



WFP EVALUATION



World Food Programme

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Evaluation of WFP’s Cash Based Transfers and Social Protection Activities in Transitioning Emergency Assistance to National Systems and Preparing for a Responsible Exit in Moldova

CONTEXT

Following the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, Moldova received a major influx of refugees, most of whom transited onward to Europe. The conflict also severely affected Moldova’s economy due to its proximity and dependence on Ukraine and Russia for energy, food, and trade. This heightened risks for a population already experiencing high levels of poverty and food insecurity.

Moldova’s social protection system is relatively advanced in design but constrained by limited fiscal space, administrative capacity, and human resources. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) is the principal policy authority regulating social protection. Its RESTART reform strategy (2023–2027) aimed to improve access to social services and assistance and their quality, human resources, and promote digitalisation. The Ajutor Social programme provides cash-assistance safety net for poor families.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation covered the period from the establishment of WFP’s presence in Moldova in March 2022, the establishment of the Moldova WFP Country Office in February 2023, through to August 2025, when in-country data collection was conducted. Any changes that may have occurred between the date of data collection and the publication of the report are outside the scope of the evaluation. It assessed three successive WFP frameworks: the Ukraine Limited Emergency Operation (LEO) in Ukraine and refugee-hosting countries, the Transitional Interim Country Strategic Plan (T-ICSP) and the Interim Country Strategic Plan (ICSP) for Moldova.

WFP activities commenced in March 2022 as part of the Ukraine LEO including the provision of hot meals to refugees and cash transfers to refugee hosting households. The T-ICSP expanded the emergency response to address the needs of vulnerable Moldovans. Cash assistance was provided to crisis affected vulnerable Moldovans as a top-up to the poverty focused Ajutor Social cash transfer programme. The T-ICSP also committed to a responsible exit through providing technical support to the MLSP to strengthen the institutional capacity of the government to implement shock responsive social protection activities.

The ICSP brought a stronger focus on capacity strengthening of the national system. Specific commitments to capacity

strengthening, conducted in partnership with the Government, United Nations and other actors, included technical support to: improve the shock-responsiveness of the social protection system; digitalization to address data gaps, accuracy and interoperability; and enhance the capacity of local social canteens.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of this decentralized evaluation was threefold: (i) to prepare for and guide the responsible exit of WFP from Moldova and handover its activities to other United Nations agencies and the MLSP; (ii) to provide learning for WFP operations around the world on how WFP cash assistance and capacity strengthening for social protection complements and transitions to technical assistance and inclusion efforts in government social assistance programmes; (iii) to provide WFP with evidence to feed into international, regional and national decision-making for addressing policy, programming and funding issues related to protracted humanitarian emergencies and operating social protection in fragile, conflict affected and violent contexts.

This evaluation serves the dual objectives of accountability and learning and was designed to contribute to the preparation for a responsible exit of WFP from Moldova and distil learnings for WFP and external stakeholders.

The main intended users of the evaluation are the WFP Moldova Country Office, to inform future planning and programming. The evaluation also supports learning on capacity strengthening by WFP regional offices, senior management and technical units at Headquarters, other users include the Republic of Moldova, members of the United Nations country team, and cooperating partners.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Relevance. WFP’s presence in Moldova responded appropriately to emergency and pre-existing vulnerabilities, with needs-based support for refugees and Moldovans that promoted social cohesion. Targeting drew on multiple assessments, though analysis of refugee-hosting households and gender gaps was limited and donor interests shaped support. As funding declined, WFP aligned with national social protection and co-developed a menu of possible capacity-strengthening “offers” with MLSP.

Coherence. WFP aligned well with national priorities, leveraging RESTART reforms to support digitalization, cash-assurance and human resource strengthening, though some key activities, such as shock-responsive social protection, sat outside this framework and progressed more slowly amid gaps in disaster risk management and refugee inclusion policies. Overall, strong, non-competitive interagency cooperation, clear government leadership and WFP's time-bound role enabled effective coordination and continuity-focused partnership efforts.

