



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Evaluation of Malawi WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023

CONTEXT

Malawi is a landlocked country in south-eastern Africa with an estimated population of 19.1 million in 2020, 43 percent of whom are below the age of 15. As of September 2022, Malawi hosted 56,486 registered refugees and asylum seekers.

Most Malawians (84.4 percent) live in rural areas and more than half the population (51.5 percent) live below the national poverty line. In 2020, 84.7 percent of households were engaged in agriculture, while the sector contributed only 22.8 percent of gross domestic product.

A large share of the population experience serious food insecurity, with significant disparities between rural and urban areas (67.2 versus 40.7 percent) and women and men (72.2 versus 58.7 percent).

Malawi is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The country has faced several extreme weather events in recent years, including Cyclone Idai in 2019 and Tropical Storm Ana in 2022.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

The Malawi country strategic plan (CSP) for 2019–2023 reflected a shift from direct implementation to capacity strengthening. Initially, the plan defined five strategic outcomes with six contributing activities, and aimed to mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment, accountability to affected populations and protection.

The original needs-based plan for the CSP set out a budget of USD 620 million to reach 4.85 million beneficiaries over five years. The budget increased to USD 634.5 million over the period May 2019–June 2022 in response to Cyclone Idai and COVID-19. As of October 2022, 41.2 percent of the needs-based plan was funded.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the Malawi CSP sought to generate evidence and learning to inform the development of the next CSP. The evaluation covered CSP implementation between January 2019 and June 2022. It also considered data from 2018 to examine the development of the CSP and its shifts from previous country planning approaches. The evaluation design included gender equality and human rights dimensions.

Intended users include the WFP Malawi country office, the Regional Bureau for Southern Africa, technical divisions at headquarters, WFP's Office of Evaluation, targeted programme recipients, the Government of Malawi, WFP partners and donors.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Relevance

The CSP and its interventions were informed by the zero hunger and malnutrition strategic review (2018–2019) and extensive vulnerability and food security analyses; however, the CSP lacked the analyses needed to inform a gender-transformative approach or a more systematic approach to capacity strengthening.

The CSP was well aligned with the priorities outlined in national development strategies, national emergency and humanitarian response plans and district-level development plans. The CSP was designed to contribute to the United Nations sustainable development cooperation framework, and WFP's partnerships with other United Nations entities and its role in key national clusters and working groups supported coherence across stakeholders.

An explicit theory of change constructed during the first year of CSP implementation clarified the interconnectedness of the strategic outcomes and identified clear impact pathways,

The CSP remained relevant over time and adapted to crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Tropical Storm Ana and Cyclones Idai and Gombe. An activity aimed at strengthening health supply chain systems to enhance pandemic preparedness was added in June 2022, reflecting experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effectiveness

WFP provided timely and effective emergency responses to lean seasons, flooding and COVID-19. WFP's assistance helped improve food consumption and reduced reliance on negative coping strategies. However, beneficiaries could still not afford minimum expenditure baskets.

WFP's refugee assistance was consistently underfunded, forcing WFP to reduce transfers. This led to a deterioration in food and nutrition security outcomes, disproportionately affecting households headed by women.

Take-home rations provided during COVID-19 owing to school closures complemented Malawi's social protection system and informed the Government's approach to future implementation of social protection. Assistance helped improve enrolment and attendance as well as decreasing dropouts. Home-grown school feeding contributed to increased resilience by connecting farmer cooperatives to school food supply system.

Shifting from malnutrition treatment to prevention, including behaviour change communication, contributed to improved health and nutrition outcomes. However, the proportion of children aged 6-23 months who consume a minimum acceptable diet remains very low.

Despite being under-resourced, integrated resilience programming improved food consumption, expanded the livelihood asset base and increased communities' capacities to manage climate-related shocks. Asset creation activities helped mitigate environmental degradation while fostering household access to village savings and loan groups and contributed to an increased ability to pay for food and non-food expenditures. Still, households' economic capacity to meet essential needs remained low. There is little evidence that WFP connected smallholder farmers to markets other than schools, or that crop insurance led to enhanced coping mechanisms.

