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

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This case study is informed by interviews with, and information provided by WFP staff, as well as documented sources primarily made available between November 2022 and February 2023. It forms part of a series of country case studies conducted by IDS for WFP, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of WFP’s efforts in enabling social protection globally. The analysis and views expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the WFP.

Acronyms

| | |
|----------------|--|
| CARD | Council for Agricultural and Rural Development |
| CSP | Country strategic plan |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization |
| FSN | Food Security and Nutrition |
| FSS | Food Systems Summit |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| GS-NSPC | General Secretariat for the National Social Protection Council |
| HGSF | Home-grown school feeding |
| KII | Key informant interview |
| M&E | Monitoring and evaluation |
| MEF | Ministry of Economy and Finance |
| MoEYS | Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport |
| MoLVT | Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training |
| MoSVY | Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation |
| NHGSFP | National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme |
| NSPC | National Social Protection Council |
| NSPPF | National Social Protection Policy Framework |
| PRISM | Platform for Real-time Impact and Situation Monitoring |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SR | Strategic Result (of Country Strategic Plan) |
| SRSP | Shock-responsive social protection |
| THR | take-home rations |
| TWG | Technical Working Group (FSN) |
| WFP | World Food Programme |



1. Introduction

This case study reviews the World Food Programme's (WFP) support to social protection in Cambodia over the last decade. It assesses how WFP has supported the various building blocks of Cambodia's national social protection system, focusing on non-contributory social assistance as the Royal Government of Cambodia's main mechanism for supporting poor and vulnerable people. This is a light-touch exercise, undertaken through a rapid literature review and interviews with WFP current and former staff.

2. Context

Cambodia is a lower middle-income country with a population of around 17.1 million people (National Institute of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, 2023), which has experienced economic growth and a near halving of the poverty headcount in the decade 2009–2019 (Karamba et al., 2022). While inclusive growth has, broadly, improved living standards, rising inequality has prevented an even greater reduction in poverty (Karamba et al., 2022). Nearly one in five Cambodians continue to live in poverty, while around 15 percent live precariously just above the poverty line (Karamba et al., 2022). Poverty rates are higher in rural areas where the majority of the population live (Karamba et al., 2022). A large proportion of the population live in flood-prone areas, dependent on rain-fed agriculture, with limited infrastructure and inadequate early warning systems (WFP, 2021a). Inequities in access to nutritious diets continue to drive high levels of malnutrition, including for nutritionally vulnerable groups (WFP, 2019a; 2019b).

In Cambodia, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (compounded by the impacts of climate-related shocks¹) resulted in the most pronounced economic contraction in the East Asia and Pacific region, with a partial reversal of some of the previous poverty reduction² (Karamba et al., 2022). In 2022, rising food prices threatened food security and nutrition (FSN) in Cambodia (FAO et al., 2022). These events have exposed the country's insufficient economic diversification and the vulnerabilities of the near-poor (Karamba et al., 2022). Low-skilled workers, informal workers and low-income households tend to have minimal savings, high levels of indebtedness, including loans taken during the pandemic, and limited access to safety nets. This makes them highly vulnerable to shocks, including Cambodia's regular floods and droughts³ (Karamba et al., 2022). Vulnerability analyses also highlight deep-rooted intersecting inequalities affecting opportunities and risks for women, children, elderly people, people with disabilities and returning unemployed migrants (WFP, 2022; 2021b; 2019a).

1 Alongside the economic shock of COVID-19 in 2020, a severe COVID-19 outbreak in 2021 and stringent containment policies led to widespread job, income and remittance losses (WFP, 2021a), while flooding made matters worse (for 172,000 households in 2020 and 30,000 households in 2021) leading to damaged cropland, reduced food consumption and increased debt (Wahyudi et al., 2022; WFP, 2021a).

2 Karamba et al. (2022) estimate 460,000 people entered into poverty in 2020 and the poverty rate went up by 2.8 percent.

3 Cambodia faces regular climate hazards and is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (CARD and TWG-FSN, 2021; Wahyudi et al., 2022).

Social protection context

The Government's social protection policy is set out in the National Social Protection Policy Framework 2016–2030 (NSPPF), and framed by the constitutional right to social security for workers and employees and other social benefits for poor and vulnerable groups (Sann, 2011), as well as Cambodia's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commitments, and key national growth and development strategies and plans.⁴ The NSPPF is a road map to expand and improve the governance and delivery of Cambodia's emerging national social protection system, through two pillars: social security (contributory pension, health insurance, employment injury, unemployment and disability allowance) and social assistance (non-contributory cash, food and in-kind transfers and subsidies) (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2017; Wahyudi et al., 2022).

Non-contributory social assistance represents the Government's main mechanism for supporting disadvantaged groups, in particular those living below or near the poverty line, infants, children, pregnant women, families with food insecurity, people with disabilities and elderly people (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2017). Prior to 2020, Cambodia's social assistance was delivered as small, discrete programmes implemented by different ministries, with limited impact on poverty and vulnerability at the macro level (FAO et al., 2020). Since 2020, there has been a dramatic expansion in the coverage of social assistance, with large-scale cash transfers provided in response to COVID-19, floods and inflationary pressures, as well as the expansion of school feeding and educational scholarships. See Table 1. A key mechanism is the IDPoor (Identification of Poor Households) programme database, which is used to identify beneficiaries across social assistance programmes. Established in 2006 and operating



at a large scale nationwide, IDPoor uses a community-based proxy means test to identify the poorest households, providing 'equity cards' for poor households to access social assistance support. In 2022, IDPoor was extended to identify households at risk of falling into poverty (IDPoor n.d.). To strengthen operational coherence across social assistance programmes, cash transfer interventions managed by the National Social Assistance Fund (NSAF) have been consolidated into one 'Family Package', which was officially launched in December 2023 and will be rolled out from April 2024 onwards (Wahyudi et al., 2022).

⁴ These include the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency Phase IV 2019–2023 and the National Strategic Development Plan 2019–2023, as well as the Second National Strategy for FSN 2019–2023.

