



# Synthesis of evidence and lessons on WFP's cooperating partners from centralized and decentralized evaluations

## CONTEXT

WFP defines a cooperating partner as “a non-profit entity that enters into a contractual relationship with WFP to assist in the performance of WFP's work (including government entities, non-governmental organizations and United Nations organizations).”<sup>1</sup>

Cooperating partners are fundamental to WFP's work, with 31% of WFP's total contributions (in 2023) channeled through cooperating partners.<sup>2</sup> Given the scale and ubiquity of WFP's work with cooperating partners, understanding WFP's management and relationships with cooperating partners is relevant across operating contexts.

The WFP approach to working with cooperating partners is guided by external and internal frameworks. Localization, a key priority of the Grand Bargain 2.0, emphasizes empowering local responders and involving affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs. WFP's Strategic Plan (2022-2025)<sup>3</sup> reflects this commitment by prioritizing partnerships with local and national organizations to reach vulnerable groups. The WFP Corporate Partnership Strategy (2014-2017)<sup>4</sup> provides the overarching vision for WFP's work in partnership with NGOs and governments amongst other partners, while the Corporate Guidance on WFP Management of NGO Partnerships<sup>5</sup> constitutes the main guidance to support country offices in the management of NGOs as cooperating partners.

## SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE SYNTHESIS

The evaluation synthesis drew on 47 centralized and decentralized evaluations completed in the period 2020-2023. It asked five synthesis questions to examine how WFP's partnerships with cooperating partners contributed to WFP's aims at the country level, in which specific activities, and what has worked well or presented challenges. The synthesis also examined attention to cross-cutting priorities and corporate commitments, what factors influenced the quality and performance of WFP's work with cooperating partners, and the extent to which WFP's relationships with its cooperating partners have evolved over time.

## OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE SYNTHESIS

The synthesis aims to contribute to WFP's global and regional evidence base and support corporate decision-making in the short and medium-term for WFP's management and collaboration with

cooperating partners. The intended users of the synthesis are WFP's Operational Partners Unit, the Programme Policy & Guidance Division, and the Gender, Protection and Inclusion Service, and programme and policy owners, Regional Bureaus and Country Offices.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. To what extent do evaluations show that WFP's partnerships with cooperating partners contributed to the achievement of WFP's aims at country level?

For strategic outcome 1, evaluations highlight the contributions of cooperating partners to WFP's work to save lives in emergencies, enhancing its reach to vulnerable populations and hard-to-reach areas. Cooperating partners contributed to refining targeting of WFP's delivery through conducting household exercises, and they helped mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by sustaining pipelines, improving cost efficiency by providing local transport and facilitating information flow. However, evaluations also identified capacity gaps in areas like technology, gender and protection, which hindered effective delivery.

For strategic outcome 2, evaluations highlighted the central role of cooperating partners in expanding WFP's nutrition, health and education programmes at the community level and advocating for these issues nationally. Cooperating partners helped WFP to deliver results by expanding food distribution in schools, providing direct nutrition assistance, and training community groups. They also contributed to beneficiary data collection, programme monitoring and technical assistance for school feeding and nutrition programmes.

Under strategic outcome 3, cooperating partners improved WFP's livelihoods and resilience programming through their local knowledge which improved understanding of the root causes of food insecurity, targeting and community feedback management. However, WFP did not always fully leverage cooperating partners' expertise to address the underlying causes of food insecurity through WFP programming.

As part of strategic outcome 4, government cooperating partners, contributed to building an enabling environment and strengthening institutions. Their contributions included advocacy

<sup>1</sup> WFP. 2021. [Revised anti-fraud and anti-corruption policy](#). WFP/EB.A/2021/5-B/1

<sup>2</sup> [WFP Annual Performance Report 2023](#), WFP/EB.A/2024/4-A/Rev.1

<sup>3</sup> WFP. 2021. [WFP Strategic Plan \(2022-2025\)](#). WFP/EB.2/2021/4-A/1/Rev.2.

<sup>4</sup> WFP. 2014. [Corporate Partnership Strategy \(2014-2017\)](#). WFP/EB.A/2014/5-B.

<sup>5</sup> WFP. 2018. Executive Director's Circular on Corporate Guidance on WFP Management of NGO Partnership. ED2018/004.

for nutrition-sensitive agriculture and improved livelihoods and implementing pilot projects in support of system strengthening.

## **2. In which specific activity areas do evaluations show that cooperating partners have made contributions to the achievement of WFP's aims, and what has worked well? What challenges have arisen?**

Evaluations found that cooperating partners played a significant role in helping WFP to undertake specific activities. Within this set of evaluations, their contributions were most evident in school-based programmes, community and household asset creation and unconditional resource transfer activities. WFP's training and coordination meetings improved partners' skills in areas like nutrition and resilience, enhancing information exchange and programme adaptation. However, challenges included delays in signing contracts, short-term agreements, and high staff turnover among cooperating partners. Challenges also occurred where targeting criteria were not clear to cooperating partners, which caused delayed delivery to beneficiaries.

