020.³⁵⁸ Example activities are included in Box 21.³⁵⁹

Box 21: Maintaining communication with affected populations

- Using established community engagement mechanisms to collect feedback and suggestions from beneficiaries regarding assistance (**Myanmar**)
- Committing to establishing a dedicated telephone hotline and email feedback loop, to be operated by WFP monitoring and evaluation staff (**Armenia**)
- Developing a referral system to build networks in order to address arising needs in new populations (**Lebanon, Colombia, and Sierra Leone**)
- Developing a gender-based violence referral system to be implemented through general food assistance platforms (**Bangladesh and Sri Lanka**).

³⁵¹ Gender Policy Evaluation 2020; country strategic plan evaluations in the Gambia, Lao PDR, Zimbabwe.

³⁵² Interviews with 7 regional-level and 21 country level staff.

³⁵³ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report 2020.

³⁵⁴ WFP. 2020. *Evaluation of the Gender Policy (2015-2020)*.

³⁵⁵ As reflected in 18/18 sample annual country reports analysed, triangulated with interviews (12/14 KII).

³⁵⁶ Analysis of 18 annual country reports 2020.

³⁵⁷ For example, Colombia, Pakistan, the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe and Lebanon. Some countries also noted the use of SugarCRM (Customer Relationship Management), a corporate tool to collate and track community feedback on a streamlined platform to allow for easier oversight and analysis of the data for the purposes of follow-up e.g., Myanmar and Pakistan.

³⁵⁸ WFP. 2020. Annual Country Report Colombia.

³⁵⁹ Analysis of 24 annual country reports 2020, triangulated by country office interviews.

192. In 2020, 64 percent of WFP countries of operation met annual targets of informing a high proportion of assisted people about their operations, a slight decrease from 2019³⁶⁰ but arguably a significant achievement given challenges of access during the pandemic. In 2020, WFP also reported that 90 percent of its operations documented, analysed and integrated beneficiary feedback into programme improvements, an upturn on 82 percent in 2019.³⁶¹ However, evaluations found these achievements to be inconsistent across countries.³⁶²

2.5. WHAT DID THE RESPONSE ACHIEVE?

Summary

In terms of food security and nutrition, the response in 2020 served a record number of 115 million beneficiaries in aggregate, though with diversity across regions and with lower food volumes than intended. A total of 90 million people were served in the first half of 2021. Funding constraints, activity suspension due to national conditions and supply chain disruptions were the main factors where country offices could not reach beneficiary targets.

Overall, WFP assistance prevented any significant deterioration in the food security and nutrition status of its beneficiaries – but nor did statuses overall improve. Against the very significant headwinds created by the pandemic, however, this is a positive gain.

WFP successfully underpinned the global humanitarian response through its common services activities, allowing the humanitarian system as a whole to remain operational. This has repositioned WFP globally, increasing its visibility within the United Nations and wider international systems, and providing it with very considerable reputational capital.

Internally, existing systems and capacities mostly expanded or pivoted to meet need. Some innovation also flourished. Systems to manage risk and staff well-being, provide global surge, generate data and analytics all expanded, as did United Nations, government and private sector partnerships and the WFP advocacy role. Elsewhere, systems and capacities such as management, workforce and internal financial arrangements, along with estimations of needs, all pivoted to adapt. New innovations or frameworks were also introduced to help manage the response, including strategic frameworks, internal financing mechanisms and communication modalities.

However, knowledge management systems saw no change during the pandemic. Moreover, some pivots/adaptations – such as in gender and social protection – occurred despite limited corporate investment. This arguably limits WFP potential for transformative change in these areas.

193. Achievements during the response fall into two main categories: (1) meeting food security and nutrition needs and underpinning the international response; and (2) institutional change and reform.

2.5.1 Meeting food security and nutrition needs

194. **Feeding record numbers.** WFP reached a total of 115.6 million beneficiaries in 2020 with food or cash-based transfers, exceeding those reached in 2019 by almost 20 percent (97.1 million), although this could not be fully attributed to COVID-19.³⁶³ In all, 93 percent of target beneficiaries in aggregate were reached, with a range of 84–100 percent across all six regions (Table 10).

³⁶⁰ When 38/55 (69 percent) countries reported achieving the same target. WFP. 2020. Annual Performance Report 2019.

