



World Food Programme

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# WFP's support to strengthening the national social protection system in Colombia

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# Contents

<b>Acronyms</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Context</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>3. WFP’s objectives and role</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>4. Activities and Results</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>5. Lessons Learned</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>Annex: key social protection measures that the national and local governments implemented in response to the impacts of the pandemic in Colombia</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>Annex: Key Informant Interviews</b> .....	<b>30</b>

This case study is authored by **Carolina Holland-Szyp** of the UK Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and **Manucheher Shafee** and **Diana Valero** of the World Food Programme (WFP).

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# Acronyms

<b>DNP</b>	National Planning Department
<b>DPS</b>	Department for Social Prosperity
<b>GIFMM</b>	The Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows)
<b>ICG</b>	International Crisis Group
<b>IPC-IG</b>	International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth
<b>KII</b>	key informant interview
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>PEP</b>	Special Permanence Permit
<b>RSH</b>	Social Registry of Households
<b>SISBEN</b>	System for the Identification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes
<b>SRSP</b>	shock-responsive social protection
<b>TPS</b>	Temporary Protection Status
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme



# 1. Introduction

This case study reviews the role of the World Food Programme (WFP) in supporting social protection in Colombia since 2020. It assesses how WFP has supported the various building blocks (WFP, 2021f) of Colombia's national social protection system and delineates the lessons learned. The case study is a light-touch exercise, undertaken through a rapid literature review and interviews with WFP staff and other key stakeholders.

## 2. Context

Colombia is classified as an upper-middle income country, with a population of 51.5 million. It is the fifth largest economy in Latin America and has achieved high human development (World Bank 2021c; 2021b; 2021a). The country has experienced significant economic growth and reductions in poverty and malnutrition over the past two decades (WFP, 2021b).

However, it faces a number of challenges to sustainable development related to inequality, including gender inequality, as identified in the National Development Plan 2018–2022 (UNDP, 2022; WFP, 2021b). The Colombian labour market is characterized by high informality, with only half of workers identified as formally employed in urban areas (WFP, 2022e). Worrying levels of food insecurity and malnutrition are prevalent among both migrants and Colombians, particularly

vulnerable groups such as Afro-Colombians, indigenous communities, and violence-affected people (WFP, 2022c). The country faces challenges in achieving comprehensive protection across various sectors, including health, education, employment, housing, risk management, and social assistance. Further challenges include productivity stagnation (due to global supply shocks and limited access to agricultural inputs by farmers), food price inflation, population and regional gaps, limited access to high-quality services, history of armed conflict resulting in internally displaced people, violence caused by non-state armed groups, presence of illegal economies, and vulnerability to disasters and climate change (WFP, 2021b; 2022c; 2022d).

The regional migration crisis is added to this mix, as people from Venezuela flee a multidimensional crisis (WFP, 2022c). There are approximately 2.8 million Venezuelans residing in the country (R4V, 2023), often in irregular migratory situations,<sup>1</sup> who face discrimination, violence, and limited access to employment, safety nets and social security. Colombia's local governments struggle to cope with the substantial demand on infrastructure and services, and both migrants and host communities are experiencing deteriorating food security (R4V, 2022; WFP, 2022d, 2022e). Recent reversals of gains caused an increase in poverty rates and a decrease in income for many Venezuelans and host communities due to the Covid-19 pandemic (WFP, 2021b), with very few reporting having received government assistance (WFP, 2022d).

<sup>1</sup> The irregular migrant population are those residing in Colombia who are not legally authorized to remain in the country (approximately 1.5 out of 2.5 million migrants). The regular migrant population is made up of individuals who have been authorized to remain in Colombian territory legally as a result of regularization programmes, and who thus have access to formal employment and social services (Bitar, 2022).



In response to this challenge, the Colombian Government has implemented ground-breaking integration policies for Venezuelan migrants,<sup>2</sup> including the issuance of **Temporary Protection Status (TPS)**, which allows irregular migrants to apply for a ten-year permit for access to basic services, employment opportunities and social protection (traditionally excluding migrants), and has benefited almost 2 million people to date (WFP, 2022a). However, challenges remain in terms of economic and social integration in practice, including limited access to essential services, job opportunities and financial services, as well as discrimination and exclusion (WFP, 2021b). Efforts are being made at the national and international levels to address these issues and ensure comprehensive assistance, social inclusion, and economic opportunities for all (WFP, 2021b).

It is important to note that, even though addressing the migration crisis continues to be part of the government's agenda after the 2022 change in government,<sup>3</sup> the crisis' profile has

relatively decreased as a result of changes in the government's regional foreign policy priorities and orientation (KII).<sup>4</sup>

## Social protection context

The social protection context in Colombia is characterized by a dual system that combines insurance-based programmes for formal workers with social assistance for lower-income and informal workers. Labour market failures, including a high proportion of informal workers, have resulted in lack of protection for a large proportion of the population, with access gaps based on employment type and income level (among others), particularly for pensions (WFP, 2021c). Further, framing and conceptualizing the provision of assistance as a complement to poor household incomes – as well as basing targeting on that – highlights the limited sensitivity of the national social protection system to food security

2 The Colombian Government adopted ad-hoc regularization mechanisms to guarantee regular status for Venezuelan migrants through the Special Permanence Permit (PEP) which went from holding specific calls for registration to those done regularly and by demand. It also created the Special Complementary Permanence Permit in 2019, which applies to refugee status applicants whose applications were denied, or who were not recognized as having the condition of refugees. This document, which is granted for a period of 90 days, allows them to exercise any legal activity or occupation in the country, including those that are performed under an employment contract.

3 One of the measures of the new Government was to reopen the border with Venezuela (KII).

4 We have referenced throughout the study as 'KII' all comments received from country office staff through interviews and in written form.

and nutrition, and results in missed opportunities in connecting poverty and food insecurity across strategy, design and operations (KII). However, since the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 change in government, there is a renewed political agenda focused on 'hunger', enabling related nascent advocacy work (KII).

Intersectoral coordination for social protection services is limited, and there are no formal mechanisms for harmonization between the social protection and disaster risk management systems, such as a social registry (WFP, 2021c; 2022e). Coordination between the Colombian Government and the international community, including United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is limited to the framework of cooperation. While several agencies and NGOs provide support to national and local entities, strategic and resource-level coordination is limited (WFP, 2021c).