Efficiency. WFP delivered timely, secure and accessible cash-based transfers (CBT) in Moldova, with strong safeguards and alignment to national systems that improved efficiency, ownership and prospects for sustainability, although incomplete social registries limited targeting, and aligned transfer values sometimes reduced how fully needs were met. Investments in delivery chains, analytics and staff capacity strengthened MLSP, but high staff turnover, earmarked funding, uneven progress in some areas and gaps in documentation limited efficiency gains.

Effectiveness. WFP's multipurpose cash assistance and hot meals provision effectively helped Moldovans and refugee households meet essential needs, though inflation eroded transfer value and coping strategies worsened. WFP played a constructive role in refugee inclusion and shock-responsive social protection, focusing on Ajutor Social, gender-sensitive targeting and "no regrets" digital tools. However, fiscal, political and legislative constraints and limited government IT capacity constrained longer-term transformation.

Responsible Exit. WFP's time-bound engagement in Moldova used a phased transition model developed in the absence of corporate guidance to support the transitioning of operations. Strong national systems, partnerships, flexible funding and United Nations handovers enabled a shift from emergency delivery to capacity strengthening, though ambitions to promote localization efforts, working with civil society organisations, remained unrealized.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

WFP rapidly established itself as a credible actor in Moldova, delivering timely and effective assistance while strategically aligning CBT support with national systems and contributing valued improvements to MLSP cash delivery chains, including through digitalization. WFP's positioning to support policy and programme reform and social protection capacity strengthening was enabled by early strategic choices and flexible systems, but the short operational timeframe, dependence on government interest and wider financial and political barriers constrained the depth of system-level change. These factors also influenced the ability to pivot from emergency response to longer-term engagement that could have strengthened results. WFP added value by promoting coordination and linking government to broader development financing, and was most effective when flexibly supporting longer-term reforms led by other partners. The limited refugee caseload ultimately justifies WFP's decision to exit direct operations in Moldova, and the Country Office's deliberate, responsible approach to transition offers useful learning for future engagements.

The evaluation identifies key lessons, notably that early alignment with national systems and integrated refugee and host population responses strongly shape WFP's strategic trajectory, exit decisions, and refugee inclusion. It also highlights that sustainable system

strengthening and responsible exit depend on pairing technical assistance with solutions to financial and political constraints, strong partnerships, and adaptive planning.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. In advance of the planned WFP exit from Moldova, the Country Office (CO) should focus on embedding and sustaining system strengthening activities within national institutions and capturing key learnings to inform corporate practice.

- 1.1. WFP should complete all system strengthening activities in line with the timeframe for closing the Country Office in early 2026.
- 1.2. In this remaining programme period the WFP Country Office should prioritise the implementation of (i) "post production" activities to ensure the successful transfer of system strengthening activities, and (ii) support to inter-agency and Government coordination efforts to transition of refugee support from humanitarian, to development, sources of finance, whilst (iii) putting in place handover plans to the government and WFP partners.
- 1.3. The Country Office should prioritize knowledge management plan actions to capture key lessons from Moldova in relation to its system strengthening work, to fill gaps in WFP corporate technical guidance
- 1.4. The Country Office should develop products capturing the entry-to-exit best practice across programme and support services including development of an entry-to-exit model for WFP CO in similar contexts and Standard Operating Procedures for Country Office Transition and Closure.

Recommendation 2. WFP HQ should draw on the lessons from Moldova to support the delivery of the WFP Strategic Plan for 2026-2029, including Strategic Outcome 1 (Effective emergency preparedness and response) and Strategic outcome 3 (Enabled government and partner programmes).

- 2.1 Update Country Strategic Planning (CSP) guidance related to CSP design, particularly applicable to MIC and protracted humanitarian and displacement contexts, and key features on the rollout of programme and support services from the opening to closure of a CO.
- 2.2 Update specific tools and procedures related to the Global Footprints Review supporting Country Offices to proactively transition out of direct assistance to government systems, and to manage a responsible exit and closure of Country Offices.
- 2.3 Using best practice from the Moldova CO, support Global HQ to strengthen areas of WFP technical guidance currently under revision or development, and to identify potential needs for clarification or new corporate guidance. To pay attention in particular to: transitioning direct assistance to social protection programmes including the use of digital technologies; management of protracted refugee caseloads; application of SRSP to protracted displacement and crisis contexts, and innovations in the training of Government social workforce.