Table 1: Selected social assistance programmes in Cambodia

| Implementing ministry | Programme | Years | Coverage | Eligibility and targeting |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY), NSAF since 31 March 2022 (sub-decree on the Establishment of the National Social Assistance Fund as a Public Administrative Establishment) | Cash Transfer for Poor and Vulnerable Households during COVID-19 Impact | June 2020 – March 2024 | (2021) 2.7 million people or 690,00 households – 17% of households | Households identified as poor and vulnerable (IDPoor database) |
| | Cash Transfer for Pregnant Women and Young Children | 2019 – ongoing | (2024) 230,778 mothers: prenatal benefits, 50,926 lump sum for public hospital delivery; 118,985 children (0–18 months): cash linked to health check-ups, vaccinations | Pregnant women and children under 2 years holding a valid equity card (IDPoor) or priority card (issued by public hospital or health centre) |
| | Cash Transfer for People with Disabilities | Not known (data from 2016) – ongoing | (2020) 16,373 people: 5% of people in the population with severe or moderate disabilities | Poorest people with severe or moderate disabilities (IDPoor database) |
| Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) | Post-Lockdown Social Assistance in Cash | 2021 | (2021) 400,000 workers and 260,000 households | People living in selected urban areas under lockdown, including workers from selected sectors; nationwide to families where member contracted/died of COVID-19 |
| Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) | Scholarships | Not known (data from 2016) – ongoing | (2020/21) 250,000 children: 7% children in primary schools and 12% in secondary schools receiving scholarships | Poorest households (IDPoor database with input from school management committees) |
| | National Home Grown School Feeding (HGSF) Programme | 2019/20 (1999 – school feeding activities with WFP) | (2021) 72,000 children (and 247,000 through the WFP implemented programme); (2023) 110,000 children (and 180,000 through the WFP implemented programme); 14% of primary schoolchildren (potential overlap with the scholarship beneficiaries) | Pre-primary and primary schoolchildren (poverty and geographic targeting) |
| | | | 2021) Adjusted to provide take-home rations (THR) to 30,000 households during school closures due to COVID-19. | |
| Ministry of Health | Health Equity Fund | Not known – ongoing | (2021) 2.97 million people | Classified as poor holding a valid equity card (IDPoor) or priority card (issued by health centre) |
| Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) | Wage subsidy scheme | 2021 | (2021) 554,988 workers | Workers (mainly in garment and tourism) sectors where business suspended |

Sources: Knox-Vydmanov and Ramírez López, 2022 – and also drawing on Karamba et al., 2022; Kunthea, 2022; MoEYS and WFP, 2022; Wahyudi et al., 2022; WFP, 2021a; WFP staff input.

Recent developments have strengthened government leadership of, and investment in, national social protection. The National Social Protection Council (NSPC), an inter-ministerial body led by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, was established in 2017, with financial and human resources investment in the General Secretariat of the NSPC (GS-NSPC) (Knox-Vydmanov and Ramírez López, 2022). A review of the NSPPF found that NSCP has enabled “unprecedented government ownership and buy-in in social protection policy” (Knox-Vydmanov and Ramírez López, 2022: 2). More recently the global pandemic has spurred on the Government’s interest and investment in how social assistance can be used to respond to shocks,

acting as “a shot of adrenaline in the arm of social protection” (key informant interview (KII)). The Government has expanded its spending on cash transfers in response to COVID-19 and floods, from less than 0.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 to 1.4 percent in 2021, changing to on-demand registration of poor households through the IDPoor programme, and reaching 17 percent of the population (Karamba et al., 2022). This emergency cash transfer response successfully averted a larger rise in poverty in 2020/21 (Karamba et al., 2022). Following this experience, with inflationary price rises in 2022, the Government has again turned to cash transfers to provide additional support to poor and vulnerable people.



3. WFP's objectives and role

WFP has been present in Cambodia since 1979, and the last decade has seen continuity, but also change, in WFP's goal and role in the country (WFP, 2021c). The consistent long-term vision guiding WFP's activities is to support "all Cambodians to have access to sufficient and diverse food at all times to meet their nutritional needs" (WFP, 2011: 8). Strengthening social protection for the poor and vulnerable in Cambodia has been a constant focus for WFP, with social protection the key means to ensure food security for all, in particular through supporting nutrition-sensitive approaches and the resilience of food systems in the face of shocks. WFP's 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan (CSP), for instance, positioned WFP "as a partner to the Government in addressing major cross-cutting concerns in social protection, food security/nutrition and emergency preparedness/response", with a needs-based plan budget (after revisions) of US\$ 80.34 million (WFP, 2022: 17; WFP, 2021a).

Alongside this continuity, there has been a striking change during this period in how the organization perceives its role and added value. Across its global portfolio, WFP has made a deliberate shift "from implementer to enabler", responding to the growing capacities and resources in the

countries it operates in (Visser et al., 2021: ii). This has meant a move away from WFP's traditionally heavy operational presence and the direct implementation of relief and recovery programming to a partnership-based approach – supporting the achievements of the SDGs and nationally owned development through providing advice, strengthening national capacities, and building scalable programme models (WFP, 2018: 3; WFP, 2019b; WFP, 2022).

WFP's role in social protection in Cambodia has pivoted to supporting the building blocks⁵ of the national social protection system, moving away from directly implementing "food-based social safety nets in the sectors of education, nutrition and productive assets/livelihoods support" (WFP, 2011: 9). In 2021, WFP's approach involved supporting "the Government efforts to expand and broaden social protection, by complementing the Government social assistance to people living under the poverty line through dedicated food and cash assistance programmes while supporting the development of policies and programmes on shock-responsive social protection and school feeding and strengthening capacity and systems in relation" (WFP, 2021a: 8). In WFP's CSP 2019–2023, social protection aims and activities had

⁵ As identified in WFP's 2021 Strategy for Support to Social Protection (WFP, 2021d).

been captured under Strategic Objectives 1, 3, 4 and 6 (Table 2).

Table 2: WFP CSP 2019–2023

| Strategic Results (SRs) | Strategic Outcomes | Activities |
|--|--|---|
| SR 1 Everyone has access to food (SDG Target 2.1) | 1. Vulnerable communities in Cambodia have access to nutritious, safe, diverse, convenient, affordable and preferred foods by 2025. | • Home-grown school feeding |
| SR 4 Food systems are sustainable (SDG Target 2.4) | 2. Poor and vulnerable communities in Cambodia are more resilient to shocks and stresses in the food system by 2023. | • Local food systems |
| SR 5 Countries have strengthened capacities to implement the SDGs (SDG 17.9) | 3. National and subnational institutions have strengthened capacities to mitigate risks and lead coordinated shock preparedness and response efforts by 2025. | • Shocks and risk management |
| | 4. National and subnational institutions in Cambodia have strengthened capacities to develop, coordinate and implement well-informed, effective and equitable actions for achieving food security and nutrition targets by 2030. | • Info management technology solutions • Food security and nutrition, and social protection governance |
| SR 8 Enhance Global Partnership (SDG 17.16) | 5. Development and humanitarian partners in Cambodia have access to common supply chain services throughout the year. | • Supply chain services |
| | 6. (Introduced late 2020) Vulnerable people affected by crisis in Cambodia have access to nutrition-sensitive food assistance during and after the crisis. | • Emergency cash transfer programme |

Source: WFP, 2019b.