The Covid-19 pandemic led to important modifications in Colombia's institutional architecture of social assistance, with the Department for Social Prosperity (DPS) now responsible for leading strategies to overcome poverty and managing various cash transfer programmes (WFP, 2021c). Centralizing these programmes requires the creation and strengthening of an information system to improve coordination and avoid errors in targeting and inclusion (WFP, 2021c), and there have been increased efforts to achieve this. These include the expansion of the System for the Identification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes (Sisben) and the design and development of the social registry, which had begun in 2014.<sup>5</sup>

Although the social protection response to the impacts of the pandemic (and other shocks) in Colombia mostly replicated pre-existing patterns of inclusion and exclusion,<sup>6</sup> distinguished



5 The design and development of the social registry is a public policy that started in 2014 (KII).

6 Annex 1 highlights some of the key social protection measures that the national Government and some local ones implemented in response to the impacts of the pandemic.

endeavours aimed to, for instance, include marginalized groups, such as migrants (IPC-IG, UNICEF & WFP, 2021). The *Ingreso Solidario* cash transfer programme was created specifically to reduce the impact of the pandemic on households and individuals in poverty and vulnerability, especially those who were not benefiting from existing programmes (including *Familias en Acción*, *Jovenes en Acción* and *Colombia Mayor*) which excluded them due to issues related to the design and requirements.

Even though this programme anticipated the eligibility of Venezuelan migrants (only those who held a PEP and were registered in SISBEN at that point), these only represented about 2 percent of the beneficiaries. There were some issues with the data used to identify and target beneficiaries for this programme. Indeed, while SISBEN plays a crucial role in beneficiary identification and targeting social spending in Colombia, it underwent a consolidation phase during the Covid-19 pandemic, limiting its functioning and updating. To mitigate this, the Government used other sources of information, including administrative records to complement SISBEN and to target emergency programmes more effectively. Some groups, such as migrants, have traditionally not often been included in data updates, and are difficult to follow due to their higher mobility (IPC-IG, UNICEF & WFP, 2021; WFP, 2021c). However, efforts are currently being made to include them. Other programmes that aimed to provide responses to the emergency, such as a social assistance pilot in Arauca, provided food and cash transfers, and sought to extend and support the social protection system by piggybacking<sup>7</sup> on SISBEN for an efficient response (WFP, 2021c).

While there has been progress in the transition to the current consolidated SISBEN methodology, its coverage is not universal, with difficulties in updating information (WFP, 2021c). Access gaps exist as citizens are required to request SISBEN, which can be challenging during shocks or emergencies, especially for those without permanent residence. Improved coordination, coverage, and updating of social protection registries are necessary for a timely and accurate response to disasters and social assistance needs.

Current efforts from the Government and partners aim to expand the demographic coverage of SISBEN, such as by registering migrants with TPS through home visits by local authorities and assigning a socioeconomic condition, which would enable them to access social protection programmes (WFP, 2022a). Further efforts entail progress towards the creation and consolidation of an interoperable social information system – a social registry – which will seek to integrate the socioeconomic information of the population with the information of the social programmes from different ministries to establish the targeting, eligibility and permanence criteria, minimize the risk of targeting errors, and ensure efficient administration, monitoring of trajectories, and emergency response (WFP, 2021c).

<sup>7</sup> Piggybacking strategies have been deployed in the region to support migrants during the crisis due the pandemic, in which humanitarian assistance uses some aspect of the administrative capacity of the social protection system, such as databases, registries, or payment systems (WFP, 2022e).





### 3. WFP's objectives and role

WFP has been operating in Colombia since 1969 and plays a vital role in supporting the Colombian Government's efforts to address food insecurity and achieve sustainable development goals (WFP, 2021b). Its objectives in Colombia align with the Government's priorities in both humanitarian and development spheres, mainly focusing on Sustainable Development Goals 2 and 17 (Delgado, 2020; WFP, 2022e). The key opportunities identified by WFP to support the Colombian Government in addressing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus include managing emergencies caused by various factors, recovering and strengthening livelihoods affected by violence and climate change, providing assistance to migrants and Colombian returnees, strengthening public policies on food security and nutrition, and enhancing institutional capacity to serve vulnerable populations (WFP, 2021b).

The recent change in government, which made it possible to link the previous focus on poverty with one that includes hunger and food insecurity, has provided a window of opportunity for WFP to support both the capacity strengthening and shock response of the national social protection system, as reflected in the National Strategy for Social Protection.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Government has approved WFP seconding their staff to work within a number of departments within the DPS, such as on shock response, and also to incorporate a food security and nutrition approach within cash transfer programmes (KII).<sup>9</sup>

WFP Colombia operates based on its Global Social Protection Strategy, which aims to add value by supporting different building blocks of the national social protection system (WFP, 2021f),<sup>10</sup> and also based on the WFP Social Protection Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean, with a strong focus on supporting shock-responsive social protection (SRSP) and the national social protection system (WFP, 2019). The current country strategic plan for 2021 to 2024 adopts a triple nexus approach for crisis response, including the provision of humanitarian assistance and services to Venezuelan migrants, Colombian returnees, and host communities (WFP, 2021d). It aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Colombia (Government of Colombia and UN, 2020) and aims to complement the Government's efforts in strengthening resilience, providing assistance and services to those affected by the Venezuelan migration crisis, and promoting food security, nutrition, and social inclusion (WFP, 2021b).

WFP's National Social Protection Strategy in Colombia (WFP, 2021c) adapts both the Global (WFP, 2021f) and Regional (WFP, 2019) Social Protection Strategies to the national context, including two key pillars: SRSP (with an emphasis on cash transfers), and strengthening the social protection system (with a focus on information systems). WFP's Social Protection Unit in Colombia, established in 2020, with dedicated social protection staff,<sup>11</sup> works closely with national and local government entities to implement and coordinate such actions with entities such as the DPS and the National

8 WFP emphasizes the importance of strengthening national and local capacity and building broad partnerships for sustainable development (WFP, 2021b). The Colombian Government's social protection system is robust but not designed to respond to large-scale emergencies (WFP, 2022e).