³⁶¹ Annual performance reports 2019 and 2020.

³⁶² In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, feedback and complaints were not systematically followed up on or addressed in a timely manner. WFP. 2021. *Evaluation of the WFP Democratic Republic of the Congo Interim Country Strategic Plan (2018-2020)*; In Bangladesh, the extent to which affected populations, especially women, felt empowered to use the feedback mechanisms was unclear. WFP. 2021. *Evaluation of WFP Bangladesh Country Strategic Plan (2016-2019)*.

³⁶³ WFP. 2021. Annual Performance Report for 2020.

Table 10: Planned and actual beneficiaries reached in 2020 (in millions)

Region	WFP regional bureau	Planned	Actual	% Annual performance
Asia Pacific	RBB	20	17.5	88
Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe	RBC	28	28.1	100
Western and Northern Africa	RBD	20	18.2	91
Southern Africa	RBJ	23	19.3	84
Eastern and Central Africa	RBN	27	26.5	98
Central and South America and Caribbean	RBP	6	6.0	100
	Total	124	115.6	93

Source: WFP 2020 Annual Performance Report

195. Analysis of the results of a sample 24 countries spread across regions, found more nuanced results:

- Of the 22 country offices where direct cash transfers were carried out, 8 met or exceeded intended beneficiary numbers; 14 did not
- Of 22 countries where in-kind transfers were carried out, 10 met their intended target for beneficiary numbers, while 12 did not.

196. Apart from funding constraints, including the late commitment and disbursement of committed funds,³⁶⁴ the main reasons provided for failures to reach target, related to COVID-19, included:

- Activity suspension due to national government restrictions/movement limitations/school closures/COVID-19 outbreaks
- Supply-chain disruptions.

197. Preliminary data for January-June 2021 indicate that, from a total (estimated) planned 113 million beneficiaries for that period, 90 million beneficiaries globally, or 79.2 percent, had been reached as of October 2021. However, this data had not yet been consolidated or finalized, and expectations are that the targeted number of beneficiaries for the year, as well as those reached, will be higher.³⁶⁵

198. **Food assistance volumes affected by COVID-19.** Despite the increase in beneficiary numbers, actual volumes of cash and commodities distributed remained exactly the same in 2020 as in 2019 (Table 11).³⁶⁶

Table 11: Volumes of cash and food delivered

	2019	2020
Total quantity of food provided (mt)	4.2 million	4.2 million
Total amount of value transferred (USD) through CBTs/ vouchers	2.1 billion	2.1 billion

Source: WFP 2020 Annual Performance Report

199. These numbers are reflected in the 24 sample countries analysed for the evaluation, which found that of the 22 country offices conducting cash-based transfers, 18 could not deliver the intended volumes, while 4,³⁶⁷ all with healthy funding profiles, managed to do so. Of the 22 countries conducting in-kind food transfers, all but 1 (Mauritania) did not manage to deliver the planned volumes. Country strategic plan evaluations covering 2020 and 2021 found similarly.³⁶⁸ COVID-19-related reasons were similar as for failure to reach beneficiary targets and included: activity suspensions; access constraints and pipeline breaks; and

³⁶⁴ For example, the Gambia. WFP. 2020. Annual Country Report 2020.

³⁶⁵ Data supplied by WFP COMET team, October 2021. Data is preliminary only.

³⁶⁶ The Corporate Annual Report points out that the handing over of the emergency social safety net programme in Turkey accounted for a major part of these stable numbers in 2020, even while quantities of food distributed increased elsewhere in the WFP portfolio.

³⁶⁷ Jordan, South Sudan, Mauritania, Sudan.

³⁶⁸ See for example WFP (2021) country strategic plan evaluations in Mozambique, Afghanistan, the Gambia.

one-off distributions to beneficiaries in need at discrete points in time. Funding constraints were the main reason cited, however.

200. **Food security status.** Given increased needs, funding shortfalls, reduced global supply and commodity price increases,³⁶⁹ WFP support can reasonably be presumed to have contributed to maintained stability of food security under COVID-19. Despite considerable technical shortcomings and only limited data available,³⁷⁰ analysis of WFP outcome data found that, overall, the food security and nutrition status of beneficiaries at least did not decline by any significant degree between 2019 and 2020 (Table 12).

