



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

THEMATIC CASE STUDY

Digitalization

Flexible Systems-Effective Responses?

Regional Evaluation of WFP's contribution to Shock-Responsive Social Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean (2015-2022)

WFP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean

January 2024

INTRODUCTION

The present case study was conducted as a part of the Regional Evaluation of World Food Programme's (WFP) Contribution to Shock-Responsive Social Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). At the onset of the evaluation, the evaluation team identified that digitalization and WFP's collaboration with governments in this topic as innovative given its importance for making social protection systems more responsive. Building on this insight, the evaluation team analysed relevant data collected during the evaluation process.¹ Three additional interviews were subsequently conducted with individuals exclusively involved in this domain from the Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean (RBP). Furthermore, a review of relevant literature was carried out, alongside a region-wide survey. This survey encompassed a question about digitalization, which garnered responses from 71 participants from 20 LAC countries.



¹ In seven interviews, the concept of digitalization (or related terms) was mentioned when discussing collaboration mechanisms, comparative advantages, or capacity strengthening.

WHY IS **DIGITALIZATION** IMPORTANT TO MAKING **SOCIAL PROTECTION** **MORE RESPONSIVE** TO SHOCKS?

Digitalization plays a crucial role in social protection, particularly when it comes to effectively **responding to shocks**. Firstly, technology interventions **bring efficiency by transitioning from time-consuming manual processes to faster digital ones**. The digitalization process also allows for a thorough review of existing procedures (like beneficiary registry or delivery of benefits), identifying areas where steps can be integrated to make the process even more efficient. As such, a more efficient response enables a timelier reaction to a shock.

Moreover, digitalization not only saves time but also **enhances overall operational effectiveness**. By digitalizing processes, social protection ministries can **reduce the risks of errors in manual information handling** while also **having real-time monitoring of implementation** that facilitates better decision-making. Digitalization allows for the automation of data collection, storage, and analysis, minimizing the chances of human error and ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information. This streamlined data management system enables agencies to have up-to-date data on beneficiaries, programme implementation, and outcomes, providing a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of their interventions.

The evaluation team identified cases of prioritization dilemma between actions that can strengthen the social protection system addressing structural causes and the ones addressing its shock-responsiveness. It was mentioned in interviews that, in contexts with limited resources, allocating staff and resources to create activation processes for monetary transfers in the event of a climate-related disaster could compromise efforts to identify and register people living in poverty who reside in areas less vulnerable to disasters. However, digitalization is a tool that allows for strengthening the system to address both aspects as the same solution serves to simplify processes, expedite deployment, increase efficiency, and improve administration. Ultimately, the digitalization of payments through an application that is used by all programmes could benefit both people affected by a disaster and those seeking to benefit from a programme that addresses structural causes.

CONTEXT: EVOLUTION OF WFP'S CORPORATE ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITALIZATION



Figure 1. Using SCOPE to register beneficiaries

To implement programmes that require handling information about identities and beneficiary delivery processes, **WFP developed its own tool: the System for Identification and Registration of Beneficiaries (SCOPE), a digital platform to register and manage beneficiary data of humanitarian/social protection assistance.** Both the experience with its own system and in implementing large-scale emergency programmes positions WFP as a key player with respect to strengthening social protection systems through digitalization processes (see Figure 1).

According to interviews with WFP staff, as governments became more aware of SCOPE, some began to use this platform for their own national programmes, starting with the Government of Namibia in 2016 and followed by other governments worldwide. In response to this interest, **WFP provided SCOPE to governments and trained their staff**

to use it throughout the programme cycle including for **registration, delivery, and information management.** With this collaboration, not only was a technological tool provided but also relevant knowledge. Interviewees from WFP's Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean with wider WFP experience noted that although this support managed to improve processes during the collaboration period, **the improved governmental capacities were not sustainable, as governments still lacked a similar system** that could endure over time without SCOPE. Therefore, the revised and **current strategy to support governments in digitalization processes is not to use the corporate system, but to strengthen capacities** within the countries to enable them to digitalize their processes.