9 Other secondments include in gender and in emergencies, to support inclusivity and shock response of the system (KII).

10 The 12 building blocks of a national social protection system encompass a focus on: (i) system architecture: policy and legislation, governance, capacity and coordination, platforms and infrastructure, and planning and finance; (ii) knowledge and learning: assessments and analysis, advocacy, engagement and communications, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning; and (iii) programme features: design of programme parameters, registration and enrolment, benefit delivery, and accountability, protection and assurance. They draw on, and expand upon, the five pathways identified by WFP in the corporate framework for support to country capacity strengthening. The analytical approach is also coherent with many international frameworks, such as the 'three key aspects' of social protection in the Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI) (WFP, 2021f: 58).

11 Since its creation in 2020, the Social Protection Unit has seen an incremental growth, with more than four staff members, including the core team, a network of secondments, and additional operations (KII).

Planning Department (DNP) (WFP, 2022e). WFP's alignment with government priorities in terms of strengthening its social protection system and improving knowledge and socioeconomic support for its vulnerable population (including migrants) in times of shocks and emergencies are illustrated through numerous activities that have taken place in the country in recent years. These include the Covid-19 emergency response to those affected by the Venezuelan migration crisis (Arauca pilot), supporting the implementation of the TPS, expansion of SISBEN to include Venezuelan migrants, and advocating for and supporting the implementation of a social registry, among others. The key *building blocks* supported have therefore been *Platforms and infrastructure, Governance, capacity and coordination, and Design of programme parameters.*

Furthermore, WFP's work in Colombia covers a wide range of activities, such as advocating for a system more responsive to food security and nutrition, supporting other marginalized groups such as children, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, ex-combatants, and those affected

by violence and disasters (WFP, 2022c).

These actions include collection of food security and nutrition data and assessments (Assessments and analysis) (WFP, 2022d; 2022c); work on social cohesion (Accountability, protection and assurance) (Delgado, 2020; WFP, 2022c); rural development and livelihood strengthening (Benefit Delivery) (WFP, 2018; 2022b); school feeding (Governance, capacity and coordination) (WFP, 2022j); and gender empowerment (Accountability, protection and assurance) (WFP, 2022c). Moreover, WFP's work on the Advocacy building block focuses on the development of an instrument that enables assessment and targeting of those without permanent housing, as well as on strengthening of food security and nutrition, and emergencies expertise through secondments (WFP, 2021e; 2022a). The organization collaborates with various government entities and local partners to implement relevant programmes, leveraging their expertise and ensuring a sustainable approach to social protection and emergency response (WFP, 2022c).



## 4. Activities and Results

As per its National Social Protection Strategy, WFP Colombia Country Office has framed its key activities in social protection under two pillars: (i) shock responsive social protection (SRSP) with a focus on cash transfers, and (ii) capacity strengthening with a focus on information systems (KII).

### Shock-responsive social protection with a focus on cash transfers

#### ARAUCA PILOT

Jointly with the Government, WFP implemented a pilot project on SRSP in the Arauca department of Colombia from April 2020 to February 2021. This pilot aimed to enhance adaptive social protection and complement the national social protection

response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the region by filling some of the coverage gaps<sup>12</sup> (WFP, 2021e). In its response to the pandemic, the national government initially opted for vertical expansions of existing cash transfer programmes, as well as the creation of a new programme (*Ingreso Solidario*) to reach a new beneficiary population. Following this same logic, the focus of the pilot in Arauca was developed, and to ensure full coherence with national standards, the value of transfers was aligned with that of the Government's emergency cash transfer programmes and the *Familias en Acción* programme (WFP, 2022e). Additionally in order to ensure an evidence-based approach, WFP in collaboration with the government conducted a decentralized evaluation of the pilot, as well as a full systematization of the evaluation findings. The pilot thus sought to *complement* government assistance by aiming to mitigate the drop in income resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, and focused on the poor and vulnerable Colombian population,



12 In Arauca, only 32 percent of migrants had a PEP, a document created by the national government for the identification of Venezuelan migrants in a regular migratory situation that authorizes them, among other things, to work and to access some services of the social protection system and registering in SISBEN (GIFMM and R4V, 2020; WFP, 2022e).

as well as Venezuelan migrants in regular and irregular migratory status (WFP, 2022e).<sup>13</sup>

The Arauca department, located on the border between Colombia and Venezuela, experienced significant impacts from the migration crisis and the pandemic. The WFP office in the department of Arauca began work in 2018 in its capital (Arauca), with humanitarian assistance to the population from Venezuela (WFP, 2022e). Unemployment rates were three times the national average, leading to a decline in incomes, consumption, and living conditions, particularly affecting informal workers, rural residents, and the unemployed (WFP, 2022e). The existing social protection system in Colombia only provided benefits to migrants in regular situations, leaving those in irregular situations without access to social assistance (KII).

To address this gap, the pilot project in Arauca utilized SISBEN as the main targeting instrument. It accessed information from SISBEN IV, which classified households into different poverty levels, although this was not necessarily updated (WFP, 2022e).<sup>14</sup> Other targeting instruments were used to complement SISBEN, including the Single Registry of Victims and Affected for the elderly, administrative records of regular and irregular migrants, and databases of municipal administrations, through which active search strategies were conducted (WFP, 2022e). WFP also collaborated with local authorities to gather updated data, as households frequently changed their contact information.<sup>15</sup> This experience illustrates successful coordination between social protection and humanitarian assistance in relation to information, measures for the identification of beneficiaries, and operational processes, in particular with government agencies, including DPS, the Unit for the Management of Risks and Disasters, and Border Management, to ensure coherence with national standards (IPC-IG, UNICEF and WFP, 2021).



There were recognized issues with this programme of support, such as the lack of consideration of household characteristics, and the unpredictability and temporary duration of measures to mitigate income reduction (only two payments) (WFP, 2022e). Even though the pilot faced challenges leading to inefficiencies in execution and delays (coverage limitations of financial operators, lack of documentation from beneficiaries, etc.), it provided valuable field evidence on the bottlenecks in household information and the still limited articulation between social protection and disaster risk management systems and sectors (WFP, 2022f). As per the results and recommendations of the evaluation, WFP has been prioritizing its role as facilitator and coordinator for a potential second phase of the pilot (KII). The scope of the operation of the Arauca office made it possible to

<sup>13</sup> Irregular migrants were identified through government lists and received in-kind transfers (rather than cash) (KII).

