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Evaluation of WFP's Corporate Emergency Response in Ukraine

CONTEXT

Over the last decade, Ukraine has experienced escalations in civil unrest and conflict. In March 2014, the Russian Federation took control of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, while the Ukrainian authorities lost control of major parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

In February 2022, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation led to a full-scale war. Since the escalation of the conflict, the number of people in need surged to 14.6 million in 2024, with 7.3 million specifically in need of food assistance, compared to 1.5 million people in 2021. Highly vulnerable people included those living close to the frontlines, people with disabilities, returnees and internally displaced persons. The latter was estimated at 3,665,000 million in 2024, while the number of refugees reached 6,906,500 million in 2025.

Prior to 2022, the country had a diversified economy, with important mining, manufacturing, agriculture and information technology sectors.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF EVALUATION

In 2022, WFP launched a Limited Emergency Operation (LEO), initially planned to last three months and then extended till December 2022 with a total budget of USD 1,946,462,396, and the planned beneficiaries amounted to 4.7 million.

In January 2023, WFP implemented the Ukraine Transitional Interim Country Strategic Plan (T-ICSP), initially planned to last until June 2024. The T-ICSP underwent two budgetary revisions which led to a final Needs Based Plan of USD 2.07 billion and was extended till December 2024. The United States of America was the largest donor to both the LEO and T-ICSP, accounting for 48.3 percent and 41.2 percent respectively.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The main purpose of the evaluation was to provide evidence and learning on the performance of WFP in the emergency response in Ukraine during the period 2022–2024, as well as accountability for results to stakeholders.

The evaluation covered the activities under crisis preparedness and contingency planning as well as subsequent WFP interventions in Ukraine under the limited emergency operation (LEO) and the subsequent transitional interim country strategic plan (T-ICSP) for 2023–2024.

The main intended users of the evaluation are the WFP country office in Ukraine, senior management and relevant technical units at headquarters, the WFP Executive Board, donors, members of the United Nations country team, cooperating partners and beneficiaries.

SUMMARY OF KEY CONCLUSIONS AND INSIGHTS

1. Crisis preparedness, flexibility and scale-up

Despite the absence of an established organizational presence in Ukraine since 2018, WFP was able to demonstrate a remarkable speed and effectiveness in scaling up its operations under emergency conditions in 2022. It swiftly established logistical and supply chain capabilities, enabling large-scale food assistance deliveries less than two months after the start of the war.

WFP also facilitated the system-wide humanitarian response through significant contributions to needs assessment, security and access and the rapid establishment of common services. Nonetheless, the relatively moderate nature of food insecurity in Ukraine raised questions about whether, from a food security perspective, the scale of the response was justified compared with that for other global crises. The 'no regrets' approach facilitated quick decision-making, for example by simplifying procedures, but was inconsistently understood and applied across WFP, leading to considerable retrospective work on administration, such as documenting decisions.

2. Monitoring and reporting systems

WFP monitoring and reporting systems made WFP's contribution to food security outcomes in Ukraine hard to demonstrate. Corporate indicators provided limited clarity on how WFP assistance contributed to food security outcomes in Ukraine, particularly given the relatively

modest rates of severe food insecurity at the baseline and the presence of numerous actors addressing the challenge.

While WFP intended to deliver benefits beyond immediate food security needs – such as support for food systems, employment, and recovery – it did not establish clear targets or monitor progress toward these broader outcomes. Nonetheless, the evaluation found that evidence of results for food security and nutrition was starting to emerge.

3. Modality selection

There was strong evidence from an early point in the crisis that a cash-based response was more appropriate and aligned with both market conditions and beneficiary preferences and could support a transition to government-led social transfers. However, due to logistical reasons (e.g. detailed registration information needed to enable cash transfers, and the long lead times in setting up cash top-ups for pensions and disability grants), WFP delivered most of its assistance through an in-kind modality.

Despite this, the evaluation found that household level in-kind and cash transfers have plausibly contributed to improvements in the food security of beneficiaries, and that WFP's approach to topping up social benefits has been strongly welcomed by the Government.

4. Humanitarian principles

WFP was conscious of minimizing perceptions of the politicization of humanitarian assistance and advocated the adoption of a principled humanitarian approach. The country office actively tried to promote a neutral, impartial and operationally independent humanitarian response. However, limitations such as restricted access, lack of experienced local partners, and engagement with national authorities required some trade-offs. Similarly, WFP engagement with national authorities e.g. on social protection, while operationally appropriate, risked creating the perception that the UN was not impartial.

5. Partnerships and humanitarian coordination

WFP contributed to leading coordination efforts and forged important partnerships which contributed to enabling an effective humanitarian response. Regarding United Nations Partnerships, WFP made relevant contributions to the United Nations Strategy and the provision of common services in Ukraine.

WFP led key clusters and took up a leading role in other coordination mechanisms. For example, WFP introduced initiatives such as Building Blocks as a tool for the coordination of Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance under the umbrella of the Cash Working Group. Additionally, decisions on the coverage of crisis assistance were evidence-based and mostly coordinated with humanitarian partners.

6. Gender, accountability to affected people, and protection

WFP has made progress in tailoring its assistance to ensure accessibility for vulnerable groups particularly elderly

people and people with disabilities. However, an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of gender equality and other socio-demographic characteristics was only undertaken at a later stage in the response. As an example, the main activities lacked adaptation to encourage female participation. Additionally, while, WFP put in place a community feedback mechanism, there was limited beneficiary participation in core decisions.

Finally, WFP made several attempts to enhance participation, particularly through investments in livelihoods pilots aiming to foster greater inclusion and community engagement.

7. Funding, institutional arrangements and planning for transition

WFP's funding profile, the form of contributions, flexibility and timeliness, supported by donor willingness to allow the organization to carry over funding from one year to the next, were all instrumental in enabling a swift emergency response.

WFP was able to adopt a rapid and extensive corporate-led "surge" staffing which was critical during the early stages of the response. However, this was also particularly challenging as WFP had to build a Country Office from scratch, with no prior presence. The evaluation notes important lessons on striking the appropriate balance in the deployment of strategic and administrative staff during the surge phase, ensuring that surge deployments consistently support operations without adding to Country Office workloads.

Currently, the situation in Ukraine is uncertain and so is the level of need and prospects for future humanitarian funding. This has implications for adjusting ongoing interventions, pursuing innovative opportunities and planning for transition and exit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation makes five recommendations to WFP:

Recommendation 1. To draw on the lessons learned in Ukraine to strengthen preparedness for future corporate emergencies especially in conflict context.

Recommendation 2. To utilize existing global engagement platforms to strengthen coordinated approaches to the provision of food assistance.

Recommendation 3. To enhance the relevance and utility of its assessment, targeting and measurement of results in Ukraine.

Recommendation 4. To explore and develop support for early recovery alongside a primary focus on emergency assistance.

Recommendation 5. To adapt its programme to facilitate transition and exit from Ukraine at an appropriate time.