



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Evaluation of WFP's use of technologies in constrained environments

CONTEXT

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the scale and complexity of humanitarian crisis while expectations regarding efficiency, accountability and protection of affected populations have also grown. Digital technologies have been regarded as transformational across the humanitarian sector and have been deployed to support planning, design, targeting, implementation, monitoring and security of operations. However, while the digital transformation has the potential to improve the efficiency, quality and continuity of humanitarian assistance, it can also present risks and uncertainties, including for affected populations.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

WFP uses digital technologies throughout all focus areas and activities, at corporate, programmatic and local level. WFP has developed a broad portfolio of policies and processes to guide its development and use of digital technologies, and built crucial partnerships in the humanitarian technology space. This evaluation was concerned with WFP's use of digital technologies and data over the period 2014 to mid-2021, in environments that are constrained in terms of humanitarian access or where there are important physical, social or political obstacles to the deployment of digital technologies. The evaluation was framed around the four interrelated components of a system including technology, people, policies and processes, and partnerships.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess whether WFP uses, and is equipped to use, the most appropriate digital technologies to achieve its objectives under constrained conditions and whether it has put in place appropriate measures to mitigate and manage risks to populations and operations resulting from the use of digital technologies in constrained environments. The main users of the

evaluation include WFP management and staff at country, regional and HQ level. Particular efforts were made to hear the voices of WFP, in particular those of women and marginalised groups. Furthermore, the evaluation engaged with WFP's full range of partners: governments, civil society, private sector, UN agencies and donors.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Technology

The use of digital technologies has increased WFP's effectiveness, efficiency and adaptability in constrained environments. For example, it has improved registration and management of beneficiaries, optimized supply chain management, automated routine administrative tasks and allowed WFP to remain fully operational during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some digital technologies are less appropriate in highly constrained environments due to connectivity problems, low level of cellular network coverage and other barriers.

People

Digital technologies have had a general positive effect for the people served by WFP. For example, technologies that enable the shift to cash-based transfers contribute to greater access, flexibility and dignity for people served.

However, there is a risk that the burden of technology failure is carried by the people served by WFP, for instance when technical problems lead to delays in assistance. Digital technologies are also not entirely neutral nor inclusive. Certain groups may be excluded because they are less digitally connected or digitally literate. While measures are often put in place to accommodate the needs of diverse groups, these are not always effective.

WFP has made progress to enhance data protection and cyber-security across the organization, with enhanced control mechanisms and procedures. However, compliance is lagging, in particular at country level, resulting in ongoing risks to data protection, security, and privacy for people served. There is a gap in digital capacities in WFP and for WFP's cooperating partners, particularly in constrained environments.

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Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at <http://www.wfp.org/independent-evaluation>

For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation wfp.evaluation@wfp.org

Policies and processes

Over the evaluation period, WFP has developed a solid base of policies and processes regarding the development of digital technologies at different levels. However, country offices still perceive technology development to be slow, costly and cumbersome. As regards the management of IT solutions, central guidance is more limited and fragmented, and guidelines are little known and often considered optional.

WFP has significantly invested and expanded its attention on risks to operations in relation to the use of ICTs, but responsibilities for vulnerability and risk management are spread across several WFP divisions and units. Monitoring and evaluation on the use of technology are very limited and resources to support and oversee the deployment of digital technologies are insufficient, in particular in constrained environments where this is more costly.

Partnerships

In many humanitarian crises WFP is leading the provision of technology services, making its systems and solutions available to other organizations. Digital data sharing is increasingly important to enable close cooperation with partners but there are obstacles to enable safe and secure transfer of data. There are also no clear controls in place to ensure that personal data is being handled by partners as per WFP requirements, putting WFP in a vulnerable position concerning reputational risk and potentially bringing unintended consequences to the people it serves.

At the global level, WFP has engaged in partnerships with the private sector to develop innovative solutions to cover programmatic needs. In some cases, the vetting process was perceived as not transparent and consultative enough.

Recently, WFP has also moved into the provision of digital assistance to governments. In this area, coordination amongst UN agencies needs to be improved to reduce duplication of the assistance each agency is providing.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

WFP has acquired unique experience but lacks strategic clarity in terms of a coherent direction for digital transformation and in terms of clear positioning on contentious issues, hindering progress internally and undermining the potential for WFP to establish itself as a trusted and credible leader on humanitarian technologies.

There remain some fundamental challenges to the digital transformation of WFP, including fragmented governance and responsibilities, unresolved tensions between centralized technology services and the needs of country

operations, and the requirement for greater investment in human resources.

WFP's rapidly expanding use of digital technology and processing of data are at risk of failing the people it serves by not including them meaningfully in technology choices and by shifting risks to them, especially in constrained environments.

WFP has demonstrated a robust strategic commitment to its digital transformation, focusing on operational efficiency. This needs to be matched by an equal focus on protection and clear internal and external positioning on the responsible use of digital technology and data.

Recommendations

The evaluation makes seven recommendations. While most are relevant for WFP as a whole, the issues that the recommendations address are most acutely felt in constrained environments.

Recommendation 1. Formulate an overall strategic vision for the use of digital technology and data in which people and protection are central concerns. Translate this vision into clear standards, directives and guidance, and disseminate them internally and to partners.

Recommendation 2. Clarify and strengthen governance arrangements, division of roles and responsibilities, and allocation of resources driving WFP's digital transformation across all levels of the organization, enhancing the balance between product-driven efforts and business needs.

Recommendation 3. Develop strategies and mechanisms for ensuring effective protection of affected populations and personnel and the management of risks associated with the use of technologies, considering constrained environments.

Recommendation 4. Integrate inclusion, gender equality and women's empowerment in technology development and use, and meaningfully engage with diverse community members.

Recommendation 5. Develop a knowledge management approach appropriate for constrained environments to capture, store and disseminate relevant information on WFP's use of technology.

Recommendation 6. Invest in developing and implementing a coherent capacity development and change management strategy with regard to basic digital skills and data literacy for all WFP staff.

Recommendation 7. Invest in developing and supporting successful technological partnerships for operations in constrained environments, including efforts to improve access to the Internet.