<sup>14</sup> Registries are important in social protection, as a solid social registry and an updated information system makes it possible to reach out to people in times of shocks (Landa, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The updating process encountered challenges, including mistrust from the population, which WFP addressed with some mitigation actions, such as setting up a support telephone line and involving the mayor's office (WFP, 2022e).



have a team with established relationships in the territory and with the capacity to operationally lead the pilot (WFP, 2022e). The pilot reached over 46,000 new beneficiaries by providing cash assistance and in-kind food baskets to 25,000 people.<sup>16</sup> The pilot focused on extremely poor and moderately poor Colombian households, while also including vulnerable Venezuelan migrant households. Efforts were made to target those not benefiting from pre-existing cash transfers, including vulnerable groups such as women, the elderly, and migrants, as per agreement with the national government entities (WFP, 2022e). WFP targeting goals for national beneficiaries were exceeded (128 percent), whereas for the migrant population it was only 10 percent, explained by challenges in locating them due to their high mobility. It was not possible to assess targeting goals from the National Unit for Disaster Risk Management (UNGRD) on the elderly and migrants as the pilot database was not updated after the delivery (WFP, 2022f).

The Arauca pilot showcased the potential for coordination between social protection and humanitarian assistance, using official instruments to identify beneficiaries and leveraging the existing national social protection system to provide support (IPC-IG, UNICEF and WFP, 2021). It clearly showed the need to adopt mechanisms to record information on the migrant population for their integration, and demonstrated the potential of SRSP in improving the capacity, coordination and benefit delivery of the national social protection system (Peña, 2021). By leveraging existing databases, coordinating with government agencies, and targeting vulnerable populations, WFP showed its contribution in strengthening the **Coordination, and Programme Design building blocks** (among others) of the national social protection system, especially with horizontal expansions in a situation of emergency. The lessons learned from the pilot aim to contribute to more inclusive and responsive social protection systems (WFP, 2022f).

<sup>16</sup> An evaluation highlights how beneficiaries had perceived the assistance positively: they used it mainly on food, but also to pay for rent, services, health, and small enterprises (women) (WFP, 2022f).

# Capacity strengthening with a focus on information systems

## TEMPORARY PROTECTION STATUS

In line with the notion of migration as a development factor (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social, 2022), the government of Colombia enacted a recent policy with the aim to support and integrate Venezuelan migrants by offering them Temporary Protection Status (TPS) (WFP, 2022a).<sup>17</sup> WFP played a significant role in supporting the government in implementing the TPS and the subsequent registration of migrants into SISBEN (a unified vulnerability assessment, targeting system for social assistance, and part of the social registry). Further, WFP contributes to building government capacity to implement a social registry, an interoperable system between different ministries that collates information from all programmes and on beneficiaries through the incorporation of SISBEN (KII). Throughout these activities, WFP's work has focused on strengthening both the **Capacity [Governance, Coordination], and Platforms [and Infrastructure] building blocks** of the national social protection system (among other building blocks, for instance, Registration, Advocacy, and Programme Design).

As a key partner to the Government, WFP supported the adoption of the TPS in 2021 by contributing to stronger capacities of the migration authority to implement the TPS, including through regularization programmes to register and grant migrants legal status.

WFP also assisted in conducting information and pre-registration sessions, reaching 200,839

people, with a focus on women.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the organization provided support to migrants by certifying their presence in the country, which was crucial to regularize their status and for their eligibility to access basic services and social protection (WFP, 2022c).

## SYSTEM FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES OF SOCIAL PROGRAMMES

Since 1995, the System for the Identification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes (SISBEN) has been an information system that enables the categorization of households in terms of their socioeconomic status, and a targeting mechanism for accessing the social protection system, including health, cash transfers, and subsidies. Efforts to strengthen the systems architecture are intrinsically linked to supporting the development and updating of policies, strategies, laws and regulations related to social protection.

Additionally, they contribute to governance, national capacities, and coordination to improve the effectiveness of institutions. Through operation of SISBEN, WFP Colombia has focused on supporting information systems for the social protection system to enable the government to develop tools that are suitable and efficient in making people in need visible (WFP, 2023b).

Between December 2021 and July 2022, WFP started a joint operation with the National Planning Department (DNP), with the objective of strengthening the capacities of mayors' offices – local SISBEN offices – and expanding the registration of the migrant population in the social protection system (WFP, 2022h). The Government started registering migrants with TPS in SISBEN. This was a necessary step for socioeconomic integration, by incrementally allowing Venezuelan

17 This permit for Venezuelan migrants who intend to stay in Colombia offered hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants the opportunity to regularize their situation by applying for a ten-year permit that would facilitate their access to basic services and employment opportunities. Before the TPS, access to mechanisms such as the PEP and Humanitarian Visa ensured regular permanence and eligibility for employment, education, social protection and healthcare. While many Venezuelans held PEP, some still faced challenges due to the high cost involved and the complexity of document processing and requirements (IPC-IG, UNICEF and WFP, 2021).

18 It was identified that most vulnerable people unable to meet basic needs were primarily young migrant women (WFP, 2022c).



to identify relevant individuals. Supported by a communication campaign for registration, United Nations agencies and NGOs communicated with migrants, provided them with information about SISBEN, and identified those without permits, resulting in massive regularization (KII).

The registration process involved online applications, biometric registration, and the issuance of permit cards (socialprotection.org, 2021). WFP supported the data collection efforts of the DNP, leading to an increased coverage of the social protection system for migrants and vulnerable Colombians. It was a large operation that involved hiring more than 720 staff (from local implementing partners, mostly women) and providing equipment and logistical support for surveys by the Government. Through local partnerships, WFP reached remote areas as well as strengthened local capabilities to provide assistance and services to migrants, returnees, and host communities, thus contributing to enhancing the 'inclusion' capacity of the system (WFP, 2022c; 2022a).

migrants access to over 29 programmes – including cash transfers, subsidized health, and childcare – in order to halt their poverty and food insecurity (WFP, 2022a). WFP provided technical assistance to the Government (DNP) and surveyed 229,624 households, including 533,159 nationals (55 percent) and migrants (45 percent) in 37 municipalities in less than six months<sup>19</sup> to assess their eligibility to Colombia's social protection programmes (52 percent of migrants with TPS registered in SISBEN is a result of this operation) (WFP, 2022i) (WFP, 2022c). Although WFP was the key stakeholder at the operational level for migrant registration, it collaborated with other actors through the SISBEN Coordination Platform

