



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES

Evaluation of the WFP Transitional and Interim Country Strategic Plans in Syrian Arab Republic 2018–2025

CONTEXT

The crisis in Syria started in 2011 and continues to take a heavy toll on the life of Syrian people. In 2018, the country was reclassified as a low-income country. Economic deterioration, accelerated by the financial crises in Lebanon and Türkiye, as well as the impacts of the war in Ukraine, climate-related shocks, COVID-19 and the 2023 earthquake have increased vulnerabilities further.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

WFP has been present in Syria since 1964 and its assistance approach shifted over time towards development-oriented projects until the start of the crisis in 2011. The Transitional-Interim Country Strategic Plan (T-ICSP) 2018 transitioned into providing livelihood-focused activities while maintaining food assistance to the most vulnerable. The ICSP 2019-2021 added support services to humanitarian partners across Syria; provided lifesaving assistance and aimed to increase both resilience of affected communities and general food assistance, through four Budget Revisions between 2019-2021. The Syria ICSP 2022–2023 (extended to December 2025), aimed at responding to growing food and nutrition needs.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation was to provide evaluative evidence for accountability and learning to inform the next programme. It covered WFP interventions implemented between 2018 and June 2023. It assessed WFP's relevance, strategic positioning, and coherence, its contribution to outcomes, efficiency in implementation, and the factors explaining performance.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Extent the country strategic plan is evidence-based and strategically focused to address the needs of the most vulnerable

The evaluation found that WFP's assistance responded to the priority needs of the crisis-affected population. WFP has strengthened its evidence base through assessments and surveys which have informed programming, underpinning continued efforts to strengthen vulnerability-based targeting and lifesaving and life-sustaining interventions.

WFP's programming was aligned with Humanitarian Response Plans priorities. Furthermore, WFP aimed for both humanitarian response and increased focus on recovery and resilience to support a move away from direct food assistance where feasible. The move towards this dual track approach is also

aligned with the priorities outlined in the UN Strategic Framework 2022-2025, and the Government's objective to support agricultural production. WFP does not work in isolation from others and is seen as an active partner within the UN system.

WFP's comparative advantage in aligning its operations with the context lies in its logistical strength, nationwide reach, and its knowledge and expertise in general food assistance, nutrition and livelihoods. At the same time, there is not yet conceptual clarity on how WFP can best use its comparative advantage to support a resilience agenda.

The T-ICSP has remained relevant and enabled WFP adaptation to Syria's diverse geopolitical contexts. But with increased funding reductions impacting general food assistance, the relevance and effectiveness of this reduced assistance in addressing beneficiaries' food insecurity needs, is becoming increasingly questionable.

Extent and quality of WFP's specific contribution to CSP strategic outcomes in Syria

WFP was able to respond to food security needs across Syria through large-scale general food assistance operations. Overall these had a stabilizing effect on the food security situation. As of 2020, WFP was no longer able to meet the increased demands for food assistance because of an exponential increase in humanitarian needs and reduced availability of financial resources. WFP has worked towards a better targeting approach to ensure the most vulnerable are being assisted. However, the reduced food basket caloric value and the rotation of beneficiaries receiving food assistance meant that effects on household food insecurity were significantly reduced.

School feeding led to increased school attendance and retention but did not improve enrolment rates since broader economic factors led children being out of school. The number of children reached decreased after 2020 due to funding limitations.

Additionally, from 2018 WFP partnered with UNICEF to provide date bars to children in non-formal education, initially in camps in northeast Syria.

A shift in focus emphasizing restoration of communal assets and the wheat value chain approach enabled WFP to increase its beneficiary reach, and to support the recovery of farming communities and food availability, with the aim of reducing beneficiary dependence on food assistance. However the lack of funding hampered WFP support. Although restoration of communal assets increased community self-reliance, improved food availability, food affordability, jobs created and reduced

negative coping strategies livelihood interventions did not always consider sufficiently the societal limitations of women in accessing markets.

WFP expanded its planned number of malnutrition prevention and treatment beneficiaries to respond to increased needs. However, WFP faced challenges related to funding shortages, COVID-19, and rising transport costs. Aggravated by adverse price trends of staple goods including food items, the achieved Minimum Dietary Diversity rate of women, a key indicator of malnutrition prevention, remained very low.

For malnutrition treatment, the outcomes for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women and Girls, and children in the treatment programme were positive across almost all indicators but saw a dip during the COVID-19 pandemic because of movement restriction for mobile clinics. It improved afterwards.

