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Strategic evaluation of WFP's support to refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants

CONTEXT

By the end of June 2024, approximately 122.6 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights abuses. A complex range of drivers – including increasing irregular migration flows, conflicts and climate change – continue to shape displacement and migration both within countries and across borders. While the protection of refugees is enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, there are no legally binding international instruments ensuring the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and irregular migrants.

The adoption and implementation of international agreements, legal frameworks and coordination models vary widely across countries and population groups, creating significant challenges for UN agencies in delivering effective and adaptable responses. These challenges are particularly acute in regions where governments fail to recognize certain displaced groups or irregular migrants. Meanwhile, the global displacement crisis continues to escalate, yet funding is critically inadequate – by 2023, the estimated shortfall for refugee aid neared 70 percent, as donor priorities shifted from protracted crises to emerging emergencies.

SUBJECT OF THE EVALUATION

WFP assistance to refugees, IDPs and migrants (RIMs) spans all programmatic and functional areas, including general food assistance, prevention and treatment of malnutrition, food assistance for assets and training, school feeding, food security and nutrition assessments, analysis and monitoring, supply chain and logistics, country capacity strengthening and advocacy. The number of RIMs assisted by WFP reached 35.5 million in 2023. About 60 percent of WFP's multilateral resources were allocated to crisis response activities, with specific attention to refugees and people facing the highest levels of vulnerability.

EVALUATION SCOPE AND PURPOSE

The key objective of this strategic evaluation was to inform relevant policies, strategies and approaches affecting WFP's future support for displaced populations, and irregular migrants. The evaluation examined WFP's support for RIMs over the period from January 2017 to July 2024, assessing the performance of WFP interventions in support of RIMs, examining WFP strategic partnerships, and reviewing WFP engagement with RIMs with respect to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE), conflict sensitivity, disability, protection, accountability to affected populations (AAP), and adherence to the humanitarian principles.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Strategic relevance

The evaluation found that while WFP has enhanced its responsiveness to increasingly dynamic and complex displacement environments, its strategic vision and position for food insecure RIMs remains unclear. There is no corporate-level policy explicitly addressing RIMs and other relevant policies and strategies only sparsely reference them. Corporate guidance is insufficient resulting in inconsistent approaches across regions and countries.

WFP consistently strives to adhere to humanitarian principles in its assistance to RIMs. WFP is aware of trade-offs in applying the principles in some contexts such as when seeking agreements with governments or non-state armed groups to maintain humanitarian access to these populations, or when not assisting certain RIMs categories in need when these are not recognised or prioritised by government.

Effectiveness

WFP is widely recognised as the primary humanitarian food and nutrition agency, able to achieve scale quickly during major displacement crises. Accordingly, the evaluation found that WFP makes important contributions to address the immediate food security needs of refugee and IDP populations, though emergency assistance to irregular migrants is extremely limited compared to needs.

Strategies to enhance the self-reliance of RIMs are highly dependent on national economic and security environments, and the willingness and/or capacity of host governments to extend rights, entitlements or support to RIMs. WFP contributions to self-reliance and the longer-term food security and nutrition needs of RIMs are usually constrained by their short-term and small-scale nature.

In some countries WFP has made important contributions to the integration of RIMs in national systems, notably by supporting their inclusion in social registries, but this was contingent on the host governments' recognition of the rights and needs of different RIMs categories and their capacity to meet additional costs.

WFP interventions to address malnutrition amongst RIMs have often largely been inadequate in terms of volume and coverage. When facing funding shortfalls, WFP does not have a clear position on

whether to target the most nutritionally vulnerable RIMs groups with higher quality nutrition assistance or to reach larger populations with lesser quality assistance.

WFP does not yet play a significant role in partnerships with other agencies to support durable solutions.

Understanding and integrating specific RIMs' vulnerabilities

WFP has relevant, general policies and guidance in place for targeting assistance along gender, social and disability inclusion lines and is increasingly paying attention to gender equality and social inclusion among RIMs target groups. However, intersecting vulnerabilities of RIMs are poorly integrated in relevant policy and guidance and there are some significant gaps in WFP's understanding of the specific vulnerabilities of RIMs in their different, evolving contexts.

WFP assessments are not currently designed to build a comprehensive understanding of vulnerabilities associated with displacement or irregular migration, or the ways in which these intersect with wider gender, age, disability, and protection related risks. WFP monitoring systems are not recording beneficiaries disaggregated by RIMs status in relation to the specific activities they are provided. WFP's ability to analyse its contributions to specific outcomes for RIMs populations, or to track individuals and households as they transition between emergency and self-reliance support, remains very limited.

Managing risks and protection of RIMs

WFP identifies and manages risks primarily in relation to its ability to access and assist RIMs populations. Since CSPs are aligned to the rights and entitlements afforded to RIMs by the government, vulnerable displaced or irregular migrant populations that governments do not recognize may be overlooked.

WFP adequately takes protection risks of RIMs into account within the immediate sphere of its food assistance and has made significant progress in developing feedback mechanisms in displacement settings. However, WFP's limited capacity to respond to feedback from targeted population groups, including on sexual exploitation and abuse, and to address the protection risks RIMs face beyond distributions, require more effective collaboration with other agencies.

Partnerships in support to RIMs

WFP's main comparative advantages perceived by partners in its support to RIMs relate to its ability to mobilise, adapt and scale-up quickly in response to emergencies and to negotiate access in sensitive locations. WFP increasingly capitalises on a range of strategic and operational partnerships, including with UNHCR and IOM, that support country offices in addressing the complex challenges of RIMs at all levels. However, greater leadership, collaboration, and clarity on roles and responsibilities is required, and there is significant scope to improve engagement with governments, regional institutions, IFIs, other UN agencies, and cooperating partners to help RIMs transition towards self-reliance.

Resourcing of support to RIMs

Despite growing numbers of forcibly displaced and irregular migrants, funding for RIMs relative to resident populations appears to have fallen and has been dominated by short-term, earmarked funding focused on immediate needs, limiting WFP's ability to support self-reliance at scale. The lack of a clear business proposition has prevented WFP to build strategic donor partnerships needed to help transition RIMs toward self-reliance and longer-term solutions at scale. WFP also has a staff capacity gap in the fields of displacement and migration, in particular for self-reliance programming and for addressing specific vulnerabilities and protection risks of RIMs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Formulate a clear vision and corporate position on WFP support to food insecure and nutritionally vulnerable refugees, IDPs and irregular migrants, and systematically embed this position within relevant WFP strategic and normative frameworks.

Recommendation 2

Specify WFP's programme offer and the partnerships it needs to adequately integrate RIMs across emergency preparedness, immediate needs, self-reliance and durable solutions interventions, and foster the introduction of transition pathways at the start of the crisis response.

Recommendation 3

Strengthen WFP's data systems and analytical capacity to improve WFP's understanding of the intersecting vulnerabilities of RIMs, inform programming, facilitate inter-agency coordination and enable principled data-sharing on RIMs.

Recommendation 4

Ensure all WFP support to RIMs is based on comprehensive analysis of status in relation to gender, protection and contextual risks, and includes robust AAP mechanisms.

Recommendation 5

Strengthen strategic and operational partnerships with mandated displacement and migration agencies, and address gaps in analysis, data and information sharing, and coordinated support for assistance and solutions for RIMs in displacement and migration settings.

Recommendation 6

Strengthen WFP's resource mobilization focus during rapid onset and protracted crises to more effectively meet the immediate humanitarian needs of RIMs and host populations and better support transitions toward longer-term solutions from the start.