It is important to note that, in order to conduct the SISBEN survey to identify the socioeconomic conditions of households, it is essential to have their permanent addresses. However, an important segment of the population has no permanent address and lives in *pagadarios*.<sup>20</sup> These families are completely invisible in government information systems and cannot access social protection, not even health care. This is because there is no instrument to target them, measure their vulnerability, and allow their access to social programmes (WFP, 2023c). The fact that SISBEN (as a targeting mechanism and information system) will connect to the social registry, underscores the

19 This included 240,874 Venezuelans with TPS. A phase two of this exercise is being contemplated, which is expected to strengthen the coverage of 63 local SISBEN offices and conduct between 800,000 and 1.1 million surveys among the national population and migrants with valid identification documents. The financing required for this operation amounts to US\$ 7 million (WFP, 2023d). Further, a joint SISBEN operation between WFP and Chemonics (USAID) will aim to strengthen the local SISBEN offices in Cali, Cúcuta and Cartagena and facilitate access to the Social Protection System for at least 20,000 people, including migrants (70 percent), nationals and returnees (30 percent). Between September and December 2023, WFP will provide operational coordination, installed monitoring capacity, electronic devices, and experience in operating the SISBEN survey; Chemonics will provide logistics and field personnel (WFP, 2023d).

20 Many poorer Venezuelans end up in informal accommodation or pay-per-day rooms, called 'pagadarios,' a predominantly urban phenomenon commonly described by their inhabitants as overcrowded and unsanitary. These have challenged the concept of 'household' as it does not comply with traditional standards. Entire families cluster together in small rooms, share mattresses, bathrooms, and have no kitchens. To pay for these pagadarios, many Venezuelans join the informal street economy. What is earned during the day is spent after work on food and nightly accommodation (ICG, 2022).



importance of supporting capacity strengthening at the local level to include people's (including migrants) vulnerability data in the information system so that they are eligible for support. There are ongoing advocacy efforts for designing and incorporating instruments for vulnerability assessment and targeting of different types of 'households' (KII).

## **SOCIAL REGISTRY OF HOUSEHOLDS AND THE SINGLE WINDOW (VENTANILA UNICA)**

Social Registries of Households (RSH) are a structural component for identifying and targeting the most vulnerable and impoverished populations

and managing the appropriate government support (WFP, 2023b). With the issuance of Decree 812 of 2020, the national government proposed to continue to develop an information system that collects socioeconomic data of individuals and households through existing administrative records (i.e., SISBEN, health affiliation, Single Registry of Victims, school feeding programme, subsidies, DPS, among others). The new system will integrate information on vulnerabilities with the territorial offer<sup>21</sup> for its immediate management. WFP is the only agency that is directly and continuously participating in the strategic formulation discussions, as well as in the construction and operation of the RSH. In order to

<sup>21</sup> 'Territorial offer' refers to social programmes managed and financed by local authorities. The interoperation of this information with the RSH is expected to enable the access of beneficiary data.



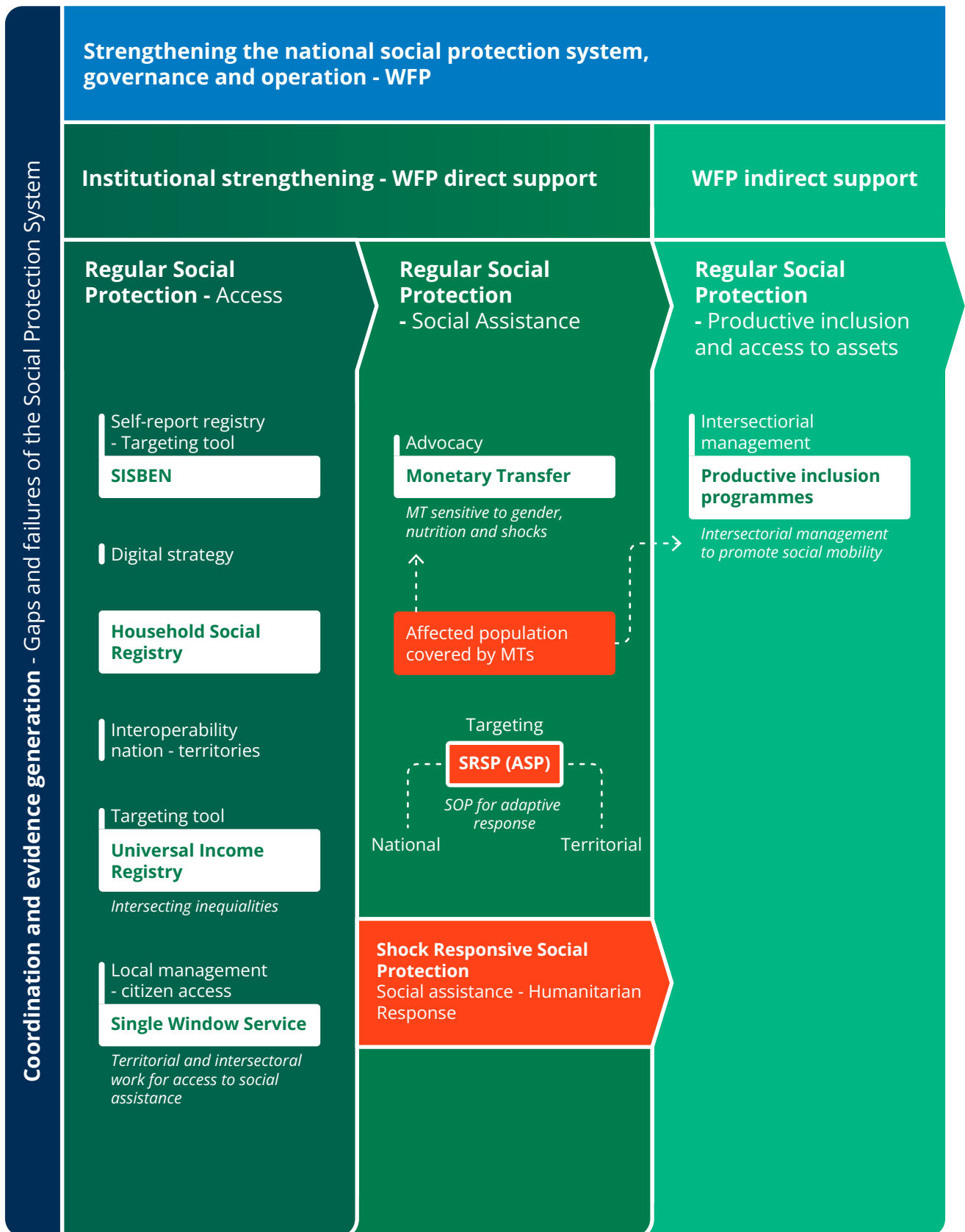
implement it, a tool/portal will be available, under the leadership and coordination of the DNP, through which information from administrative records will be managed to identify, characterize, verify, and articulate which social support is available. In other words, the RSH will facilitate the recognition of each person, thus making it possible to, on the one hand, identify criteria for targeting, eligibility and permanence of beneficiaries and, on the other hand, manage government resources more efficiently. The RSH will have an offer portal, where the different territorial authorities or managers of the different programmes will be able to consult information on individuals, select beneficiaries and/or generate statistical reports. It will also have a *ventanilla unica* (single window) to be used by national programmes and territorial entities, especially those with fewer technical and resource capacities, to make inquiries, enrol beneficiaries in their programmes and provide real-time feedback to the RSH (WFP, 2023b).