Moving on for the 2024-2028 CSP, WFP's social protection activities are predicated on the need to enhance national capacities and adopting an integrated approach across the mutually reinforcing systems of social protection, (CSP outcome 1), food systems and disaster management (CSP outcomes 2 and 3) in order to promote healthy diets through nutrition-sensitive approaches (Table 3).

Table 3: WFP CSP 2024-2028

| Strategic Results (SRs) | Strategic Outcomes | Activities |
|---|---|--|
| SR 4: National programmes and systems are strengthened (SDG 17) | 1. By 2028, systems are strengthened for people in Cambodia, particularly women and others most at risk of being left behind, to benefit from improved nutrition, education and social protection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home-grown school feeding (HGSF). • Use of fortified rice in social assistance programmes. • Evidence generation • National Social Protection Policy Framework Update |
| SR 4: National programmes and systems are strengthened (SDG 17) | 2. By 2028, food systems and disaster management systems in Cambodia are strengthened to better support the livelihoods, climate adaptive capacity and ability to manage shocks of people in hazard-prone areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operationalization of the national shock-responsive social protection framework. • Resilience-building for HGSF-linked communities • Capacity strengthening for HGSF-linked government authorities |
| SR 1 People are better able to meet their urgent food and nutrition needs (SDG 2) | 3. Crisis-affected populations in Cambodia are able to meet their food, nutrition and other essential needs during and after crises | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency/Shock-response in alignment with the national system. |

Source: WFP, 2023.





4. Activities

This review focuses on two priority intervention areas for strengthening social protection in Cambodia for WFP – the national institutionalization of the school feeding programme and strengthening shock-responsive social protection.

NATIONAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME:






Jointly with the Government, WFP has supported school feeding in Cambodia since 1999, with a focus on improving access to education, enhancing nutrition and health, and reducing short-term hunger, as well as providing a safety net for vulnerable households through an indirect cash transfer (WFP, 2019b). In 2023, school feeding accounted for 79.8% percent of the overall WFP CSP budget, supported by the Government, as well as Japan, the Korea International Cooperation Agency, the United States Department of Agriculture and private sector donors⁶ (WFP, 2023a). The programme provided school meals and complementary literacy, physical learning environment (in particular water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure) and health and nutrition activities to pre-primary and primary








schoolchildren in 1,114 schools (WFP, 2021a; WFP staff input). WFP's school feeding activities have also in the past included food scholarship (take-home rations or THR) for the most vulnerable students, including girls, to promote enrolment. This evolved into a cash scholarship modality from 2015, transitioning into a government national scholarship programme by the end of 2019 (WFP, 2019). Since 2014, the programme has started to adopt a home-grown school feeding (HGSF) model, which means schools purchase fresh, diverse and locally produced food direct from local farmers and suppliers (MoEYS and WFP, 2022). WFP continues to directly implement school feeding activities in 63 percent of schools (as of 2023), while supporting the gradual handover of all schools and school feeding activities to the government-owned school feeding programme. The agreed transition timeline is to complete the transition by 2028, with WFP continuing to provide a technical advisory role (MoEYS and WFP, 2022).

Table 4 maps the key activities from 2018 to 2023 that supported the national institutionalization of school feeding against the building blocks of Cambodia's national social protection system.

⁶ Organized by value of support (KIL).

Table 4: WFP school feeding activities mapped to social protection building blocks (2018–2023)

| Building blocks of Cambodia's national social protection system | | Activities supporting national institutionalization of school feeding |
|---|---|--|
| SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE |  Policy and Legislation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019: Supported the development of the National HGSF Implementation Framework, the action plan for the transition and expansion of the National HGSF Programme (NHGSFP), endorsed by the Minister of Education and supported by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF). • 2019–present: Supporting the development of the national school meals policy (expected by the end of 2024). • 2020: Supported the development of the inter-ministerial prakas (proclamation), which functions as a Memorandum of Understanding between MoEYS and other ministries, including MEF, and provides official basis for funding the NHGSFP. • 2021–2022: Supporting development and endorsement of the Joint Transition Strategy between MoEYS and WFP. • 2021–2023: Supporting development of a sub-decree to guide inter-ministerial coordination, which has received top-level endorsement and was signed in March 2023. • 2023: Supported the government to organize a study visit to Republic of Korea to learn policy implementation. • 2023: Conducted a SABER workshop and assisted the process of establishing National School Feeding Policy (expected to be endorsed in 2024). |
| |  Governance, capacity and coordination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018–present: Strengthening national and subnational capacity for handover, in particular of MoEYS. • 2015–2019: Handover of cash scholarships programmes. • 2023: Supported the endorsement of the Prakas on the inter-ministerial national school feeding committee (endorsed in February 2024). |
| |  Platforms and infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018–2021: Supported development of a Scholarship Information System, adopted by MoEYS and national rollout with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). • 2020–2022: Developed and piloted a School Feeding Information System; training commune councillors and school staff. • 2018–present: Building school meals infrastructure for handover. • 2023: Supported the government to establish standardized infrastructure, primarily for kitchen facilities for the NHGSFP. |
| |  Planning and financing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2019–present: Supporting MoEYS' annual budget development and advocacy to the MEF to fund the launch and expansion of the NHGSFP. |
| KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING |  Assessments and analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–2021: Oxford Policy Management and WFP study, School feeding amidst a pandemic: Preparing for the new normal in the Asia and Pacific, to identify lessons and policy recommendations from COVID-19 impact on school feeding. • 2017: Supported the study, Home-Grown School Feeding as a “Good Practice” for Poverty Alleviation and Nutrition Security in Cambodia, by the Institute for Development and Peace. • 2017: Supported the study, The Feasibility of the Implementation of School Feeding Programmes in Primary School, by MoEYS. • 2023: Supported the government to conduct a process evaluation as per NSPC's request to assess the current status of the NHGSFP. • 2023: Supported the government in designing a value-for-money study to evaluate the economic impact of the NHGSFP, intended for advocacy purposes to expand the national programme (Expected completion is set for 2025). |