WFP was able to support the humanitarian system in reaching those in need, even in hard-to-access areas through crossline and cross-border operations. WFP's provision of logistics, coordination and technical services contributed to harmonised collective approaches for efficient food and nutrition assistance. WFP adhered to the humanitarian principles; using a conflict-sensitive approach, WFP maintained its engagement with all relevant actors to ensure humanitarian access to vulnerable communities, while upholding the neutrality and impartiality of its operations.

For cross cutting themes, further strengthening of protection efforts, Accountability to Affected Population, Complaints and Feedback Mechanism, and inclusion of gender, and persons with disabilities are critical in ensuring the continued distribution of aid to those most in need.

Efforts to address sustainability in Syria fall mainly under livelihoods, resilience, social safety nets, and nutrition.

However, sanctions and the government's limited capacity and resources to maintain infrastructure and to support social protection systems are significant barriers to sustainability.

WFP's efficient use of resources in contributing to ICSP outputs and strategic outcomes

Major shifts in the humanitarian context challenged the timely delivery of outputs by increasing pressure on WFP funding, disrupting supply chains, and hampering access to beneficiaries. The supply chain was affected by various external factors, such as a ban on the import of Turkish goods and late delivery of donor funding but WFP adopted effective mitigation measures including the establishment of long-term agreements with food suppliers for locally procured commodities. In response to funding shortfalls, WFP opted to maintain broad coverage while reducing the frequency and caloric value of its food basket, but this risks people to fall into deeper food insecurity.

WFP used the Vulnerability Needs Review tool to guide household level targeting in Government controlled areas and generated beneficiary lists that are as accurate as possible under the circumstances, yet challenges accessing beneficiary data from government, along with lengthy approval processes and the vast scale of assessments, posed difficulties.

WFP used multiple procurement channels, tools, and facilities to maximise economy in the acquisition of inputs, such as the Global Commodity Management Facility which reduced lead times, as well as local procurement where feasible. Commodity losses after delivery were generally modest although slightly above the regional average and were mainly due to warehouse management activities such as repacking, rebagging, as well as looting.

The CO achieved relatively less country-level overhead than the WFP global average, helped by portfolio-level economies of

scale. Cost efficiency considerations were evident in the selection of cooperating partners, activities with other UN agencies, and choice of transfer modalities. Cash-based transfers were generally more cost efficient than in-kind transfers, but not in all contexts, such as in areas lacking retailers, and depending on exchange rates.

Factors that explain WFP performance

WFP's needs-based allocation of funding across the country lies at the core of its humanitarian operations. Multi-year funding for longer-term resilience engagement in Syria remains extremely limited. WFP has strengthened its monitoring capacity, with room for further strengthening at the Field Office level. In relation to Gender Equality, the reported indicators, even though gender disaggregated, provide limited information on gender empowerment, focusing instead on gender parity. WFP's logistical capacity is critical for humanitarian actors, ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches its intended recipients. A network of cooperating partners enabled WFP to deliver its assistance in a timely and effective manner. There is greater stability than previously among national staff, but the two-year rotation cycles for international staff have impacted stability and institutional memory.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation concludes that WFP has effectively laid the foundation for a dual-track approach to its response in Syria, combining large-scale humanitarian assistance with support for early recovery and creating conditions for self-reliance. However, the situation of the crisis-affected population has increasingly deteriorated, and vulnerabilities have risen due to the protracted crisis spanning over a decade. At the same time, donor aid budgets have reduced.

In this challenging context, WFP has made important contributions to addressing food insecurity through large-scale food assistance across all lines of control; the strategy of spreading assistance more thinly before reducing the number of beneficiaries was found to be the right approach.

WFP's efforts in Syria have been seriously hindered by a range of factors, particularly the restricted financial resources available to address evolving and increasing needs. At the same time, WFP has successfully navigated within a challenging environment, adhering to humanitarian principles, incorporating a conflict-sensitive perspective into its portfolio and increasingly paying attention to cross-cutting issues.

Finally, challenges around transparency and accountability remain, given limited access to personal identity information data which in some cases has led to exclusion errors. Despite persisting challenges, WFP has taken steps to ensure its resources reach the most vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reflect WFP's dual mandate in the next (I)CSP by consolidating the transition to the 'dual track approach' adopted to address the double burden of needs in Syria;
2. Seek a stronger strategic focus by fine-tuning the design of the portfolio and seeking synergies across interventions to better align with available financial resources and with the dual mandate;
3. Enhancing targeting to reach the most vulnerable;
4. Further contextualize and strengthen its contribution to cross-cutting aims supporting principled aid delivery and accountability to crisis-affected populations;
5. Maximize internal and external resources in support of a dual-track and transition approach.