Funding from capacity strengthening will enable an accelerated rollout of the RSH in government policy as well as funding secondments, which aim to provide structural support to the system (KII). With an estimated budget of US\$ 100,000, institutional capacity has been strengthened in 2022 and 2023, and the construction and implementation of the RSH has been accelerated through the hiring of nine people to manage and articulate administrative records (at national and territorial level), as well as to build and design the RSH and *ventanilla unica* (WFP, 2023d). To facilitate coordination and alignment, WFP has contributed, among other elements, to a technical strategy of capacity strengthening for the RSH. WFP focus has been on intergovernmental coordination, as well as advocacy work towards inclusion of food security and nutrition data in the social registry, such as school feeding, and children's malnutrition. The goal is that the information in the social registry enables the system to be more sensitive to food security and nutrition, to react more efficiently to multiple shocks, and to be more inclusive in its responses (e.g., with migrants) (KII).

The purpose of the 'single window' is to facilitate an efficient bidirectional flow of information. It collects and centralizes data from administrative records and delivers it to users – which involves a single consolidated database of people and programmes at national and territorial level. It allows the system to recognize relevant cross-references of information, according to the criteria selected by the user, to facilitate targeting processes (WFP, 2023b). The RSH helps to throw a light on the population, by identifying, characterizing and contrasting the poverty of individuals and households, through the interoperability of multiple registries, including SISBEN. RSH requires that SISBEN be updated with RSH data, considering that SISBEN holds approximately 34 million records and RSH reaches 53 million people (WFP, 2023b).

The collaboration between WFP and the Colombian Government, along with strategic alignment with national priorities, has been instrumental in shaping policies and initiatives. Through its dual focus on shock-responsive social protection and capacity strengthening, WFP's interventions have sought to bridge gaps in the social protection system, address coordination limitations, and provide assistance to vulnerable populations, particularly Venezuelan migrants. By leveraging existing systems, adapting to changing circumstances, and actively contributing to Colombia's National Strategy for Social Protection, WFP is driving efforts towards a more inclusive and robust social protection landscape in the country.

**Figure 1: Overview of WFP's activities in support of national social protection in Colombia**





Con el apoyo de  
**adveni**  
für die Menschen  
in Lateinamerika

DIÓCESIS DE CUCUTA

Casa de Pastoral  
Latina Provincial

CUCUTA

# 5. Lessons Learned

## Challenges

Efforts to support the national social protection system in Colombia have been made complicated due to numerous obstacles - including funding limitations, coordination challenges, risk of exclusion and possible social tensions, and limitations of information systems. In meeting these obstacles, social protection actors, including WFP, have learned numerous lessons. The key enabling factors identified as contributing to the success of WFP's activities in social protection in Colombia include **alignment with national priorities, organizational flexibility and adaptability, and leveraging of the national social protection system to make it stronger and more shock responsive.**

### FUNDING LIMITATIONS

A substantial challenge to strengthen the national social protection system in Colombia entailed the limited funds available to meet the humanitarian needs, and beyond, caused by both the Venezuelan migration crisis and the Covid-19 emergency. WFP had aimed to complement government efforts in the triple nexus to support those most affected; however, with limited funding to channel to the migration crisis, WFP's ability to contribute to socioeconomic integration, system strengthening for emergency preparedness, nutrition and social protection was relatively limited (WFP, 2022c). The arrival of thousands of migrants in certain communities strained their local capacities, hindering the effective provision of social protection services and support (WFP, 2021a). The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a significant increase in the number of households needing assistance. Due to restrictions, limited funding, and restricted resources, WFP faced challenges in incorporating households into the social protection system in a timely manner (WFP, 2021d; KII; socialprotection.org, 2021; WFP, 2022b).

Social protection funding presents unique challenges in terms of advocacy for mobilization, often perceived as more difficult to secure due to its technical complexity and the need for tailoring to each country's specific context (KII). In light of this, WFP has been actively working towards diversifying its funding sources. This endeavour brings forth several challenges, which include advocating for the importance of social protection both internally and externally, as well as aligning and coordinating efforts with the Government.

Building the capacity of national institutions, securing long-term funding and diversifying it, in addition to effective risk management processes, were critical to mitigate these challenges (WFP, 2022e; 2022c). The large international development and humanitarian community present in the country, along with innovative funders, has provided additional resources and expertise. Collaborative partnerships, including with the national government, have been essential for broadening the scope of the system to support migrants, addressing misinformation, and strengthening government capacities at local levels (WFP, 2022a).

### LIMITATIONS IN COORDINATION BETWEEN NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

In Colombia, the social protection system has been traditionally divided in two, between insurance-based programmes for formal workers and social assistance for lower-income and informal workers. This has resulted in access gaps for a sizeable proportion of the population, based on income level and employment type, affecting migrants, informal workers, Afro-Colombians, Indigenous communities and violence-affected people, among others. Without a social registry as a formal mechanism for coordination between social protection and disaster risk management

systems, databases from different ministries had to be operated separately, resulting in inefficiencies (KII). Even though activities were operated at the local level, they were coordinated at the national level, contributing to limited ownership at the local level (socialprotection.org, 2021; WFP, 2022a; KII).