| Building blocks of Cambodia's national social protection system | | Activities supporting national institutionalization of school feeding |
|---|--|---|
| KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING |  Advocacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021: Supported HGSF to be identified as a 'game changer' in Cambodia's road map for food systems for sustainable development. • 2021–2022: Supported the Government to join the global School Meals Coalition and develop national commitments. • 2023: Supported the Minister of MoEYS (Deputy Prime Minister) to join the Global School Meal Coalition Summit held in Paris to increase visibility of the Cambodia SF and discuss regional commitments to SF with ASEAN countries. |
| |  Engagement and communications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2018–present: Promoting the role of women in the implementation and management of HGSF programme activities. |
| |  Monitoring, evaluation and learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2022/23–present: Supporting the development of a national Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework for school feeding. • 2018–present: Tracking gender roles through the HGSF programme, identifying it as an important contributor to gender equality. • 2023: Producing a transition checklist to monitor the readiness of schools for handover. |
| PROGRAMME FEATURES |  Design of programme parameters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2022: Developed a 'programme document' highlighting the key parameters of the programme design. • 2018–present: Joint government/WFP development of the HGSF model and drafting of the national HGSF manual. • 2023: assisted the government in establishing nutrition guidelines to meet minimum nutritional requirements for school meals and the development of the standards on food safety and quality guidelines. • 2023: supported the government to pilot different procurement models for the NHGSFP. |
| |  Registration and enrolment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021–present: Developing a methodology to prioritize the most vulnerable areas based on multi-dimensional indicators on poverty, education and nutrition. • 2019–present: Design, roll-out and national and subnational capacity strengthening for an M&E and accountability system for scholarships and school feeding. |
| |  Benefit delivery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020: MoEYS and WFP repurposed and delivered school meals as THR for children of most vulnerable households that receive school meals when schools closed as a response to COVID-19. • 2018–present: Developing a delivery model based on cash to schools to procure local commodities (home-grown model) based on the government preference for delivery. |
| |  Accountability, protection and assurance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–present: Supporting provincial officials to gather feedback and complaints from programme beneficiaries, developing monitoring checklists to track concerns. Engaging communities in planning THR through local school feeding committees and clear communications with beneficiaries. • 2020–present: Supporting the development of school feeding committees at school, district, provincial and national levels. • 2023: Conducted gender-responsive and disability inclusion studies to inform the sustainable NHGSFP. |






Sources: WFP Annual Country Reports 2018–2023; WFP staff input.








STRENGTHENING NATIONAL SHOCK-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION (SRSP)

WFP has supported a series of SRSP activities since 2017, including through SRSP evidence generation, technical support for policy development and programme parameters, and promoting linkages between anticipatory action and shock-responsive social protection, bringing disaster response and social actors together (WFP, 2021a). A key activity has been technical assistance to the GS-NSPC to support: (i) the development of the consultation-based SRSP Framework to inform

the Government’s policy and coordination of SRSP in Cambodia; and (ii) operationalization of the Framework. Also, in response to the impacts of COVID-19 and floods, WFP provided an emergency cash transfer programme in 2021. With support from GIZ, the German agency for international cooperation, WFP commissioned operational research to capture learning from this experience and help inform future national shock-responsive social assistance. Table 5 maps these and other key activities from 2018–2023 that supported SRSP against the building blocks of Cambodia’s national social protection system.

Table 5: WFP SRSP activities mapped to social protection building blocks (2018–2023)

| Building blocks of Cambodia’s national social protection system | | Activities supporting SRSP |
|---|---|---|
| SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE |  Policy and Legislation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–2023: Supporting development of an SRSP Framework, which has been officially endorsed by the PM in December 2023 • 2022-2023: Join the public consultations on the review and update of the NSPPF 2030 • 2022-2024: Supporting the development of the SRSP Framework operational plan. |
| |  Governance, capacity and coordination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–2021: Technical support to the GS-NSPC to produce the SRSP Framework, through stakeholder consultations. • 2020: Capacity strengthening on SRSP to ensure that the government counterparts are well equipped to take relevant actions in exploring and aligning the policy framework and implementation of the national social protection systems. |
| |  Platforms and infrastructure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–2022: Supporting development and roll-out of on-demand IDPoor system, through support to the Ministry of Planning. • 2021–2022: Use of IDPoor for targeting and beneficiary selection for the WFP flood emergency cash transfer programme. • 2021–present: Supporting expansion of Platform for Real-time Impact and Situation Monitoring (PRISM) to prioritize assistance to populations exposed to climate hazards. |
| |  Planning and financing | |
| KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING |  Assessments and analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020–2021: Conducted risk analytics, including developing a vulnerability index to understand which areas might be the most vulnerable to floods or droughts, and a set of thresholds, as triggers for a response that could be connected to social protection. • 2019–2020: Supported analytical study to better understand how essential needs might be impacted in the event of shocks, providing further evidence for ongoing efforts to strengthen disaster preparedness and social protection mechanisms. Contributed to analysis to support policy options and country road map for SRSP (under the ECHO-funded project led by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)). |

| Building blocks of Cambodia's national social protection system | | Activities supporting SRSP |
|---|--|--|
| KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING |  Advocacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020: WFP and other UN agencies advocated for scale-up of COVID-19 social protection activities, contributing to roll-out of nationwide cash transfer. |
| |  Engagement and communications | |
| |  Monitoring, evaluation and learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021/22: Operational research on WFP's emergency cash transfer programme to inform the design and operationalization of SRSP Framework. |
| PROGRAMME FEATURES |  Design of programme parameters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021–present: Technical support on designing nutritious food assistance rations to inform the Government's assistance package to vulnerable people in lockdown. • 2021–present: Analysis of the Minimum Expenditure Basket – updated in 2022 with partners to support harmonization of transfer values. The updated Minimum Expenditure Basket has already been used by NSPC and MoSVY for transfer value determination. The aim is for it to become part of national policy/guidelines for the design of social protection programmes. |
| |  Registration and enrolment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2020: Supported the Ministry of Planning's roll-out of the on-demand IDPoor system to respond to COVID-19, to identify newly poor households and register them in the social assistance programmes. |
| |  Benefit delivery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021: WFP emergency cash transfer programme designed as a prototype to inform potential future shock-responsive social assistance schemes. |
| |  Accountability, protection and assurance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021: WFP emergency cash transfer programme paid special attention to accountability to affected populations, with mainstreaming of disability inclusion – lessons learned brought out in operational research to inform future government programmes. |

Sources: WFP Annual Country Reports 2018–2023; WFP staff input.