Table 12: Food security and nutrition status

Strategic result	Outcome indicators with sufficient evidence to report (ten countries or more in both 2019 and 2020)	Improved from 2019-2020	Remained the same 2019-2020	Declined 2019-2020
1	1.1 Maintained/enhanced individual and household access to adequate food	2	16	2
2	2.1 Improved consumption of high-quality, nutrient-dense foods among targeted individuals		7	1
3	3.1 Increased smallholder production and sales	1	1	
4	4.1 Improved household adaptation and resilience to climate and other shocks		2	
5	5.1 Enhanced capacities of public and private sector institutions and systems, including local responders, to identify, target and assist food-insecure and nutritionally vulnerable populations		1	
8	8.1 Enhanced common coordination platforms		1	
TOTAL		3	28	3

Source: Evaluation team, based on analysis of WFP annual performance report data

201. Closer analysis of 24 annual country reports and interviews with country-level staff indicate the following:

- Although few countries showed improvements in the food security and nutritional status of beneficiaries, the prevention of deterioration in beneficiary populations against considerable headwinds caused by COVID-19 was considered a significant gain.
- In some countries such as Afghanistan, Palestine, Lesotho and Zambia, the stability of food consumption/nutritional status in beneficiary populations took place against general declines in the wider population.
- Some food consumption scores were within target but declined overall, for example, in Pakistan and Palestine.
- WFP interventions helped stabilize the food security and nutrition status of refugees (Jordan and Burundi) who had fewer livelihood opportunities available to them under the pandemic.
- In some countries, beneficiary food consumption scores increased (Haiti and Ecuador), including in urban populations where WFP intervened (Lesotho).

2.5.2 Enabling the United Nations response

202. **In meeting its common services responsibilities, WFP successfully underpinned the work of the global humanitarian system.** More than just facilitating, the organization's supply chain and logistics

³⁶⁹ World Bank. 20 April 2021. Commodity Prices to Stabilize after Early 2021 Gains

³⁷⁰ Limitations included: the WFP outcome methodology, where even indicators where only one or two countries have reported, undergo the same methodology to rate performance, resulting for example in a "100 percent" or "strong performance" rating for an indicator where only one country has reported. The evaluation made adjustments to compensate for this limitation; only indicators where more than ten countries had reported were included (see Annex 2 methodology for a full explanation of which indicators were excluded).

work, which included moving equipment and PPE successfully, enabled the rest of the humanitarian system to remain operational. The provision of services to evacuate staff also enabled other agencies to “stay and deliver”.

203. Beyond straightforward volumes of cargo delivered, passengers transported, and medevacs conducted, WFP made a significant contribution to the wider results delivered by the humanitarian system for COVID-19 (Table 13).

Table 13: Enabling the international humanitarian response

GHRP strategic priority	Results area	Result achieved	WFP contribution
1	Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality	By December 2020, 55 GHRP countries had received nearly 114 million medical masks	Cargo services, with 135,000 m ³ of cargo transported from April 2020 – March 2021, and 54,500 m ³ from January-October 2021.
2	Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods	UNICEF and partners reached nearly 57 million people in 60 GHRP countries with essential health care services. UNHCR, in parallel, provided 605,000 people in 44 countries with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services	Cargo services; passenger services, transporting humanitarian workers (26,700 passengers transported between March 2020 – January 2021).
		Establishing a data facility covering 29 countries, to support remote data collection and analysis	Provision of technical support, data and analytics
3	Protect, assist and advocate for refugees, internally displaced people, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic	9.4 million refugees and IDPs and 1.24 million people most vulnerable to/affected by COVID-19 in 50 GHRP countries received livelihood support	Provision of food and livelihoods support through existing agreements with UNHCR; advocacy for humanitarian access

Source: Evaluation team, based on UNOCHA (2021) GHRP final report, February 2021; interviews.

204. This success has repositioned WFP, increasing its visibility within the United Nations and wider international systems and enhanced its reputational capital.

2.5.3 Institutional change and reform

205. **Most WFP systems and capacities either expanded or pivoted to adapt.** The unprecedented conditions of COVID-19 functioned as a severe stress test to the WFP organizational capacities and systems, particularly where reforms were still underway (paragraphs 33-40). Overall, of those analysed, most systems and capacities either expanded or pivoted to adapt to the new conditions of the pandemic. Some innovation also flourished.

