



World Food Programme

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# Evaluation synthesis on WFP's engagement in middle-income countries (2019–2024)

## CONTEXT

According to World Bank classifications<sup>1</sup>, 70 percent of the countries where WFP operates (63 out of 89) are middle-income countries (MICs). 44 of these are lower-middle income, and 19 are upper-middle income.

While income status alone cannot artificially define context types, WFP's Strategic Plan 2022–2025 acknowledges the specific conditions and characteristics of middle-income countries – often marked by relatively strong governance and legal systems, and robust public policy frameworks. The Strategic Plan 2022–2025 frames WFP's engagement in these countries as pursuing “a growing enabling agenda [...] focused on technical assistance, policy advice, evidence generation and system strengthening” alongside its food assistance and emergency response roles.

Despite representing the majority of WFP's operational contexts, MICs accounted for only 33 percent of WFP's total needs-based plan budget and 34 percent of its total funding over the period 2019–2024.

## EVALUATION SYNTHESIS SCOPE AND PURPOSE

A synthesis of evaluative evidence was conducted by the Office of Evaluation (June 2024 – February 2025). The synthesis brings together evidence from 73 centralized and decentralized evaluations conducted in 25 MICs, between 2019 and 2024, as well as findings from a portfolio review, and an analysis of global evaluations.

The synthesis aimed to provide insights into WFP's strategic positioning, partnerships and results in middle-income countries, and contribute informing the development of WFP's next Strategic Plan.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

### Relevance and limits of MICs category

The **MICs category** masks wide contextual disparities across countries. Upper-middle-income countries in particular have distinct characteristics. As such, it is not a useful categorisation to inform programming choices.

The profile of WFP's resourcing in MICs closely mirrors that in low-income countries, with similar funding levels (57 percent in 2024), high activity-level earmarking (around 73 percent) and comparable levels of private donor support.

Programming areas including unconditional resource transfers, asset creation, livelihoods, and capacity strengthening, are also similar. However, two-thirds of WFP's budget in MICs is allocated to unconditional resource transfers, primarily targeting displaced populations.

Specific features of the MICs in which WFP engages include:

- Reduced donor interest in countries that have transitioned to middle-income status;
- A distinct WFP role and programme offer in middle-income countries hosting forcibly displaced people; those in transition; and where WFP does not target direct beneficiaries;
- Increased host governments funding WFP's work in their countries;
- An expanded and diversified programme offer in less traditional areas (e.g. value-chain development);

<sup>1</sup> World Bank data (July 2024) [World Bank country classifications by income level for 2024-2025](#)

- more diversified partnerships (e.g. with academia and private sector) particularly in upper-MICs.

### WFP's role and strategic shift in MICs

Evaluations show that, while maintaining its crisis response role, WFP in MICs has pursued the intended strategic shift articulated in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025: transitioning (albeit usually non-linearly) from direct delivery of assistance to strengthening capacities of national actors and systems.

WFP has undertaken increasingly diversified roles in MICs, ranging from a provider of expertise in food security and nutrition analytics to inform policy development, as well as expanding into areas such as smallholder farmer market access support. Comparatively mature institutions in many of the MICs where WFP is engaged have created entry points for an expanded WFP's programme portfolio.

### Results, challenges and missed opportunities

Overall, the evidence synthesized finds that WFP made significant contributions to results in all areas articulated in the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Its programme offer focused on technical assistance, policy advice, evidence generation and system strengthening, while maintaining WFP's role in crisis response in support of nationally-led interventions.

The synthesis found evidence of key contributions to strengthened food security and nutrition systems; expanded social protection during crises; improved policy frameworks; enhanced disaster preparedness; gender-inclusive economic opportunities (e.g. in connection to local procurement for school meal programmes); and improved social cohesion and refugee integration into national systems.

Challenges and missed opportunities arose when moving "upstream" from small-scale, single initiatives; in ensuring a strategic approach to capacity strengthening; in adopting a coherent rather than fragmented approach to planning, considering the vulnerability to piecemeal donor funding.

WFP's narrative on the value and achievements in MICs – especially when supporting government-led actions – was not always clearly articulated.

### WFP's partnerships in MICs

Evaluations indicate that WFP's role in MICs has evolved to combine strategic, technical, and operational support tailored to national contexts. However, the absence of coherent, overarching country-level partnership frameworks has constrained the effectiveness of these roles, with challenges in coordination, capacity strengthening, and coherent engagement at national and sub-national levels.

WFP's partnerships in MICs diversified over time. Evaluations reported that governments in these contexts highly value WFP's role and expertise – reflected in their financial support. However, recurring challenges are noted including the need for:

- clearer definition of roles when engaging in system strengthening;
- better defined entry points into national systems and more sustained engagement at sub-national levels.
- greater consideration of the skillset and extended timeframes required to make progress in national capacities and system strengthening.

### Pilot initiatives

Pilot initiatives form a major part of WFP's portfolio in MICs. Evidence highlights that while piloting in MICs has showcased WFP's value and innovation, efforts often lacked adequate planning for scale-up (as relevant), learning, and sustainability, leading to some fragmentation and limited long-term impact.

### Handover to national actors

WFP effectively realized the full handover of programmes to national actors in MICs, especially for school meal programmes. However, evidence indicated gaps in planning for financial sustainability; for a more structured transfer of responsibilities, for better preparing the transition from WFP-led, to nationally-led activities, and for more careful consideration of different needs and capacities at national and sub-national levels geared towards the achievement of sustainable results.

### Factors

The main factors identified as affecting WFP's achievement of results and strategic shifts in MICs included uncertain financing prospects; gaps in corporate frameworks and guidance for WFP's engagement in MICs; and challenges in the current corporate indicators to capture and convey WFP's added value and contributions to national systems and capacity. Finally, staffing skillsets, profiles and contract durations are not consistently aligned with the specific needs and objectives of WFP in MIC settings, where relationship-building and skills in political economy are required.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendation 1

Set out a clearer rationale for WFP's presence, positioning and resourcing in middle-income countries and, in particular, in upper-middle-income countries.

### Recommendation 2

Clarify and strengthen the development and use of partnership strategies in MICs.

### Recommendation 3

Strengthen planning for programme handover and transition, where relevant and the path to WFP's exit from the country, where appropriate.

### Recommendation 4

Enhance the generation of evidence from pilot activities to inform decisions regarding potential scale-up.