5. Results

National institutionalization of school feeding

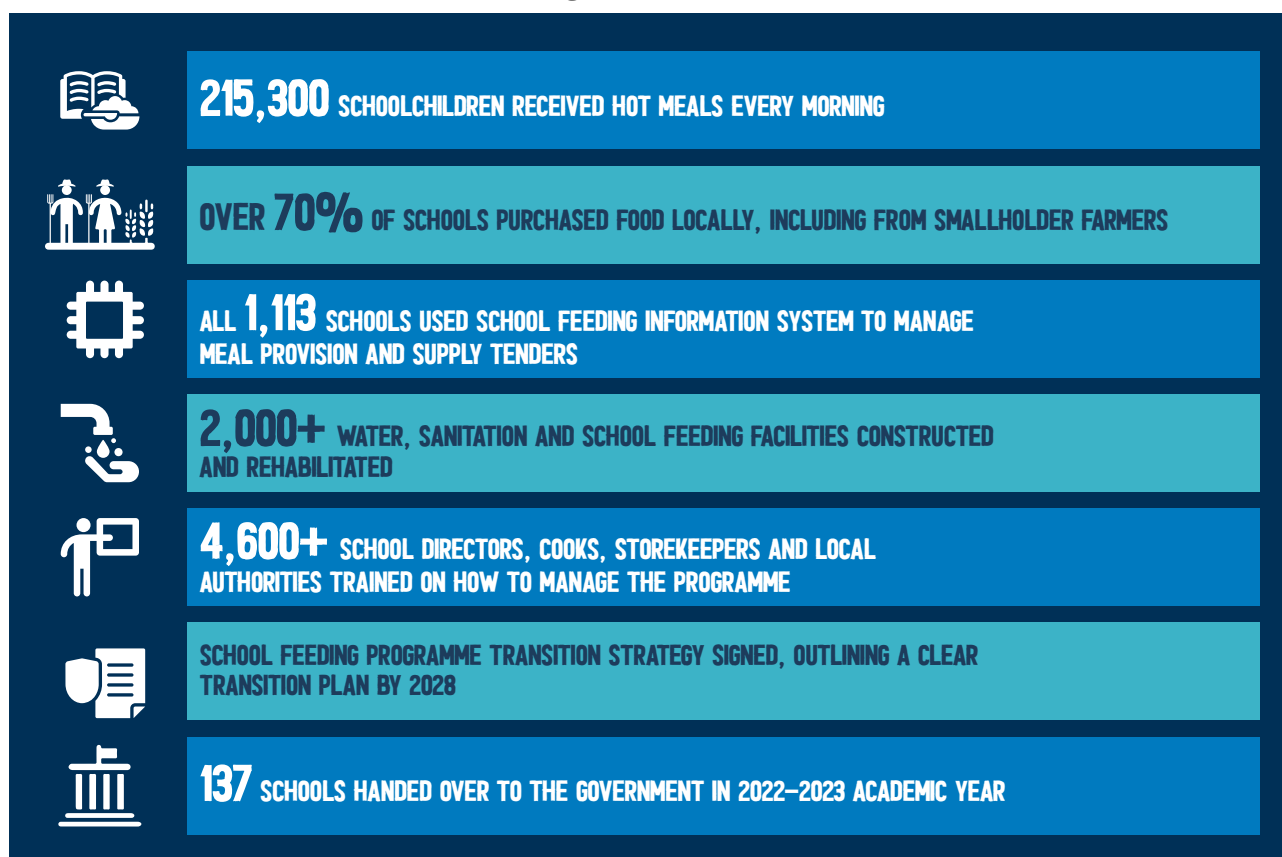
Dunn et al. (2020: 42) commended MoEYS and WFP on the “significant progress” in transitioning school feeding activities to national ownership during 2017–2019, which has continued in 2020–2021, albeit at a slower rate than planned during the pandemic (WFP, 2021a: viii). In 2021, 290 schools (72,000 children) were managed by the Government⁷ (WFP, 2021a).

Key advances have included WFP support to MoEYS to develop: (i) “a sub-decree to facilitate inter-sectoral collaboration between 11 ministries over the national school feeding programme” (adopted in March 2023)(WFP, 2021a: 15); and (ii) the 2022 Joint Transition Strategy (updating the 2015 road map), which sets out the handover steps and associated capacity-building plan with a timeline (MoEYS and WFP, 2022). In addition, national ownership and cross-sectoral coordination of the HGFS model has been strengthened by a MoEYS and WFP facilitated dialogue on HGFS, with line ministries and other key stakeholders in the national consultation for the Food Systems Summit (FSS), leading to HGFS being included in the national FSS road map (WFP, 2021a).

⁷ The Joint Transition Strategy aims for a target of 685 schools in 33 districts by 2025 and the full handover of 1,113 schools by 2028 (MoEYS and WFP, 2022: ii).