Figure 20: Adapting to respond



Source: Evaluation team

206. Existing systems and capacities that were accustomed to flexing to meet demand, expanded as needed. These included systems to manage risk; the global surge system (already undergoing change) and systems to manage the physical and mental well-being of staff. United Nations, government and private sector partnerships all expanded, as did generating data and analytics and the provision of common services. WFP expanded targeting to meet food security and nutrition needs in countries; and scaled up its use of cash transfers/social protection programming/capacity strengthening/advisory support to governments. It also upscaled its provision of supply chain and logistics services at government request.

207. Some systems and capacities **pivoted or** adapted to meet needs. These included the Level 3 declaration and management arrangements for the response; estimations of needs; internal financial management systems; and workforce management, including adapting to remote working. Programmatically, country strategic plans were adapted, particularly for greater emergency response; activities adapted for biosecurity; and systems changed to address accountability to affected populations. Cooperating partnerships also adapted directly in response to the pandemic.

208. New frameworks or innovations were introduced to help manage the corporate response to COVID-19, such as new strategic frameworks and resource-raising/financing mechanisms and some communications modalities. However, corporate investment in knowledge management systems stayed the same – ultimately restricting the ability of WFP to ground its lauded flexibility in a solid foundation of learning.

209. Some adaptations happened despite limited corporate investment. Changes in approaches to gender, for example, occurred at country level without increased corporate investment. Social protection work expanded without increased headquarters resources to help develop frameworks, tools or advocacy positions. Changes occurred despite, not because of, increased corporate-level commitment. This arguably limits the potential of WFP for transformative change in these areas.

210. The WFP major organizational capacities of agility and resilience – borne from long experience in emergency response – are reflected in these results.

3. Conclusions, Lessons and Items for Consideration

3.1. CONCLUSIONS

Under the novel conditions of COVID-19, WFP faced potentially the greatest disruption it had ever experienced. The pandemic stress-tested its systems and capacities – as well as its people - to their limit. With the crisis continuing in 2021, what can be learned so far?

Although corporately unprepared for a global pandemic, and despite “bumps on the road”, WFP mostly pivoted to adapt, and expanded its capacities to meet country and global needs and demand. Internal systems largely supported the response, though areas of longstanding under-investment, such as knowledge management, constrained opportunities for change. Limited central investment in social protection and gender equality did not prevent adaptation on the ground, but restricted scope for more transformational change. Standard response systems struggled amid a crisis whose defining feature was its global diversity, with no common overview, and strains and tensions emerging among headquarters, regional and country levels.

Operationally, WFP stayed to deliver, even as many other agencies departed. Programmatic action on the ground continued despite the headwinds, with cash support, often as part of social protection responses, upscaling to address new and emerging needs. New populations were served with agility, including by expanding into urban areas. Technical advice and support were supplied, along with needed supply chain and logistics support, and new, often untypical, requests, were responded to with flexibility and agility.

The WFP contribution to the international humanitarian response through its common services offer has earned the organization trust and respect from partners around the world. Its achievements here – along with increased external advocacy - have changed the WFP global profile. More than a “safe pair of hands” or a “capable’ service provider”, WFP is seen as a critical and fundamental **systems enabler**, without which, the collective humanitarian response for the pandemic – and ultimately the hungry poor - would have been severely compromised.

However, these achievements had a high human cost. WFP owes an immense debt to its workforce, who, at all levels, shouldered the burdens of staying to deliver amid often intense conditions of strain. A service-based ethos; individual identity as “humanitarians”; a culture of flexibility; the familiarity of “running towards” an emergency even as others leave; and a resolute commitment to the people WFP serves, all played their part. But staff care – over and above “wellness” – is an organization-wide concern.

The pandemic response has brought forward a vast array of challenges and opportunities for the humanitarian system. Reaching greater clarity on the *raison d’être* of WFP in a world of systemic crises is therefore timely. This evaluation report offers some suggestions for WFP to help maximize its service offer as a “systems enabler”, and to stimulate reflection as it moves into its next strategic plan period.

211. The advent of a global pandemic caught the world and the humanitarian system unprepared. The systems, capacities and behaviours of governments, health organizations and those serving humanitarian needs were tested to their limits, amid conditions of uncertainty and complexity.

