



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Evaluation of the Corporate Emergency Response in Myanmar (2018–2022)

CONTEXT

Myanmar has an ethnically diverse, largely rural (70 percent) population of 53.7 million. Minority population groups face increasing challenges related to armed conflict, human rights violations and land rights. Since 2017, the country has faced four major shocks that have significantly affected WFP operations: the Rohingya conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, the military takeover of February 2021, and the ongoing economic crisis. By early 2022, the estimated poverty rate was 46 percent and, in 2023, 12.2 million people are facing moderate or severe food insecurity. While continuing for decades, internal population displacements have increased significantly since 2021.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

The country strategic plan (CSP) was designed around four strategic outcomes focused on crisis response, resilience building through asset creation and school feeding, nutrition support and the provision of humanitarian services. The plan foresaw an evolution in the focus of WFP's work from emergency response to the provision of longer-term development support, with a gradual handover of WFP interventions to state institutions. Since the military takeover, government capacity strengthening activities have been halted, in accordance with United Nations guidance.

The original needs-based plan estimated the total cost of the CSP at USD 310.8 million. By the end of 2022, this grew, to USD 860.6 million, targeting 5.76 million people as direct beneficiaries. At that time, 53 percent of the plan was resourced of which 74 percent had been spent.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation assessed WFP's work in the country from September 2017 to December 2022 to meet accountability requirements and identify learning. It aimed to inform the design of a new interim country strategic plan (ICSP) for Myanmar and WFP's emergency response practice globally.

While the focus of the evaluation was on the corporate emergency response to a series of crises affecting Myanmar, it also covered WFP's work under the entire country strategic plan (CSP) for 2018–2023, with a special emphasis on the period from 2020 onwards.

The main intended users of the evaluation include the WFP Myanmar country office, the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, technical divisions at headquarters, programme recipients, partners and donors.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Strategic positioning in relation to evolving needs

WFP was able to respond to consecutive crises, successfully scaling up its coverage and extending its services to other humanitarian actors. Programming has been continually adapted to changing conditions, relying on decentralized decision making, high-quality information and good preparedness. While WFP's geographic targeting and delivery modalities were adjusted to meet the expanding crisis and diverse needs, access constraints in conflict-affected areas have led to knowledge gaps and permitted only approximate estimates of needs. CSP design overlooked political stability and adequate institutional capacities as critical success factors to enable the strategic shift from saving lives to changing lives.

Effectiveness of the response

Despite operational difficulties, WFP successfully scaled up its emergency food assistance, including by adding 1.7 million new beneficiaries in peri-urban Yangon. While food consumption targets have largely been met, many beneficiaries continued to resort to negative coping strategies. Progress in assisting the government to develop a social protection programme was interrupted by the military takeover in February 2021.

School feeding, asset creation and nutrition activities have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the aftermath of the military takeover and funding shortfalls. Asset creation activities likely contributed to improved food security. Treatment of Moderate Acute Malnutrition achieved WFP's outcome targets, but numbers of beneficiaries reached were below target. Cash transfers for HIV and TB patients largely met targets. WFP humanitarian supply chain services have been highly appreciated by partners.

Programming was gender-sensitive and inclusive, with the "intersectionality" of different vulnerabilities taken into account in vulnerability assessments and targeting.

Connectedness of assistance

Cooperating partners played a central role in delivering assistance and benefited from extensive capacity strengthening efforts. Consultation of cooperating partners on strategic planning and coordination at the national level was more limited.

Resilience building was operationalized mainly through asset creation and nutrition interventions, but lacked a more strategic approach at the community, institutional and food systems levels. Activities were context- and conflict-sensitive but contributions to peace were not measured.

Partnerships and coordination

WFP partnerships, focused on the delivery of assistance, have been extensive and diverse. WFP was fully integrated into humanitarian assistance frameworks and coordination mechanisms. Relationships with the authorities improved during the COVID-19 response but after the military takeover engagement was limited to humanitarian issues in line with UN principles of engagement with the *de facto* authorities.

Humanitarian Principles, Protection and Accountability

WFP gave priority to the humanitarian principle of humanity, aiming to "do no harm" while remaining as impartial, independent and neutral as possible under the challenges of the context. Only limited formal guidance and HQ support on dilemmas in relation to humanitarian principles and access was available. WFP conducted detailed analysis of protection risks and took appropriate measures to mitigate these, although its rapid programmatic expansion has sometimes outstripped its capacity to manage all protection risks. The community engagement mechanism has been continually expanded, reflecting WFP's commitment to ensuring relevance and quality of its programmes. Use of the mechanism was challenged by technology limitations and low beneficiary awareness especially in more recent intervention areas.

Efficiency and Risk Management

WFP human resources were adequate to steer and oversee its expanding operations, although specialized staff recruitment was challenging, and the deployment of international staff was affected by entry and travel restrictions. Staff well-being was a management priority in this high-pressure environment. WFP secured satisfactory financial resources for its emergency response, but school feeding and asset creation activities were underfunded. Despite the highly challenging setting and serious access constraints in some areas, activities were

generally implemented in a timely and cost-efficient manner. Support costs were reduced over time by low supply chain losses, prudent financial management and improved data analysis and technology. Risk management was prioritized and benefited from valued regional bureau support. There was a lack of clarity regarding WFP's responsibilities where risks are transferred to cooperating partners.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

The evaluation concluded that WFP achieved a major scale-up in response to consecutive crises in Myanmar, using its growing role as a humanitarian agency prudently and effectively, in coordination with United Nations partners. It carefully managed risks and balanced tensions between humanitarian principles but risks to cooperating partners require more attention. While assistance was effectively targeted in areas with access, humanitarian needs in conflict-affected areas are likely to be underestimated, which could lead to significant coverage gaps. Several shocks in Myanmar have diverted WFP from its original CSP goal of providing support for medium-term, government-led development. In the post-military takeover context, WFP lacked a strategic approach for resilience building at community and systems levels.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Adaptation and scale-up: Maintain and enhance the capacity to work at scale. Factors enabling operational flexibility should be actively maintained, along with staff well-being.

Recommendation 2. An inclusive, principled and risk-sensitive approach: Sustain consistency in internal decision-making processes in the face of difficult ethical and practical choices related to the humanitarian principles and the balancing of risk management priorities. Support for the individuals making decisions must be constant and tailored to operational situations. The key role of cooperating with service partners calls for fuller consideration of their capacities and status in operations. Extend current efforts in communication regarding WFP's humanitarian positioning to a wide range of stakeholders.

Recommendation 3. Information and feedback systems: Adjustments to qualitative and community-based data collected will allow WFP to transmit -- internally and to beneficiaries -- a fuller picture of activities that impinge on food security and nutrition. Such information should not increase the quantity of text and figures presented in reports and other communication materials but should rely on integrated digital tools to a greater extent than is currently the case.

Recommendation 4. Integration of resilience in the emergency response: The ICSP period of two years should be used to test and gradually integrate a wider resilience perspective throughout the programme so as to address structural vulnerabilities and to ensure that communities can rely on local capacities after shocks. Focusing on communities and systems can help to create stronger links between the strategic outcomes in the long term and can strengthen coordination across teams in the matrix-like structure of the country office.