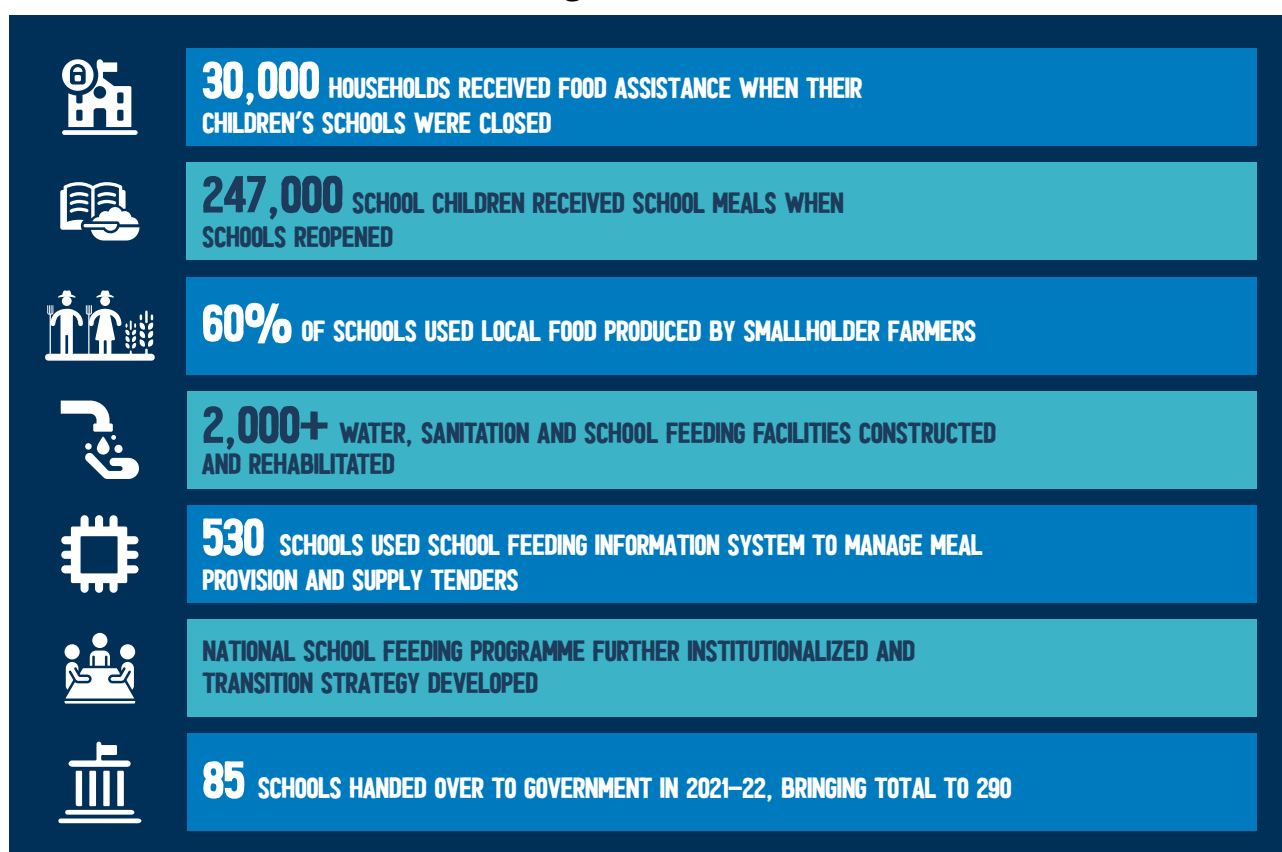


Box 1: 2022 results in school feeding



Source: WFP, 2022a.

Box 2: 2021 results in school feeding



Source: WFP, 2021b

On strengthening country capacities, results at the national level include: development of a sub-decree and draft policy; strengthened coordination mechanism for programme management; development of the national HGSF programme Theory of Change and M&E Framework; a draft HGSF manual; a standard infrastructure package; and COVID-19-related standard operating procedures (WFP, 2021a; WFP staff input). Moreover, the capacity strengthening to subnational authorities and local stakeholders and infrastructure built under the WFP programme continues to support the transition, with fully fitted schools prioritized for handover (WFP, 2021a).

There has also been progress on strengthening school feeding digital systems and related government capacity (WFP, 2021a). WFP migrated the Scholarship Information System and data to the MoEYS server and provided refresher trainings to 96 officials in five provinces. MoEYS is now using the system to administer its scholarship programme. In 2021, WFP tested the School Feeding Information System – which provides management output data and reporting – to meet the needs of end-users (school directors and local government staff), and WFP and MoEYS provided

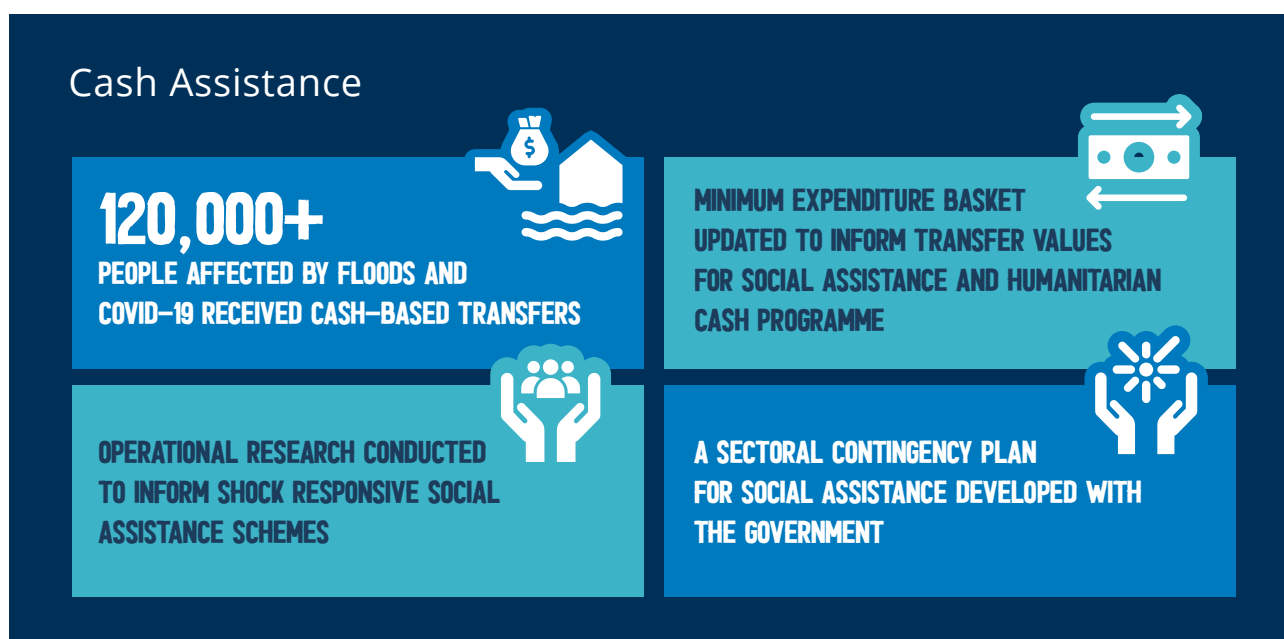
training to 150 subnational officials (WFP, 2021a). Most training was adapted during the pandemic to be delivered virtually. However, overall, the total number of capacity-strengthening activities was below target, due to government postponement of the digital roll-out to some provinces (WFP, 2021a). From 2022, the system has been rolled out to all 1,113 schools to manage meal provision and the supplier tendering process.