212. Within this, WFP – while corporately unprepared to respond to a global pandemic – faced the greatest disruption and most significant stress test to date. Overall, it adapted and measured up to the challenge.

213. **Scaling up and adaptation.** Despite challenges along the way, overall WFP successfully scaled up to identify, and respond to, urgent food security and nutrition needs. It expanded and accelerated programming for those in need, including new populations not traditionally served. It partnered with governments to provide technical advice and support and to help strengthen national capacities. It adapted

modalities where required and provided badly needed supply chain and logistics services where governments faced constraints.

214. Balancing the no-regrets approach of a risk-hungry operational organization with the need to manage accountability to external contributors was a far from easy balance but initial tensions were navigated, and a way through found. WFP also – though not always in harmony with the contexts in its country offices – recognized the medium-term implications of the pandemic relatively early, in line with international thinking.

215. The pandemic also saw WFP reaping the benefits of earlier intentional investments in its adaptive capacity to respond. These include investments in surge mechanisms; duty of care for employees; and advance financing mechanisms, which enabled swift deployment of resources to needs. These actions supported delivery on the ground with the result that, ultimately, food security and nutritional status among beneficiary populations was, for the most part, maintained. This is no small achievement amid the challenges.

216. **Changed stature and profile.** Perhaps most prominently, however, WFP leveraged its capabilities to serve the international humanitarian response with a confidence, efficiency and expertise that are widely admired. Its scale-up of cargo and personnel transport, and its swift establishment of medical facilities met practical challenges, but their delivery earned WFP major international respect. Medevac services were neither swiftly nor smoothly established, but once United Nations-wide agreements were in place, managed to meet demand. The WFP provision of public goods, including food security data and analysis, both enabled the international response and supported global decision making.

217. These services are, in many ways, the foundations of WFP. During COVID-19, their delivery has changed the organization's global profile and positioning. More than the traditional safe pair of hands or a capable service provider for the humanitarian system, it is now seen as a critical and fundamental **systems enabler**, without which, the international humanitarian response for the pandemic – and ultimately the hungry poor - would have been severely compromised.

218. Increased advocacy in international forums, supported by well-informed data and analytics, has also increased WFP visibility, and enhanced attention to the food security and nutrition dimensions of the pandemic. However, advocacy capacity is still developing at country level, and greater skills are needed here. Where capability exists, however, WFP country offices have found themselves leveraging the trust and mutual respect of many years of partnership and country commitment to advocate for, and with, the local humanitarian community, for example on access – in many cases, with success.

219. **Partnerships.** Relationships during the pandemic have not always run smoothly. In the initial stages, setting up new systems, processes and collaborations amid testing global conditions and without any precedent or common language, placed strains on both WFP and its United Nations partners particularly. Initial frictions were mostly worked through, however, and overall, pandemic-related collaboration provided foundations for later joint work, for example, with WHO. Government requests at times took WFP well beyond its comfort zone, but the organization responded with agility, and relationships with cooperating partners shifted for the better.

220. **Internal change.** In many ways, the pandemic showed WFP to its best advantage. The crisis and the needs it engendered played to its strengths, borne of many hard years of emergency response under complex and demanding conditions. Its agility under stress and the resilience of its systems and capacities highlighted its ability to adapt and respond at scale. Its response enhanced, rather than reduced, its reputational capital.

221. The pandemic response also showed some areas where WFP investment in its internal systems, planning tools and processes constrained its adaptive capacity. They include the budget revision process, which does not suit emergency adaptation, and internal financial management tools. There are clear tensions between commitments to formalize systems and processes and retaining scope for adaptation and response. If WFP were to prioritize adaptive capacity, it might place a quite different emphasis on how its systems and tools functioned.

222. The response also highlighted areas of under-investment. Like most organizations, WFP was unprepared for a global pandemic, both in strategic frameworks and corporate preparedness systems. Knowledge management systems did not facilitate the response but remained heavily dependent on

employees' individual experience, commitment and willingness to learn. Gender equality and social protection adapted on the ground but did so against the odds. WFP did not invest more heavily in addressing gender inequalities, thereby missing opportunities for more transformative change.