## **3. What does the evidence show regarding WFP's and cooperating partners' attention to cross-cutting priorities and corporate commitments?**

The synthesis found varied capacity to address gender equality and women's empowerment among NGO cooperating partners, with inconsistent implementation of protection principles, partly due to variable guidance from WFP. Cooperating partners play a central role in Community Feedback Mechanisms, but capacity gaps persist. Disability inclusion is not yet systematic, and attention to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse attention varies across contexts.

## **4. What factors do evaluations indicate contributed to or hindered the quality and performance of WFP's work with cooperating partners?**

Evaluations highlighted WFP's strong partner selection processes, favouring NGOs with local knowledge and expertise, although financial constraints at times prevented contracting skilled cooperating partners. Further, the synthesis emphasizes that longer duration field-level agreements enhanced partnership quality, while short-term contracts hindered staff retention and budgeting for cooperating partners. Evaluations that discuss contract negotiation and management of government cooperating partners highlight the need for a clear strategic framework for engagement. They also noted administrative delays at contracting stage and a lack of budget transparency caused inefficiencies.

In the evaluations reviewed, WFP was recognized for adapting programmes to local needs and feedback from cooperating partners, but limited skills in resilience, gender equality and vulnerability analysis affected implementation. They further highlighted that while technology reduced administrative burdens, data management by cooperating partners remained inconsistent and NGO monitoring systems continued to face challenges.

Evaluations documented WFP's challenge in balancing a "risk hungry" approach to strategic risk with its risk-averse approach to fiduciary risk in serving the vulnerable and maintaining a duty of care to cooperating partners.

## **5. To what extent do evaluations indicate that WFP's relationships with its CPs have changed over time?**

Evaluations show that WFP's relationships with cooperating partners have evolved from transactional to more collaborative, though improvements are still needed. While some evaluations highlighted cooperating partners being viewed only as implementers, others described equitable, mutually beneficial partnerships with shared responsibilities. WFP is developing a localization policy and involving cooperating partners in planning. Although there is evidence of cooperating partners; participation and representation in collaborative efforts, support for cooperating

partners leadership in technical areas remains lacking, despite the recognized value of local knowledge.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The evidence underscores the essential role of cooperating partners in supporting WFP to fulfil its mandate, particularly in delivering life-saving assistance, contributing to nutrition, health and education programmes, while supporting livelihoods and resilience efforts. Involvement of government cooperating partners has enhanced the national enabling environment for food security and nutrition. Within this set of evaluations, cooperating partners' contributions were most prominent in School-based Programme activities, Community and Household Asset Creation, and in Unconditional Resource Transfer activities.

The synthesis notes that while NGO cooperating partners are actively involved in gender equality and accountability to affected populations, inconsistencies in capacity and attention to these areas are evident. Additionally, attention to disability inclusion, along with protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, needs enhancement.

While cooperating partners bring valuable assets like local knowledge and technical expertise, there are capacity issues, such as unfamiliarity with WFP's targeting criteria and high staff turnover. Additionally, the management of cooperating partners, particularly NGOs, needs improvement, with delays in contract signing and payment affecting aid delivery, and inflexibility in field-level agreements has increased transaction costs. Evaluations found that management processes for government cooperating partners require development.

The synthesis found that WFP is progressing towards more collaborative relationships with cooperating partners, characterized by greater consultation and a shift towards equitable power dynamics, though the integration of a localization framework remains incomplete. Evaluations suggest the need for more strategic frameworks to working with government partners, and medium-term approaches to cooperating partner relationships.

Key successful engagement practices include longer-term contracts, flexible field-level agreements, and an ethos of trust. These practices help build strong, longer-term relationships with cooperating partners. Additionally, clear codes of conduct and whistleblower reporting channels, have helped clarify expectations and build trust.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation 1.**

Prioritise sustainable partnerships: Aim for long-term, sustainable partnerships, grounded in appreciation of cooperating partners and an ethos of shared interests, mutual respect and trust.

### **Recommendation 2.**

Adopt strategic and tailored approaches to capacity strengthening: Build upon strengths in areas of joint priority for WFP and partners, applying a localization lens.

### **Recommendation 3.**

Incorporate plan for engagement throughout CSP: Facilitate CP engagement at all stages of the CSP programme cycle design, implementation through to performance assessment.

### **Recommendation 4.**

Strengthen alignment with cross-cutting priorities: To ensure CP alignment with cross-cutting priorities and reduce risk, match clear contractual requirements with capacity strengthening opportunities.

**Recommendation 5.** Improve CP management: Enhance the efficiency of, and learning from, CP management and administration.