Under Strategic Objectives 5 and 6, WFP acted as an essential response enabler during crises and helped strengthen country capacities for emergency response, vulnerability assessments, shock-responsive social protection, the national beneficiary register, and logistics. Delays occurred in providing food systems support.

Cross-cutting themes

WFP built on its prior experience and the Malawi country office action plan for gender (2017-2020) to ensure that CSP activities were gender-sensitive, particularly in resilience and nutrition. However, most programming focused on women's food security and nutrition needs rather than adopting a more transformative approach and addressing underlying causes of gender inequality. Gender mainstreaming was constrained by the absence of a dedicated budget, insufficient strategic partnerships and the lack of context-specific analyses to inform interventions.

Beneficiaries had safe access to assistance, and systems for protection against sexual exploitation and abuse were integrated into cooperating partners' agreements. The complaints, feedback and recourse mechanism was expanded, and yet awareness in the Dzaleka refugee camp remained low. Consistent use of evidence on needs and vulnerabilities for targeting enabled WFP to adhere to humanitarian principles.

Integrated resilience programming improved community capacity to manage natural resources and environmental risks, but climate change adaptation was not mainstreamed across activities.

Integrating emergency response, recovery and resilience fostered strategic linkages between humanitarian and development actors. This, and work with sub-national structures, enhanced potential for sustainability. However, challenges to sustainability include government's resource constraints and declining international assistance.

Efficiency

WFP's timely emergency response was praised by partners but delays in some activities, partly outside WFP control, had negative consequences for vulnerable groups.

Geographic targeting was appropriately focused on areas in the Central and Southern regions of Malawi with high food insecurity levels and risk of shocks. However, funding gaps reduced the depth and breadth of coverage, potentially excluding vulnerable populations.

WFP improved cost-efficiency by improving procurement processes, but also through a programmatic shift towards cash transfers. It also explored options to improve cost effectiveness, such as using mobile money and take-home rations for school feeding.

Factors affecting performance

Heavy dependence on short-term, earmarked funding impeded flexibility whereas multi-year funding improved predictability and planning whenever provided. Positive donor response enabled effective lean-season and emergency responses, but the negative effects of funding shortfalls for the refugee response were further compounded by increasing numbers of refugees in the Dzaleka refugee camp.

Partnerships were enhanced over time, and WFP played a strong role in coordination and support for the United Nations country team and initiated strategic partnerships with government agencies based on formal medium-term frameworks or workplans. WFP's partnerships with private sector entities were still in the early stages.

Three organizational realignment exercises ensured continuous field presence and supported cost-efficiencies. Building the staff capacity required for the strategic shift has taken time.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WFP contributed to positive results under each strategic outcome, although progress was uneven across and within strategic outcomes. Despite WFP's efforts on cost saving, resource mobilization and improved targeting, decreasing levels of donor contributions were detrimental to addressing growing needs. Work on protection, environmental and climate adaptation, and accountability to affected populations helped achieve results and gender transformative approaches were not consistently integrated.

The integrated approach to programming helped reduce vulnerability since households could benefit from the combined effects of mutually reinforcing interventions. WFP's resilience building approach helped position WFP along the humanitarian-development continuum, but it is still viewed primarily as an emergency responder. The intended shift to an enabling role was impeded by a deteriorating food security situation and challenges to the sustainability of country capacity strengthening outcomes.

WFP played a leading role in evidence generation on food security and nutrition, and fostered an internal culture of evidence-informed decision making.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Build on the positive evolution towards an integrated programme.

Recommendation 2: Expand on the strategy for phased withdrawal in which WFP plays a stronger role as an "enabler".

Recommendation 3: Refine strategic positions and programme directions for the next CSP.

Recommendation 4: Scale up partnerships and collaboration for impact and sustainability.

Recommendation 5: Enhance the approach to addressing root causes of gender inequalities and advancing the economic empowerment of women.