223. **No shared overview.** The different lenses with which country offices, regional bureaux and headquarters saw the world – amid a crisis whose defining feature was perhaps its diversity – came into sharp relief when standard response systems were imposed. Respective roles under emergency conditions were assumed rather than examined and no shared overview of conditions existed. Strains and tensions inevitably arose, with a sense of headquarters – itself in turmoil – not consistently cognisant of the challenges faced by the field. The balance between “empowered leadership” and “decentralized decision making” is a fine one, and under the intense and pressurized conditions of a global pandemic, WFP could not reasonably be expected to achieve perfection. Nonetheless, the balance of organizational coherence and localized decision making power under emergency conditions is one that merits reflection.

224. **A high human cost.** Most critically, perhaps, a vast debt is owed by WFP to its workforce. Staying to deliver when many others left relied on a deeply felt humanitarian ethos and identity; a resolute commitment to serve those in need; the familiar practice of running towards emergency conditions even as others leave; and an inbuilt culture of flexibility. The discourse of the “WFP family” is cleverly fostered by management and supported by an organization that genuinely tried to adapt to needs. But a high price has been paid by individuals; and risks to business continuity, of overstretched, overstressed and exhausted employees, are immense. Over and above staff wellness, staff *care* is an organization-wide concern.

225. The opening up of new opportunities reinforces the timeliness of defining greater clarity on the *raison d'être* of WFP in a world of increasingly systemic crises. As it moves forward into the strategic plan for 2022–2025, how and where can WFP maximize its service offer as a systems enabler for partners across the world? The lessons and issues for consideration below reflect some starting points for discussion, in the hope that they will stimulate reflection as WFP moves into its new strategic plan for 2022-2025.

3.2. LESSONS

226. The following lessons have been extracted from the evidence to inform WFP, at regional bureau/ country office and headquarters level respectively:

Table 14: Lessons learned

WFP regional bureaux and country offices	
i.	Keeping an emergency objective in view and available for activation at all times is a key part of preparedness at country level – and helps position country strategic plans as part of the strategic architecture.
ii.	Partnerships can be frustrating where others lack the emergency instinct and culture of WFP, but perseverance – where conditions permit – can pay dividends for the future. This includes working through issues, even where they are difficult.
iii.	Cooperating partners are a vital enabler of the ability of WFP to deliver; they require maximum support and flexibility to help WFP meet its aims. Recognizing their centrality in the humanitarian response – and localizing where possible – will support them in this role.
iv.	Ensuring a consistent country-level management commitment to gender equality in programming will help align WFP with the commitments of the Sustainable Development Goals. This should not be seen as optional but rather a central part of the WFP response at all levels.
v.	Urban targeting has considerable potential for WFP expansion, particularly as part of the social protection remit, but requires skills and training to enhance capacities, as well as active identification of capable partners.
vi.	Social protection responses may require engagement with different national interlocutors, which have little familiarity with WFP or the services it offers. A clear narrative will help communicate comparative advantages and capacities to new partners.
vii.	Developing management skills for remote working is an important part of the future workplace; it requires specific training and ongoing manager performance review.

- viii. Staff wellness is a critical element of duty of care but is much broader than formal counselling alone – it requires management training; a workplace culture of two-way commitment and trust; and an ethos of commitment to employees’ well-being.

WFP leadership and senior management at headquarters level

- i. The optics of consolidated fundraising requests can be as important as their substance; a clear rationale, overview, and narrative as well as clear communication all help make the case to external partners – as well as a realistic approach.
- ii. The value of a common understanding of an emergency context cannot be understated; creating this during an emergency response is critical. Data has a valuable role to play here as the starting point for discussion.
- iii. The balance of risk management and “no regrets” is never straightforward, but ease of use for staff of risk management instruments helps build procedural respect, and to build a risk-conscious culture.
- iv. Streamlining communication to country offices is a valuable part of emergency response, but channels of communication require careful attention if no one part of the system (for example, the regional bureaux) is to become overloaded.
- v. Guidance is essential to ensure consistency across the response; the absorptive capacity of hard-pressed staff may be limited, however, so a streamlined approach is required.
- vi. Central to sustaining any emergency response is staff willingness and commitment. Prioritizing staff care in its broadest sense is an investment in the workforce of the future. Gender dynamics in the workplace always require consistent attention.
- vii. Advocacy is a potentially powerful instrument to benefit global food security and nutrition concerns. It requires explicit skills development, as well as careful, strategic and consistent messaging to ensure organizational coherence.

