



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Evaluation of WFP's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

CONTEXT

The onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (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.

Key features of the pandemic included unprecedented humanitarian needs, with 270 million people directly at risk of acute hunger;¹ 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.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

This corporate emergency evaluation assessed WFP's response to the COVID-19 pandemic from February 2020 – June 2021. 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:

- prioritizing organizational learning needs
- ensuring consultation and evidence sharing with stakeholders throughout
- integrating with the surrounding evidence building environment.

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?

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The objective of the evaluation was to assess WFP's adaptive capacity in its response to the pandemic. An emphasis was placed on how the response developed rather than a traditional theory-based evaluation. Stakeholder engagement and feedback was central to this approach.

Internal users of the evaluation evidence were widespread and had opportunities to engage with evidence captured in ten ‘evidence summaries’ on key topic of concern in real time. Consultative groups, discussions with senior leadership and both regional and HQ-focused briefings were organized throughout the evaluation to contribute to on-going learning as WFP continued to respond to the pandemic. The evaluation is of interest to external actors, such as UN Evaluation Group members, donors and international cooperating partners.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Adaptation of the enabling environment and organizational assets of WFP

Overall, the evaluation found that WFP's response to the pandemic during the timeframe was agile and adaptive but

¹ United Nations. 2020. *Global humanitarian response plan COVID-19*; UN Coordinated Appeal, April – December 2020, 26 June 2020.

came with a high human cost. Although unprepared for a global pandemic, WFP adapted swiftly to face new demands. Corporate strategic frameworks were quickly developed, although differing conditions from region to region placed a strain on decision making. Fundraising was novel and responsive to needs. A managed balance was achieved between the “no-regrets” ethos of humanitarian delivery and external accountability. Human resource and staff well-being systems were adapted but employees at all levels endured very considerable strain. Knowledge management was unsystematic, and managing information flows between headquarters and country offices placed a considerable burden on the regional bureaux.

Country strategic plans were adapted but the process for revising them and country portfolio budgets was cumbersome. Key revisions included increased emergency focus; adaptation of targeting, including in urban areas; greater use of cash transfers; scale-up of social protection activities; expansion of capacity strengthening and advisory support; and provision of supply chain and logistics services. WFP swiftly implemented biosecurity measures for activities. Timeliness was mixed, although the in-kind supply chain was largely sustained. WFP did not scale up or re-prioritize its corporate commitment to gender equality. However, efforts were made to maintain communication with affected populations.

Fulfilment of partner role in the collective humanitarian response

Despite a steep learning curve, the WFP common services response was agile, capable and time-efficient. Some early-stage tensions arose in partnerships with other United Nations entities but were overcome by willingness and commitment on all sides. WFP aligned itself with government responses, responding flexibly to new requests, while cooperating partners reported greater openness and flexibility. Advocacy expanded, both at the global and country levels, for example on the movement of humanitarian workers.

Achievements and learning

The response served a record number of 115.6 million beneficiaries in 2020, or 93 percent of those targeted, and had served 90 million by October 2021. WFP assistance prevented any significant deterioration in beneficiaries' food security and nutrition status. Common services provision successfully underpinned the international humanitarian response. Internally, existing systems and capacities mostly expanded or pivoted to meet needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

Conclusions

Despite numerous challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, WFP adapted to meet the needs created by the pandemic and made valued contributions to the global response. Programming continued and support to national social protection systems was expanded to meet new and emerging needs. Technical advice and support were supplied, along with supply chain and logistics support.

WFP stayed to deliver. Its global profile changed as WFP's role was seen as a critical and fundamental 'systems enabler' in the global response. However, this commitment shown came at a high human cost and WFP owes an immense debt to its workforce at all levels.

Issues for consideration

The evaluation suggests six issues for consideration by WFP Management:

1. Reposition WFP as a key actor in COVID-19 recovery

The pandemic has reinforced the importance of the 'humanitarian-development-peace' nexus. WFP could position itself to take advantage of the increased demand for social protection expertise and reposition WFP as an integral part of the COVID-19 recovery.

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.

3. Increase advocacy

WFP has increased its advocacy work throughout the pandemic and become increasingly visible in high-level forums. This enhanced visibility could be leveraged for good, building on strong partnerships at the country level, in particular.

4. Create a shared overview and anticipate management arrangements

The lack of a shared overview of the pandemic impeded decision making with existing mechanisms set up for a more standard regional or country-level response. In future, WFP might anticipate diversity within large-scale or global emergencies and decide “how to decide” in such situations to aid the response.

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 CSPs and some internal financial management systems, struggled. WFP should consider which systems need to be adaptable when large-scale emergency strikes and how to build in and stress-test flexibility.

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.