To overcome these challenges and contribute to a stronger social protection system in Colombia, WFP has emphasized the importance of intersectoral coordination for social protection provision. Indeed, it has actively collaborated with the Government at both the national and local levels (WFP, 2021c; 2022e). Additionally, WFP has worked towards leveraging, updating and filling gaps in the national social protection instrument, SISBEN (System for the Identification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programmes), and it has done so jointly with other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations through the SISBEN Coordination Platform. Furthermore,

given the collaboration with local governments, these organizations were able to tap into their knowledge of the population and territory, facilitating a more targeted and effective approach (WFP, 2022e). Early start of coordination with local public administrations enabled a wider support at a local level (WFP, 2022e). WFP has worked towards the creation of a social registry that connects the SISBEN targeting instrument with all social programmes. The aim is to improve the efficiency of the social protection system by streamlining these processes and eliminating the need to obtain information from each entity separately. These measures are crucial for ensuring a timely and accurate response to disasters and social assistance needs, as improved coordination, coverage, and updating of social protection registries are necessary to support a more robust and inclusive national social protection system (WFP, 2022a).



## **RISK OF EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL TENSIONS**

Another challenge included efforts to ensure clarity and transparency in the social protection system, particularly regarding eligibility criteria and benefit entitlements. This lack of clarity resulted in uncertainty among beneficiaries and hindered an efficient delivery of assistance (WFP, 2022e). Lack of awareness and understanding of social protection programmes among the target population and local communities posed a significant challenge and a risk of exclusion. Many eligible households were not aware of their rights or how to access benefits, leading to underutilization of the system. WFP faced difficulties in effectively communicating programme information and encouraging participation, especially among marginalized groups (WFP, 2022e). Migrants were often unfamiliar with SISBEN and faced obstacles obtaining permits for different family members simultaneously. Additional requirements, such as a minimum period of residence, or inclusion in the registry of beneficiaries, led to the exclusion of many Venezuelan families. Similarly, people living in *pagadarios* (individuals living in precarious and informal settlements) have been excluded from the system and, so far, remain invisible as there are no appropriate tools to identify them. These exclusionary measures prevented vulnerable populations from accessing essential support (IPC-IG, UNICEF and WFP, 2021).

Further, the delivery of assistance, including cash transfers and food kits, faced logistical challenges. One of the contracted payment operators had restrictions on coverage and IDs accepted (WFP, 2022e). There were logistical considerations to ensure the security of aid delivery, especially in peri-urban areas and rural regions (KII). Negative reactions from the local population towards aid provided to Venezuelan migrants further complicated the distribution process. Indeed, WFP faced challenges related to social tensions at the local level which have resulted in challenges identifying and interacting with migrant families. This in turn affected operations and

the integration of Venezuelan migrants into the national system (WFP, 2022a; 2022e). Additionally, families living in remote and hard-to-reach areas remained excluded from the operation due to budgetary constraints, security concerns and logistical limitations, which prevented vulnerable populations from accessing social protection services (WFP, 2022a).

Maintaining narratives that promote a positive perception of the migratory phenomenon was necessary to mitigate these challenges (WFP, 2022g). The adoption of the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) is expected to improve this situation, but it also requires promoting acceptance by the private sector and enhancing relevant information systems. In fact, SISBEN does not automatically imply access to social programmes. Each of these programmes has its own requirements, and several have not yet included the TPS in their information management systems. Furthermore, without adequate vulnerability (e.g., gender) analysis and responsive programming, there is a risk of excluding or marginalizing certain groups within the population even further (WFP, 2022g).

## **INFORMATION SYSTEM LIMITATIONS**

There are challenges in identifying, understanding, and analysing the needs of the population, especially those in vulnerable situations and with irregular status (WFP, 2022g). Effective data management and analysis are crucial for targeting, monitoring, and evaluating social protection programmes. However, WFP encountered challenges in accessing up-to-date data and faced limitations in data management capacities. Limited data analysis challenged evidence-based decision making and the ability to track programme outcomes (WFP, 2022e). The SISBEN database, although useful for identifying vulnerable households, has had limitations in terms of comprehensiveness (e.g., excluding those without permanent residence), agility in updating (e.g. contact information, household composition) and lack of interoperability with the



information systems of other sectors (e.g. Disaster Risk Management (DRM)) (Beazley, Solórzano and Sossouvi, 2016; WFP, 2022e). Challenges arise from the management of beneficiary data, especially due to the frequent mobility (leading to out-of-date information) or lack of permanent residence of the migrant population (WFP, 2022g). This hampers the timely inclusion and targeting of this population, especially in emergency response contexts. Furthermore, myths linked to SISBEN also result in challenges and misperceptions with system implications (Government of Colombia, 2023).

Additional targeting instruments have been adopted to overcome some of these limitations (e.g., roundtables for vulnerable populations or Community Action Boards), still carrying some risks of exclusion, and rarely with adequately

disaggregated data. Coordination between different entities and WFP was necessary to reach marginalized populations (WFP, 2022e). Further, sensitization efforts were undertaken on the importance of keeping SISBEN updated and with comprehensive coverage, generating incentives for agile management and interoperability with information systems of other sectors. WFP has been working on designing mechanisms that make people without permanent residence visible to the social protection system.

## Enabling factors

The above discussed factors highlight the importance of aligning with national priorities, organizational flexibility and adaptability, and leveraging the national social protection system to make it stronger and shock responsive.



## **ALIGNING WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES**

The openness of the national government to integrate migrants, as demonstrated by the TPS, has been a key enabler. This strong political will of the government contributed to regularizing migrants and making considerable progress towards their socioeconomic integration through access to the social protection system. This reflects a national priority on migrant integration, which has duly acknowledged the benefits of migration for society and set an enabling environment for WFP's work and objectives (Consejo Nacional de Política Económica Y Social, 2022; WFP, 2022a). This is extremely important in a country like Colombia, where social protection is perceived as being primarily the responsibility of the state, with implications for coordination measures. The WFP office in Colombia thereby duly followed the Government's leadership, focusing on its own role as a facilitator for capacity strengthening, and working towards generating trust and forging strong relationships by harnessing knowledge of how the Government functions (KII). WFP activities, which are directed towards supporting government efforts to address humanitarian and development needs, thereby reflect national priorities adequately (WFP, 2021b).