3.3. ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

227. As the pandemic continues into 2022 the evidence gathered in this report indicates a clear strategic positioning for WFP as a **systems enabler** for the humanitarian architecture of the future, at all levels. This may include, for example: (i) supplying food security and nutrition data and analytics; (ii) supporting global responses to crises; (iii) partnering with governments on their now-lengthening journey towards zero hunger through programming, capacity strengthening and provision of technical expertise; and/or (iv) delivering advocacy in political and strategic forums.

228. The following issues are not recommendations but items for WFP to consider as it moves forward into its next strategic plan period – recognizing that the organization is already engaging with recommendations from the Strategic Evaluation of the WFP Capacity to Respond to Emergencies. The items are aimed at stimulating institutional reflection and helping WFP on its ongoing journey of change.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>1. Reposition WFP as a key actor in COVID-19 recovery. The experience of the pandemic has highlighted the futility of the humanitarian-development divide – particularly in contexts that involve multiple shocks and stressors – and reinforced the importance of the concept of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. WFP has expressed its intention, for example in its strategic plan for 2022–2025, to work on structural vulnerabilities³⁷¹ through, for example, resilience activities. The increase in demand for WFP social protection expertise – beyond support for cash transfers as an emergency response – presents a major opportunity to reposition WFP as an integral part of the COVID-19 recovery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The reputational capital garnered by WFP in its COVID-19 response positions it well to support global COVID-19 recovery. Externally, communicating WFP’s role in supporting medium-term responses to the socioeconomic legacy of the pandemic – whether in development or humanitarian contexts – will be key. Examples include helping to build and implement national social protection frameworks, support social cohesion and peacebuilding and develop medium-term responses to climate change. Gender equality is a key dimension of, and opportunity within, recovery. v. As part of this, it will be useful to clarify internally how a WFP response to structural vulnerabilities can best intersect with WFP’s emergency response role. For example, consideration should be given to how social protection can be used to address medium-term food insecurity and nutrition challenges; whether and where cash transfers are understood and applied as an emergency or medium-term social safety net; and how interventions that contribute to peace can be built into emergency responses.
<p>2. Systems enabler. Building on the reputational capital garnered during its COVID-19 response, WFP may wish to consider extending its role from that of a supporting entity within the humanitarian architecture to that of a systems enabler at both the national and international levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. As a demonstrated systems enabler and humanitarian leader, WFP can expand its services to other actors in the humanitarian system – including governments and other United Nations entities – to help build their emergency expertise and capacity at the national and local levels. This is consistent with both the United Nations development system reform and the humanitarian localization agenda. v. Defining required capacities in these areas and providing institutional support as required will help confirm WFP’s commitment to becoming a partner of choice in relevant areas. i. External messaging and communication will need to reflect this positioning and a broader understanding of WFP as a systems enabler in a strategic, as well as operational, sense.

³⁷¹ Structural vulnerabilities are weaknesses in the foundations for lifting people out of poverty and enabling them to make choices and take their lives into their own hands. They include, for example, inadequate education, child nutrition, gender equality, social protection coverage and rural infrastructure. “WFP strategic plan (2022–2025)” (WFP/EB.2/2021/4-A/1/Rev.2).