Based on this idea, RBP personnel commented that they have sought to promote the development of capacities to digitalize processes (instead of using SCOPE) in the collaborations carried out with countries. To promote these capacities, in 2023 a **new staff position was created to assist country offices in their interaction with governments with respect to digitalization.** The **role that WFP aims to fulfil now is that of a technological advisor,** helping countries develop or procure a robust technological infrastructure. Among these advisory services, WFP plans to support countries in risk identification through established methodologies at different stages of the programme process, addressing risks on topics such as data privacy, ghost beneficiaries, and database manipulation. Additionally, WFP is identifying technology service providers to expedite the procurement process, as the organization recognizes that at a certain scale, it is necessary to engage in market-based contracting for such initiatives.

"The most important strategy now is to be technological advisors. Organizations and governments go through a maturity cycle, which is similar to what happened to WFP. At the beginning, we didn't know how to do it. It's not just about having a developer, but a framework: cybersecurity, hosting, storage, business analysis. These are elements that we are now beginning to integrate so that the advice becomes more comprehensive for digital transformation". – WFP staff

KEY EXPERIENCES IN LAC

Besides this new strategy to advise countries to strengthen their systems, there are previous experiences and collaborations that warrant mention, particularly in the Caribbean where emergency response support has created an opportunity to test digital solutions with the potential to address longstanding challenges.

In **Dominica**, WFP provided assistance to the government in implementing a cash-based transfer (CBT) response programme following the impact of Hurricane Maria in 2017. This experience highlighted the crucial need to digitalize specific processes for future responses. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the Government of Dominica sought WFP's support in overseeing the entire data collection cycle for the Social Cash Transfers Programme. Instead of relying on paper forms, **WFP introduced digital tools for beneficiary registration and selection**. This shift allowed the government to **access real-time disaggregated data for informed decision-making**. Additionally, **WFP developed a QR code-based payment system for each recipient**, replacing the previous manual process that involved Village Councils collecting paper signatures and reporting their activities in the capital. Through this programme, **9,361 individuals received cash transfers**. These digitalization efforts not only facilitated timely decision-making but also paved the way for **broader digital transformation** within social protection processes, ultimately resulting in the establishment of a Management Information System for the Public Assistance Programme in 2022.²

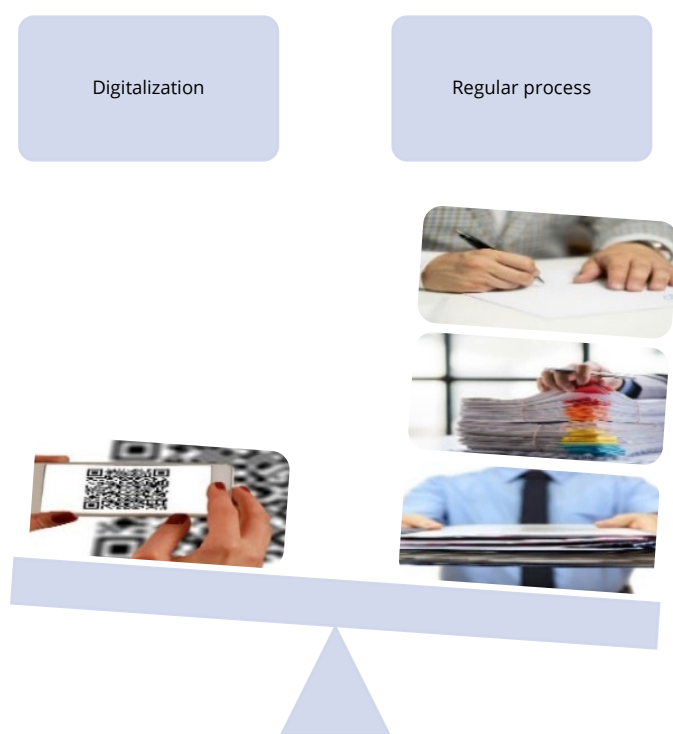
In 2021, the collaborative efforts of the Government of **Jamaica** and WFP led to the implementation of a digital solution for delivering CBT to vulnerable persons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The selection of beneficiaries was based on data obtained from a previous WFP food initiative, with thorough eligibility verification conducted by Government officers. Departing from the traditional method of issuing cheques used in the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH), the Government expressed interest in adopting **digital wallets to facilitate contactless transactions and reduce administrative burdens**. WiPay, a payment facilitation company in the Caribbean, was contracted and initially **sent QR codes for cash redemption at designated locations**. Later, beneficiaries migrated over to WiPay financial system. This pioneering pilot initiative laid a solid foundation for further exploration and experimentation with fully digital solutions in three specific parishes. Encouraged by the positive feedback received from recipients, the Government, in close collaboration with WFP, embarked on refining various facets of the emergency response processes, including form design, registration mechanisms, and data visualization tools.³