It is a point of note that the change of government in 2022 has served both as a challenge and opportunity for WFP. On the one hand, while WFP managed to adapt to the changing political environment, it found itself challenged at the onset of a new national agenda that has changed quite significantly from the previous agenda (and the subsequent relationships) through which considerable progress was made. This, nevertheless, opened a new set of opportunities, such as a renewed focus on food insecurity within national policies as well as the opportunity to support the roll-out of new social protection mechanisms. For instance, in support of the new universal transfer programme *Renta Ciudadana* or 'Citizen Income,' WFP utilised its analytical abilities to support evidence-based decision making. By

leveraging the findings of the Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) study, WFP helped inform the design and transfer value of the programme, which is now poised to help cover a considerable percentage of a nutritious diet for more than 1.7 million households.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY**

Both the Venezuelan migration crisis and the socioeconomic impacts of the measures implemented to respond to the health emergency from the pandemic had profound effects in Colombia, with particularly detrimental impacts on the most vulnerable, including informal workers, migrants and people affected by violence. This meant that the food security and nutrition landscape in the country changed, which challenged WFP as it required flexibility and adaptability in its operations (WFP, 2022c). Indeed, the strength of socioeconomic impacts arising from the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that migration crises became relatively less visible compared to issues such as food insecurity. There is therefore a need for continued advocacy efforts (KII).

WFP worked to strengthen its capacity to respond to the emergency that started in 2018 with large numbers of migrants arriving from Venezuela. It declared a Level 2 emergency in March 2018 for one year. This was added to the potential for resurging internal violence, which was a relevant risk with potential access and protection impacts. The WFP country office managed to rapidly attract more funding and scale up its operations in response to a marked increase in the demand for assistance to Venezuelan migrants, as well as in relation to the Covid-19 health emergency.

As a result of the multiple and compounded crises, WFP and other entities involved showed a willingness to adjust their operations to meet the specific needs of the population and the challenges faced. The adoption of TPS and registration of Venezuelan migrants into SISBEN is yet another example of adaptation to the current migration

crisis. This flexibility is not commonly found in social protection systems, which tend to have rigid benefit structures. The complementarity of different actors and their ability to resolve operational challenges arising from coordination supported effectiveness in implementation (WFP, 2022e).

## **LEVERAGING THE NATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM**

The nature and magnitude of the emergency and associated level of needs meant that humanitarian assistance alone would not have been able to comprehensively respond to the entire affected population. Consequently, WFP advocated for the social protection system as a whole to be involved, activating (or harmonizing) mechanisms to alleviate the fall of income, and adapting existing programmes and system tools. This included engagement as well as complementing the work of the government and international actors (WFP, 2022e). This can be characterized as a form of shock-responsive social protection or, beyond that, as a convergence of humanitarian and social protection programming, which is appropriate to Colombia's status as an upper-middle income country facing a series of severe shocks. It also means that WFP is well placed to support Colombia in delivering these humanitarian and social protection needs.

The existence of information systems, such as SISBEN, although not necessarily updated, has been instrumental in enabling piggybacking for the rapid identification of vulnerable populations and reaching them to provide assistance. SISBEN is a well-established system used to target social protection programmes, making it widely accepted by both the population and authorities. The pilot in the Arauca region demonstrated the importance of flexibility in the design and operation of social protection programmes, particularly in emergency situations, and the benefits of building on the national system. Leveraging on and improving existing targeting instruments and data enabled prompt and effective assistance to households,

including Venezuelan migrant populations that were excluded from the system (WFP, 2022e). Further, WFP has been advocating for and supporting the adoption of a social registry, which will build on SISBEN (KII).

Despite these challenges, WFP has demonstrated adaptability and resilience, working within dynamic contexts to support a more robust and inclusive national social protection system. By aligning with government priorities, adapting to changing circumstances, and utilizing existing information systems, WFP has strived to address the complex and evolving needs of vulnerable populations, contributing to both humanitarian assistance and sustainable development in Colombia.



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# Annex: key social protection measures that the national and local governments implemented in response to the impacts of the pandemic in Colombia

Given the foreseeable impact of Covid-19 pandemic measures on economic activity and employment, the national Government and some local governments implemented social protection measures, mainly consisting of social assistance. These used available infrastructure of the social protection system to speed up implementation (WFP, 2022e):

- Temporary suspension of the conditionality of the Families in Action programme (TMC); Decree 563 of 2020, main transfer programme conditional monetary.
- Vertical expansions: extraordinary payments not conditioned to the beneficiaries of the Families in Action, Youth in Action programmes (TMC) and Colombia Mayor (TMNC) (decrees 659 and 814 of 2020).
- Horizontal expansions: transfer payment not conditioned on the persons included in the waiting (or prioritized) list of the programme Colombia Mayor.
- New programme: beginning of the payment of the sales tax offset (VAT) provided for in the National Development Plan 2018–2022, and in document CONPES 3986 of 2020 (decree 458 of 2020).

- New programme: creation of the *Ingreso Solidario* programme (decree 518 of 2020), which grants unconditional cash transfers to poor households that are not beneficiaries of any of the transfers already mentioned.
- New programme: creation of unconditional cash transfer programmes such as *Bogotá Solidaria* in Bogotá and *Bono Vital* in Bucaramanga.

The national government and local governments have also implemented measures related to food safety, including:

- The delivery of food by the school feeding programme in some country cities.
- The delivery of nutritional supplements by part of the Colombian Institute of Well-being Family (ICBF) in all departments.
- The distribution of food kits by the mayoralties in various municipalities.

# Annex: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview 1, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Carolina Holland-Szyp conducted online on 8th June 2023. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Colombia.

## **World Food Programme**

Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,  
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131

**[wfp.org/social-protection](https://wfp.org/social-protection)**  
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Photo page 14: WFP/Dario Lopera, Colombia, 2018

Photo page 17: WFP/Jonathan Dumont, Colombia, 2018

Photo page 27: WFP/Norha Restrepo, Colombia, 2018