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>3. Increase advocacy. WFP has increased its advocacy work throughout the pandemic and become increasingly visible in high-level forums. This enhanced visibility can be leveraged for good, building on strong partnerships at the country level in particular.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Using the increased visibility earned through its COVID-19 response, expand WFP's advocacy for the food security and nutrition aspects of socioeconomic recovery, emphasizing in particular political audiences at the national, regional and international levels. v. Increase advocacy skills training for key staff, especially senior management at the country and regional levels. ri. Leveraging the enhanced partnerships built during the pandemic, engage with cooperating partners on advocacy agendas, identifying common concerns and seeking common messages.
<p>4. Create a shared overview and anticipate management arrangements. The lack of a shared overview of the pandemic, and what was needed for an effective response to it, highlighted the challenges of a globally diverse emergency. It also impeded decision making, with mechanisms set up for a more standard regional or country-level response. Anticipating potential local diversity within large-scale or global emergencies and deciding "how to decide" in such situations will help facilitate the design and implementation of effective responses into any future relevant responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. Developing a clear shared understanding of what may be very different local situations within large-scale or global emergencies as a first step should be prioritized in emergency response going forward – including for example in corporate response director terms of reference. v. Adopting a model of empowered leadership balanced with appropriate delegation of authority will be key to balancing corporate decision making with the flexibility needed to adapt to local conditions.
<p>5. Ensure resilient but adaptive systems. WFP found during the pandemic that many of its systems were able to adapt while others, such as budget revisions for country strategic plans and some internal financial management systems, struggled. Standard systems need to be adaptable when a large-scale emergency strikes, and flexibility must be built in and stress tested.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. The key systems that require adaptation, particularly during an emergency with diverse features across locations, are financial systems, adaptations to strategic plans (global and national); human resources; and management arrangements. v. Contingency planning and stress testing will help support preparedness in these areas. ri. Enhancing knowledge management systems to ensure that flexibility and adaptation are firmly and consistently grounded in previous experience will help to ensure an evidence-based response.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>6. Adopt an ethos of staff care. Beyond a people policy or staff wellness, how can WFP best support its staff, confirm their identity as part of the WFP family and make them feel a sense of organizational commitment to their well-being? Staff care takes systems – contractual arrangements, progression guarantees and others, many of which are out of WFP’s hands – but also workplace culture and management skills, whose limitations have been highlighted during the pandemic.</p> <p>If WFP’s organizational bloodstream is its systems, processes and technical capacities, then its heart is its people. Their experience of, and contribution to, the many intangible elements that constitute a humanitarian response should be maximized at all levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Building on commitments in the strategic plan for 2022–2025 to improve workplace culture by fostering management skills, both for duty of care (wellness) and managing performance remotely, will help provide the supportive management that WFP employees need. It will also enhance the workplace culture and foster the two-way loyalty between WFP and its employees on which emergency responses depend. v. Reflect on (and improve if possible) the availability of fixed-term, continuing and permanent contracts, both international and national. ri. Capturing the human experience of emergency response – beyond formal counselling – by allowing people to debrief and reflect on their own immediate personal experience is a key part of both valuing individual employees and harnessing their experience for improved organizational learning.

Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
ACR	Annual Country Report
ASP	Adaptative Social Protection
ATM	Automated Teller Machine
BR	Budget Revision
CAR	Central African Republic
CBT	Cash-Based Transfer
CCS	Country Capacity Strengthening
CERF	United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CRD	Corporate Response Director
CSP	Country Strategic Plan
CSPE	Country Strategic Plan Evaluation
DED	Deputy Executive Director
DSC	Direct Support Cost
ED	Executive Director
EDA	Executive Director Assurance Exercise
EME	Emergency Operations Division
EPRP	Emergency Preparedness and Response Package
ERM	Enterprise Risk Management
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FFA	Food Assistance for Assets
FLOD	First Line of Defence
FSP	Financial Service Providers
FSQ	Food Safety and Quality
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GCMF	Global Commodities Management Facility
GRP	Global Response Plan (WFP)
GHRP	Global Humanitarian Response Plan (United Nations)
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resources
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFI	International Financial Institution
ILO	International Labour Organization

IP	Implementation Plan
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IPL	Internal Project Lending
L3	Level 3 (emergency)
MAP	Management Assurance Project
Medevac	Medical Evacuation
MOPAN	Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network
mt	Metric Ton
MTPF	Medium-Term Programme Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operations and Development's Develop Assistance Committee
OEV	Office of Evaluation
OIGA	Office of Internal Audit
OPSCEN	Operations Centre
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
OTF	Operational Task Force
PHEIC	Public Health Emergency of International Concern
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
R&R	Rest and Recuperation
RBB	Regional Bureau Bangkok
RBC	Regional Bureau Cairo
RBN	Regional Bureau Nairobi
RBP	Regional Bureau Panama
RBJ	Regional Bureau Johannesburg
RBD	Regional Bureau Dakar
SCICC	Supply Chain Inter-Agency Coordination Cell
SER	Summary Evaluation Report
SERPS	Socioeconomic Response Plan
SERRPF	Socioeconomic Response and Recovery Programme Framework
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SPRP	Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan
SRAC	Strategic Resource Allocation Committee
STF	Strategic Task Force
TDY	Temporary Duty Assignment
UN	United Nations
UNDOS	United Nations Department of Operational Support
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNHRD	United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USD	United States Dollar
VAM	Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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