Shock-responsive social protection

The landmark development on SRSP is the consultation-based draft SRSP Framework, developed by GS-NSPC with WFP technical assistance, which was endorsed in December 2023. The draft policy is already being used to align donors' support for SRSP (by the World Bank and Japan, for example) (KII).

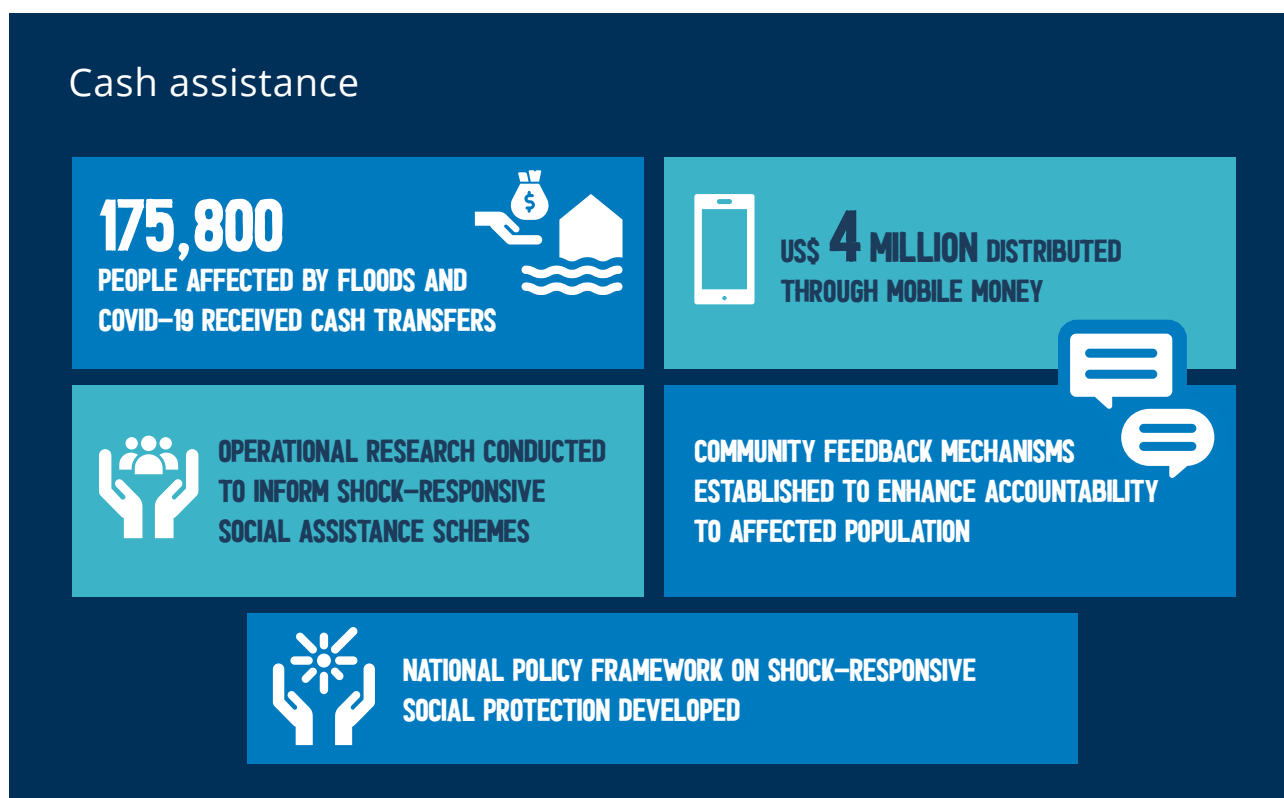
Another key result has been strengthened linkages and synergies between anticipatory action and shock-responsive social protection, assisted in 2021 by WFP facilitating a joint workshop with the National Committee for Disaster Management

Box 3: 2022 results in SRSP



Source: WFP, 2022a.

Box 4: 2021 results in SRSP



Source: WFP, 2021b

and MoSVY. This “resulted in the issuance of operational guidelines for provincial departments of social affairs on flood response, a policy brief on anticipatory action and an agreement to produce a contingency plan for social assistance” (WFP, 2021a: 20). This social assistance contingency plan for floods has been drafted and finalised in 2023 and at the time of writing this report was awaiting endorsement. Moreover, WFP’s collaboration with the Council for Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) and GS-NSPC as part of the national FSS discussion, helped to facilitate an in-depth dialogue on shock-responsive social protection, informing the Government’s FSS road map and strengthening commitments to end malnutrition (WFP, 2021a).

On programme parameters, WFP’s technical support on nutritious food assistance rations helped inform the design of the Government’s assistance package to vulnerable people in lockdown areas, while the WFP analysis on the Minimum Expenditure Basket has helped to

strengthen the Government’s understanding of this analytical tool and its potential for harmonizing transfer values for social assistance programmes (WFP, 2021a).

WFP’s emergency cash assistance in 2021 helped 175,800 people (38,985 households) affected by floods and COVID-19. WFP explored options to provide the crisis response through the Government; however, various concerns⁸ led to the decision to undertake a separate WFP cash transfer programme (albeit one that uses some of the key national systems – IDPoor for targeting and WING for the financial transfers) (KII). The programme was designed in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning, MoSVY and NSPC “to ensure synergies with the national cash transfer programme as a way to inform efforts to make social assistance more responsive to climate shocks” (WFP, 2021a: 26). The operational research on this experience has produced useful learning for the Government and all actors supporting SRSP in Cambodia to take forward.

⁸ These included concerns about the potential for a temporary benefit to confuse existing beneficiaries and raise expectations, as well as complications for governmental budget management (KII).

6. Lessons Learned

In Cambodia, WFP has been supporting the national social protection system through two priority intervention areas – the national institutionalization of school feeding and shock-responsive social protection (SRSP). Through a holistic approach, it has undertaken complementary and reinforcing activities to simultaneously support multiple building blocks of the national system i.e., those concerning i) the system architecture, (ii) knowledge and learning, and (iii) programme features. While such a holistic approach to strengthening the national system has evolved over time for WFP in Cambodia, it is set out as key in the 2021 WFP Strategy for Support to Social Protection (WFP, 2021d). This case study offers various lessons learned in WFP’s transition from the role of an implementer to also that of an enabler, centred on a capacity-strengthening approach.