² Lorenzon and Katkhoda. (2023). Going Digital: Digital Development and Strengthening of Social Protection in the Caribbean WFP

³ Idem.

Figure 2. Digitalization vs. regular process



Source: own elaboration with images from Pixabay.

the consolidation of social assistance programmes under the Ministry of Social Development. In response to the need for data that were typically collected manually, the government sought assistance from WFP to optimize this process. As a result, WFP worked with the government **to create an electronic information system**. In addition to digitalizing a manual process, the mapping of functions made by WFP **allowed for an examination of steps that could be merged to avoid duplication**, as well as refining data collection instruments (as portrayed in Figure 2). In parallel to this system, the development of software is underway to function as a social registry, making inter-operational the registries from different programmes and sectors.⁴

Similarly, in Latin America, there are some other interesting experiences of digitalization. According to interviews carried out with WFP Regional Bureau staff, the Government of **Guatemala** requested WFP's assistance in delivering food kits during the pandemic. While the government was responsible for the actual distribution, the information was registered in **SCOPE** to ensure transparency and accountability. This project, which involved the delivery of food baskets amounting to **125 million USD**, presented a significant challenge as the Government typically worked with CBT rather than in-kind distributions. However, **the project successfully showcased the potential of digitalization for enhancing transparency and accountability** in social protection programmes.

WFP significantly contributed to the single beneficiary registry (Sistema Único de Beneficiarios - SIUBEN) in **the Dominican Republic** through various missions, including the installation of web mapping. For example, **WFP provided** technical assistance to support **training on the web mapping platform** with the assistance of facilitators from other WFP offices and the Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The work in **British Virgin Islands** provides a compelling example of the benefits of **digitalization for the review of administrative procedures that also generate greater efficiency**. As a response to the hurricane season in 2017, CBT delivery was aligned with the Public Assistance Programme. This experience highlighted the need for a shock-responsive social protection system, resulting in discussions and collaboration between WFP and the government to prepare the system for future years. Based on this discussion, WFP helped to design and implement a targeting and registration tool for emergency responses that was used for delivering benefits during the pandemic. However, it was evident that this tool was better suited for climate-related shocks, instead of socioeconomic shocks like the pandemic. This lesson, together with legislative changes towards greater transparency, prompted a reassessment of eligibility criteria and

⁴ Lorenzon and Katkhoda. (2023). Going Digital: Digital Development and Strengthening of Social Protection in the Caribbean. WFP.

88%

of LAC government staff that answered the survey responded that WFP brings a clear value-added in supporting the use of digitalization in relation to other partners promoting SRSP in the region.

This support was crucial for establishing the mapping service and teaching SIUBEN staff how to use and implement the platform effectively. Moreover, **WFP's collaboration with SIUBEN aimed to democratize data and make it accessible to the public.** Despite the historically strong technical capacities of SIUBEN, which have allowed them to register 60% of the Dominican population, WFP played a vital role in further strengthening their agenda. More recently, WFP participated in the "Dominicana Innova 2023" National Drone Congress. This event, co-organized by the Government's Office of Information and Communication Technologies and the Innovation Cabinet, served as a platform for sharing knowledge. During a panel discussion entitled "*Drones: Allies in Search, Rescue, and Emergency*" WFP shared its expertise in using drone technology for assessment, search, rescue, and monitoring during emergencies and disasters, especially in challenging and isolated areas.