WFP’s technical expertise, across the school feeding and programme implementation domains, among others, has contributed significantly to its added value in supporting the Cambodian social protection system as a longstanding partner of the Government. Its corporate strategy on social protection is perceived to have assisted in defining a clearer conceptual framework for WFP’s engagement in social protection, as well as explaining its potential to support social protection that is both shock-responsive and food-security- and nutrition-sensitive. Well-placed to engage with the increasing interest in SRSP both within Cambodia and globally, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, WFP was able to respond effectively to the government’s request for assistance in responding to increased needs in 2020/21 (KII). This was, in part, due to WFP Cambodia’s trusted relationships with government



actors and its recognized and longstanding experience in emergency cash transfers, disaster risk management and climate risk and early warning analytics (KII).

It is also noteworthy to add that a key enabler for WFP has been its country strategy planning processes that has allowed the organization to set out its strategic approach to social protection across individual activities within the country programme. For instance, linkages between school feeding and social protection are highlighted in the 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) “in terms of work on policy, partnerships and capacity-strengthening” (Visser et al., 2021: 38). This is in line with the Government’s integration of school feeding as a key social assistance intervention in Cambodia’s National Social Protection Policy Framework. The potential benefits of moving to a more integrated approach, such as through the possibility of having one, integrated strategic objective on social protection (which was absent from the 2019-2023 CSP), that brings together all of WFP’s social protection activities, was being explored for the next strategic phase (KII).

The 2019–2023 CSP also highlights synergies and cross-fertilization between WFP engagement on different sectors/themes, in particular social protection, climate risk management, and food security and nutrition (WFP, 2021b: 8). Having worked across multiple fronts, such as on vulnerability assessments, anticipatory data management system, and on how social protection can be shock-responsive – with the respective leading government actors, the National Social Protection Council (NSPC) and the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM)-WFP was able to successfully advocate for and support

integration of the SRSP policy framework into the Government’s disaster management architecture, as well as support closer coordination and working relations between the NSPC and NCDM (KIIs). Such engagements focused on the sensitisation of SRSP concepts among NCDM technical staff, as well as fostering government will and commitment to the cause over the long-term (KIIs).

A global finding on transitioning to nationally owned school feeding programmes is that transition strategies need to be realistic, gradual, comprehensive, and monitored, with sufficient support and pre-assessment of country readiness, capacities, challenges, and risks (Visser et al., 2021: x). Hence, a key lesson for WFP – in particular from the handover of the scholarship programme - has been the importance of maintaining a supportive advisory role in relation with the government, and if needed, continuing to organize the provision of technical support for programme design, financing, implementation, and coordination (KII) in the aftermath of handover. Additional enablers of effectiveness in supporting the national social protection system, identified through this review, included responding to a constrained funding environment (which led to ‘difficult choices over resource allocation’ (Ravesloot et al., 2018: 14)) with securing a broad donor base with multi-year funding to provide flexibility and longer-term predictability (WFP, 2021a: 11), as well as strengthening internal capacity of technical social protection knowledge and skill (KII).

Over the years, WFP has invested in numerous analyses and assessments on various aspects of the social protection system and specific programmes in Cambodia, communicating gained knowledge and learnings to support the

Government's use of evidence to inform policy and decision-making. Alongside financial and technical support for information management and policy planning, this has strengthened evidence-based policy decision-making (Ravesloot et al., 2018). One key piece of research undertaken in 2022 - with support from GIZ (the German agency for international cooperation) - was the study to capture learnings from the experience of WFP's emergency cash assistance in 2021 for people affected by floods and COVID-19, which was aimed at informing future SRSP efforts by the Government and development partners (Wahyudi et al., 2022). In addition, South-South cooperation has also been highlighted as an important tool for advocacy and learning. One area for future improvement identified by the 2021 country audit was the need for more effective generation of evidence on WFP's country capacity-strengthening activities (WFP, 2021c).

Two other key areas showed room for improvement: on gender and on WFP capacities:

- The 2011 country programme planning did not integrate a gender-sensitive approach, although an independent evaluation of WFP activities 2011-2017 still found some positive promotion of women's inclusion (Ravesloot et al., 2018: xi). In planning the 2021 WFP emergency cash transfer, WFP set out to understand enablers and obstacles for inclusion of women and people living with disabilities, organising focus group discussion (WFP, 2021a). However, Wahyudi et al. (2022: 38) found that the programme added requirements to the IDPoor standard registration programme, which some vulnerable households could not meet, leading to their exclusion. WFP continues to focus on strengthening of inclusion and consideration of inclusion issues in support to Cambodia's national social protection system

(KII). For example, WFP is building on efforts to mainstream and standardize disability data collection methodologies (WFP, 2021a), while the HGSP programme seeks to support women smallholder farmers and promote a gender balance in school cooks (KII).

- With the shift from implementer to enabler, the WFP country office (CO) was restructured and rationalised to fit its new institutional role, with a focus on securing new skills and establishing the appropriate corporate processes (WFP, 2019b). In 2019 areas of reform identified included: enhancing gender parity and competences (gender parity was increased to 49% in 2021 (WFP, 2021a)); increasing the number of national staff in senior leadership roles; and expanding technical capacities (including in 'climate change adaptation, innovative disaster risk reduction strategies and information technologies') (WFP, 2019b: 26). In 2021 the country audit identified that additional capacity and skills were needed to implement all of the strategic outcomes in the revised CSP (with gaps in cash-based transfer expertise highlighted) (WFP, 2021c). Staff re-deployment and shortages were reported to affect the continuity of capacity within the CO to achieve desired social protection objectives (KIIs).

In sum, WFP's enabling role within Cambodia's social protection landscape reflects its expertise in school feeding and SRSP. The organisation's transition from implementer to also that of an enabler supporting national systems and Cambodia's social protection priorities has been facilitated by multi-year commitments, evidence-based advocacy and South-South cooperation. Key learning includes the importance of sustained assistance following the handover of programmes, embedding a gender-sensitive approach, and investing in staff capacities and skills on social protection.

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Annex: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview 1, WFP Staff (2022). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 11th December 2022. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.

Key Informant Interview 2, WFP Staff (2022). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 16th December 2022. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.

Key Informant Interview 3, former WFP Staff (2022). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 11th December 2022. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.

Key Informant Interview 4, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 4th January 2023. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.

Key Informant Interview 5, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 12th January 2023. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.

Key Informant Interview 6, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Becky Carter conducted on 13th January 2023. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Cambodia.



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