In **Haiti**, WFP RBP and HQ staff commented that they collaborated with the World Bank to establish SCOPE as a beneficiary registration, payment and management system. However, the implementation faced some challenges in terms of data exchange among different agencies. Additionally, WFP collected data on beneficiary payments from multiple sources to generate reports, which added value by integrating information that was then subsequently used by the government and donors to make data-driven decisions. Several agencies including WFP contributed to **strengthening Haiti's social registry**. This has allowed an **increase in the coverage** of the social registry (from 7% to 30% of the population), but above all, it has begun to serve as **one of the databases used to design different interventions, both by the government and its partners**. This effort of collecting, systematizing, and digitalizing information has been accompanied by an effort **to promote digital payments**. Currently, there is an attempt to link the information from the social registry with cell phones using digital payment applications, in order to be quickly utilized in emergency situations.



ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Below, the main enablers and barriers in WFP engagement in digitalization are summarized.

Enablers

The success of several **pilot projects demonstrates the significant benefits of such investments, expanding collaboration between WFP and governments** and transforming the recipient agency into a **strategic partner rather than a reactive entity**.

The Latin America and the Caribbean region has **broad programme coverage and comprehensive information systems, a foundation** upon which **to build** and improve social protection systems to make them more responsive to shocks.

Barriers

According to interviews with WFP staff, there **is still a lack of awareness amongst governments regarding the importance of investing in digitalization processes**, as these are often **perceived as a cost rather than a long-term investment**.

While the region excels in managing information in terms of indicators (since countries generally have aggregated information on the number of beneficiaries and their comparison with established targets), **there is a limitation when it comes to identity-related data**. With this limitation, it is possible to know if a person receives a specific programme, but it is difficult to connect different databases together to know the full range of different programmes that the same person receives.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A proactive strategy and long-term vision are essential to continuing strengthening capacities in digitalization.

Indeed, the digital transformation team in WFP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean acknowledges the need to move beyond a reactive approach, where they solely respond to project invitations, and instead develop a comprehensive strategy that involves engagement with governments and their active participation in programme design. By shifting the perception from being considered merely a cost or maintenance center to becoming strategic partners, the team not only contributes to WFP's operations but also **increasingly becomes involved in the design phase**. Through involvement in all project phases, the team has learned that collaboration should always be consultative rather than imperative, fostering a culture of continuous learning. In respect to collaboration, there is an opportunity for WFP to **explore different partnerships with the private sector**, which can leverage its expertise and resources to drive digitalization initiatives. Establishing partnerships that involve cost-sharing or preferential pricing can also help bridge funding gaps.

"The places where we have seen a different response are where there has been an investment, as it regenerates back to the country offices... they are now positioned differently to engage with the government, even in matters unrelated to the original project, but it generated legitimacy. Investing in the talent that manages technology is an investment, not an expense." – WFP staff

The examples described in this case study demonstrate that **digitalization can play an important role in making social protection systems more responsive** and better able to address both shocks and structural causes. Various experiences of digitalization in the region showcase its benefits. These experiences, often pilot projects, have increased collaboration with governments, paving the way for future work in this area. In this regard, **investment in digitalization seems to yield clear returns as it also opens up areas for further collaboration to strengthen social protection systems**. Therefore, there is a need for a shift in mindset regarding how technology as such is perceived, recognizing it as **a long-term investment rather than a mere support or maintenance cost**.

Similarly, digitalization triggers the **review of other types of processes that also optimize performance**: when digitalizing procedures, it is common to assess the necessity of requirements, identifying steps that can be integrated, or find ways to make a component more efficient. Moreover, **digitalization has the potential not only to enhance process efficiency but also to bolster its effectiveness**: real-time, disaggregated information empowers decision-makers to make well-informed choices, enabling more precise and timely responses during crises. Moreover, the benefits of digitalization extend beyond shocks, as it enables data-driven strategies to tackle broader challenges and improve overall programme performance.

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THEMATIC CASE STUDY DIGITALIZATION

Flexible Systems-Effective Responses?

Regional Evaluation of WFP's contribution to Shock-Responsive Social Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean (2015-2022)

Decentralized Evaluation

WFP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean