



WFP EVALUATION



World Food Programme

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Strategic evaluation of WFP's use of technology in constrained environments

Summary report

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Key personnel for the evaluation

OFFICE OF EVALUATION

Andrea Cook	Director of Evaluation
Michael Carbon	Senior Evaluation Officer (Evaluation Manager)
Arianna Spacca	Research Analyst

EXTERNAL EVALUATION TEAM

Patrick Vinck	Evaluation Team Leader
Emmanuel Letouzé	Evaluation Deputy Team Leader
Tatiana Goetghebuer	Senior Evaluator
Maria Antonia Bravo	Research Analyst
Romain Fourmy	Research Analyst
Kevin Henkens	Research Analyst
Jeroen Peers	Research Analyst
Stephen Mathew	Research Analyst

With additional input from

Nancy Mock	Strategic Advisor
Steff Deprez	Senior Evaluator (Global Survey)
Teresa Hanley	Senior Evaluator (Bangladesh)
Nick Maunder	Senior Evaluator (South Sudan, Iraq)
Hisham Koghali	Senior Evaluator (Jordan)
Samuel Niki-Niki	Senior Evaluator (DRC)

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SUMMARY

This strategic evaluation of the use of technology by WFP in constrained environments was conducted between September 2020 and September 2021. Its purpose is both accountability and learning. It aims to provide lessons and insights to guide the digital transformation of WFP and its use of technology in constrained environments. This in turn will improve operations and accountability to affected populations.

The findings bring together many sources of information, including: six country case studies; interviews with more than 300 people; and surveys and group discussions involving 1,000 staff members and 1,400 people served by WFP.

For some time WFP has been using digital technologies to help plan, implement, monitor and generally manage its operations in constrained environments. To do this the organization makes use of a broad range of digital technologies within WFP itself and when dealing with its stakeholders and partners at the corporate and the local level.

WFP realized at an early stage the potential advantages of digital technologies, but more recently has also been considering the risks posed by digital technology and data in constrained environments.

The importance and the challenges of a digital transformation within WFP have been recognized and are increasingly being considered in strategic plans and in the agency's organizational structure. This evaluation finds convincing evidence that the use of digital technology is making WFP operations more effective and more efficient. It also finds that WFP is making important progress in addressing data protection and cyber security risks through rapidly expanding processes, policies and practical guidelines.

WFP has acquired unique and impressive expertise and experience but lacks strategic clarity in the area of digital technology. It needs a clearer direction for its digital transformation and it needs to take a clearer position on controversial human technology issues. These issues include the use of biometrics, open-source solutions, public-private partnerships and digital services to governments.

This lack of clarity is preventing WFP from progressing and is undermining its potential to establish itself as a trusted and credible leader in humanitarian technologies.

WFP has had many successes with its digital transformation but some challenges still remain. For example, governance and responsibilities are fragmented, centralized technology services do not always align with the needs of country operations, and greater investment is needed in human resources.

Perhaps the most fundamental issue is that the rapidly expanding use of digital technology within WFP and its data processing are at risk of failing the people it is supposed to serve. This risk is present because WFP does not routinely or meaningfully include the people it serves in technology choices and assessments. WFP is also in danger of shifting the burden of the technology and the protection risks to individuals and communities, especially in constrained environments.

WFP has shown a strong commitment to its digital transformation at a strategic and operational level. This needs to be matched by an equal commitment to inclusion and protection and a clear internal and external position on the responsible use of digital technology.

The report makes several recommendations, all of which require special consideration with regard to constrained environments. These include recommendations to: (i) formulate a new strategy and vision for the use of digital technology and data. The strategy and vision should centre on people and protection and have clear standards and directives, as well as practical guidance; (ii) strengthen the governance of the digital transformation; (iii) better protect people and manage the risks associated with digital technologies; (iv) include gender equality and engage more meaningfully with communities when developing and using digital technologies; (v) develop appropriate ways to manage information and for people to learn about how WFP uses digital technology; (iv) develop and invest in staff to increase basic information technology skills and data literacy; and (vi) further develop technology partnerships.



Evaluation features

This strategic evaluation covers the use of digital technologies and data by WFP in constrained environments from 2014 to 2021. The evaluation has two purposes. The first is to assess whether WFP uses the most appropriate digital technologies to meet its objectives under constrained conditions. The second purpose is to gauge whether WFP has put in place appropriate measures to deal with the risks to populations and operations that arise when using digital technologies and data in constrained environments.

A “constrained environment” is when WFP operations face important access constraints (for example, due to insecurity or physical obstacles) or where there are considerable barriers to using digital technologies (for example, due to poor mobile network coverage or political

restrictions). The evaluation considered four pillars that are interlinked components of a system: (i) technologies, (ii) people, (iii) policies and processes, and (iv) partnerships. These four pillars led on to the evaluation questions used in the report (Figure 1).

The evaluation used mixed methods combining participatory quantitative and qualitative methods: it featured an extensive desk review, an online WFP staff survey, interviews and a comparative learning exercise involving four other humanitarian organizations.¹ The evaluation also featured six case studies carried out in countries that experienced constraints in terms of humanitarian access and digital development (Jordan, Niger, Iraq, Bangladesh, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo). The case studies involved desk reviews, interviews, surveys and group discussions. The group discussions included women, the elderly, adolescents and people with disabilities.

FIGURE 1: EVALUATION QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Context

Violent conflict, climate change, epidemics and other human caused and natural disasters have increased over the past decade and this trend is unlikely to change in the near future. This means that humanitarian needs continue to rise. At the same time, the gap between humanitarian needs and funding is growing. Donors and politicians are expecting more transparency, accountability and value for money from organizations providing humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian organizations are therefore faced with rising needs and increasing expectations in cost efficiency and in protecting the people they serve.

Simultaneously, the protracted nature of many of today's crises means that most of the environments in which WFP operates are constrained in one way or another as a result of fragility and extreme poverty, often in combination with conflict or other human-caused or natural disasters. To respond to this, WFP has moved from food aid to food assistance and increased its use of cash-based transfers (CBTs). This is expected to provide more people - and the right people - with the right assistance at the right time and also to make operations more cost efficient.

Across the humanitarian sector, digital technologies and data are seen as invaluable in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, over the past decade, digital

innovations have helped to ensure internet access and connectivity to populations on the move and have enabled mobile money applications for cash-based transfers, identity registration and verification. However, technological innovation can also present risks and uncertainties, including potential repercussions for affected populations. Digital technologies, for example, can lead to inequality and violence, threats to privacy as a core human right, inaccuracies and imbalances, identity theft and fraud. Technological infrastructure can also have an environmental impact.

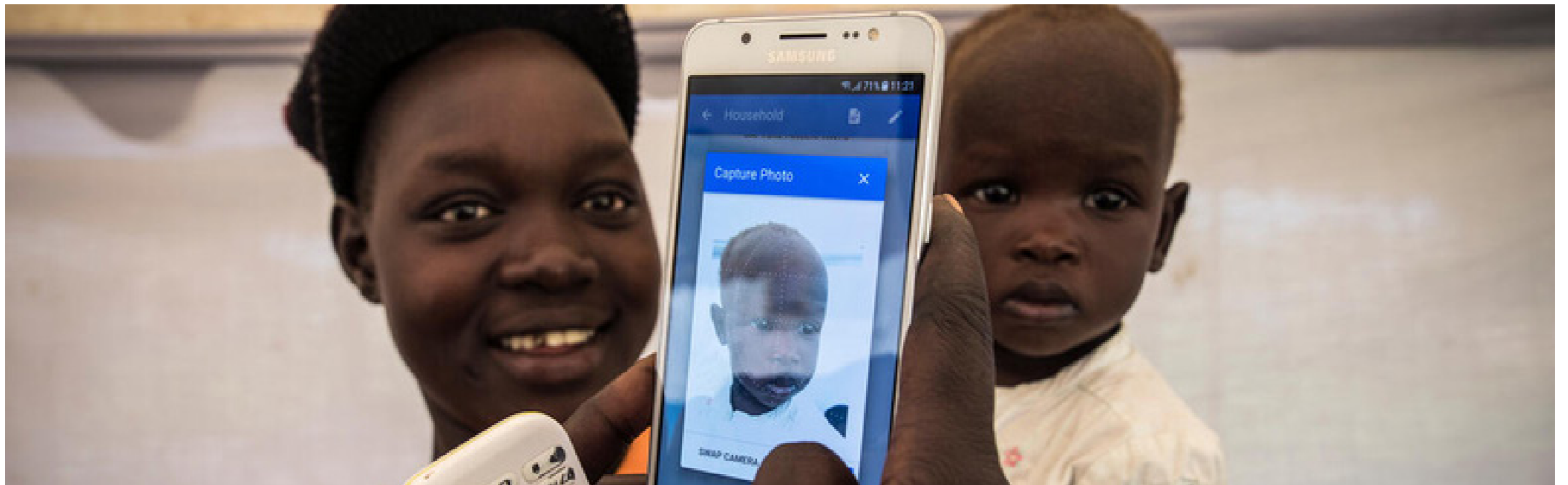
Subject

Over the evaluation period, WFP has invested considerably in digital technologies to support the planning, design, targeting, implementation, monitoring, management and security of its operations. It uses and manages digital technologies across all the environments in which it works. Figure 2 explains the extent of digital technology used by WFP. There are also many local digital technology solutions, that have been developed at the country office level. WFP has developed a broad range of policies and processes to guide its use and development of digital technologies. Partnerships, for example with private sector actors and governments, and others involved in humanitarian technology, have also increased over this time.

FIGURE 2: PORTFOLIO OF WFP DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND DATA SOLUTIONS

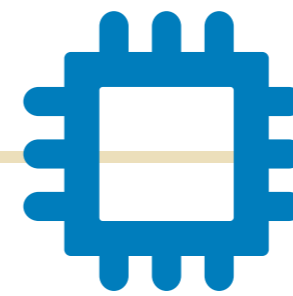


Source: WFP, 2021





FINDINGS



Technologies

HOW DOES THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES HELP WFP INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY OF ITS OPERATIONS IN CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENTS?

There is convincing evidence that the use of digital technologies and data by WFP increased the effectiveness of its operations. It has improved targeting and information gathering, and it helps tailor assistance to better meet beneficiaries' needs. Digital technology has also improved logistics and programme coordination, and has streamlined monitoring and evaluation.

Using digital technologies and data improves the efficiency of operations. For example, it saves staff time, simplifies tasks and makes them less error-prone, improves supply chain management and reduces monitoring costs.

WFP was well prepared for the COVID-19 crisis thanks to its use of digital technologies. There is a sense that despite challenges in the initial phases of adjustment, WFP was able to provide a satisfactory degree of continuity of services owing to its use of digital technologies.

In some countries (for example, Jordan and Bangladesh) digital technology is used in all areas of operations, but in others (for example the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Niger) its use is more limited due to barriers such as weak digital infrastructure and human and financial resource constraints. Generally, WFP digital technologies are appropriate to their contexts and relevant to their operations. However, in highly constrained environments significant operational challenges hinder their use, making them less appropriate. To mitigate the digital technology challenges it faces in

constrained environments, WFP, through the emergency telecommunications cluster, has helped to install and maintain connectivity infrastructure in some of these environments. Since 2005, the cluster has responded to over 40 crises around the world, including eight active emergencies in 2021.

There is, however, a general feeling that the development of digital technologies comes from the top-down. It was felt that country offices and end users were not consulted enough during the development of corporate solutions.

More generally, WFP has not made systematic efforts to assess how it uses digital technologies, including in constrained environments. WFP does not evaluate the costs and benefits of using digital technology. It does not systematically track the development and maintenance costs of technologies and does not fully consider implications of its digital technologies for the people served by WFP in terms of protection (which covers inclusion, safety, integrity and dignity). This affects the organization's ability to learn, to make better informed decisions and to share lessons learned about digital technologies.

WFP collects a vast amount of data, but could do more with that data by investing in data processing, which in turn would help its data-driven decision making. WFP could also improve on how systems interact with each other. This would reduce duplication and make reconciliation processes between different applications more efficient.

Importantly, WFP should consider its worldwide position on the use of digital technologies and data in humanitarian settings. WFP has unique expertise and experience. It could help its partners identify best practices and influence digital transformation efforts across the humanitarian sector as well as with government partners.

“The use of mobile money as a means of distributing cash has proven to be an excellent modality in the context of COVID-19. With COVID-19, direct contact restrictions have been put in place. These included avoiding contact and gatherings. Mobile money transfers were a great help in distributing cash without having direct access to the beneficiaries.”

- WFP staff survey respondent



People

HOW DOES THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES IN CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENTS AFFECT THE PEOPLE SERVED BY WFP, AND HOW DO PEOPLE AFFECT THIS USE?

Digital technologies have a generally positive effect on the lives of the people served by WFP. The technologies help those people access assistance and provide flexibility and dignity. This is because WFP has invested heavily in digital tools and technologies to get to know its beneficiaries better. The data produced by digital technologies informs decision making and makes it possible to target, scale up and meet the needs of populations, a critical issue in constrained environments.

Nonetheless, lack of local connectivity, technical issues and other barriers often limit the benefits of digital technologies for people in constrained environments. Digital technologies may help WFP to be more efficient with time and cost, but when technology fails, the consequences of delays and errors are largely carried by the people served by WFP. Data produced from automated processes have the potential for mistakes, for example: gaps in information, biases and misinterpretation of data.

WFP has not given much consideration to these potential mistakes as it increasingly relies on technologies and the data produced from its automated processes.

WFP often mistakenly assumes that its use of digital technology is inclusive or neutral. However, WFP has not taken special measures to actively engage the most marginalized groups, even when it discovers that certain digital technologies can exclude some of these groups.

More specifically, WFP has not systematically considered gender in the development and use of digital technologies, and has not monitored the impact these technologies may make on gender. On the positive side, there are examples where digital technology is used by WFP to proactively empower women, generally in the context of financial inclusion.

In considering accountability to affected populations, technology-based community feedback mechanisms have broadened the ways beneficiaries can voice their needs and concerns to WFP. Digital technology can also improve how feedback is received and track how complaints are followed up. However, some population groups have difficulty accessing technology-based feedback mechanisms such as hotlines and these mechanisms are sometimes not well known about by affected populations. As a result, technology-based mechanisms for accountability to affected populations are often only used for reporting on technical issues and for notification purposes. They are not being used to include people's views and enhance their participation. In fact, WFP rarely insisted on beneficiary engagement when it introduced new public-facing digital technologies.

WFP has made rapid and necessary progress in enhancing cyber security. It has increased data protection across the organization, with improved visibility, control mechanisms and procedures. However, this is not enough. There is still a more central and general concern regarding the changing risks and threats that the use of digital technologies can have on the protection and security of affected populations and humanitarian personnel. Even considering data protection only, WFP staff in the field and cooperating partners do not fully comply with rules and procedures. This results in ongoing risks for data protection, security and privacy. Input from gender and ethics specialists at WFP appears to be side-lined. In addition, WFP efforts to address some risks appear to shift the risks towards those served by WFP. An example of this was when WFP attempted, with little success, to monitor and address the risk of abuses in cash assistance.

At the same time, there is evidence that beneficiaries do not fully understand the risks involved in sharing their data. Despite the ethical implications, WFP does not seem to be too concerned with making sure that the people from whom it collects data really understand what it means when they are giving their consent.² This is an issue in many humanitarian organizations. This, and other limitations, may indicate that WFP is more concerned with getting its data and less concerned about being sensitive to the people in constrained environments.



Internally and externally, WFP does not invest enough in the digital literacy and information technology capacity of its staff and cooperating partner staff. Digital technology use increases at a rapid pace at all levels of the organization but technological capacity development is not matching that pace. The digital tools used by WFP are increasingly complex to manage, yet training opportunities are limited. More generally, WFP has not incorporated organizational and behavioural changes as it introduced new digital technologies.

Despite these challenges, digital technologies have generally helped to increase the efficiency, scale and frequency of monitoring and to overcome monitoring challenges in constrained and emergency settings. WFP has made major efforts to integrate data to generate deeper insights (for example the DOTS data integration platform), but data on beneficiaries still remains scattered across various formats and systems and there is a lack of comprehensive continuous data mapping.³ Furthermore, there does not seem to be enough staff capacity to ensure data quality in WFP systems. This hinders WFP when it is making decisions or learning from its operations.

“Using SCOPE has been very effective in preventing duplications in assistance across activities. However, it is usually over-burdensome for country office staff as it is not so flexible. Quick changes that need to be done with lists need to go through many levels [...], limiting our ability to respond and react. In Iraq in 2018, a data entry error during a large targeting exercise could not be quickly rectified when it was caught. This meant that several families did not receive their food assistance that month, even though the error was noticed in a timely manner.”

- WFP staff survey respondent



Policies and processes

HOW APPROPRIATE ARE WFP POLICIES AND PROCESSES IN PLACE TO ENABLE STRATEGIC USE, PROMOTE INNOVATION AND MANAGE RISKS IN RELATION TO THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES IN CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENTS?

Policies and processes related to digital technology development and implementation have rapidly expanded in recent years and become more streamlined across the various levels of the organization. This has given WFP a solid foundation of guidance and has contributed to stronger cyber security and data protection.

The roll out of digital technology and corporate solutions has rapidly increased. However, there is no central vision for digital technology. This has caused tensions within the organization and has resulted in duplication and poorly integrated systems. The scope of the WFP Digital Business and Technology Committee (DBTC) was expanded in October 2020 and this is expected to improve the situation. The DBTC has started to provide guidance and oversight for developing digital business roadmaps in which digital initiatives are prioritized.

At the same time, at the end of 2020 the appointment of business engagement managers and the creation of a field software development

network is helping to clarify and improve decentralized digital innovation governance and processes. These steps should improve the process for introducing new solutions, which, during this evaluation, was still seen as slow, costly and cumbersome. The new policies, however, are still not well known. In practice, only large country offices with predictable funding can locally develop solutions that meet the WFP standards.⁴ The smaller offices have to get around standard processes and develop parallel solutions. Importantly, WFP does not have guidance specifically tailored to the development or use of technology in constrained environments, where risks are often higher. More generally, mandates and responsibilities are not clear.

With regard to technology management, there are various standard operating procedures, guidance documents and toolkits. Once solutions become part of the WFP technology portfolio, however, central guidance is limited and fragmented, and the relevant guidelines are frequently seen as optional. The guidance is not fully put into practice because staff are not always aware of it and if they are, the guidance is often considered impractical.

On the strategic front, policies and guidelines are unclear on the strategic role digital technology currently plays in the organization or the role it ought to play, including in constrained environments. Notably, digital technology is not mentioned as a strategic enabler or priority in WFP strategic plans up to 2021. As a result, the evaluation could not easily work out the exact strategic direction of WFP regarding its use of

digital technology, specifically for country-level operations. In some concrete areas – for example with regard to supply chains and cash-based transfers – there is greater clarity on the role that digital technology plays for WFP.

For the first time, the strategic plan for 2022–2025 considers the support that digital technology can provide. According to the plan, WFP will solidify its commitment to becoming a digitally enabled and data-driven organization to inform decision making and increase operational efficiency and agility. Further, the WFP approach to technology will put people at the centre, following the principles of do no harm, participation, non-discrimination and inclusion.

WFP has looked closely at risks to operations in relation to the use of digital technology. Responsibilities for vulnerability and risk management regarding technologies are spread across several WFP divisions as well as the regional bureaux.⁵ Regional bureaux should be providing support on technology matters, but the evaluation found that this role is not performed effectively or rigorously. At the country office level, stakeholders noted that tools were available and used to assess and mitigate risks arising from the use of digital technologies and data. However, the evaluation also found that the decentralized nature of WFP means that country offices do not have to comply with recommendations from the Technology Division (TEC), even when those recommendations are critical to risk mitigation and security. Furthermore, there were no systematic performance checks and risk reviews for digital technologies across the organization, as they were considered too costly.

“ For more than a decade, WFP has been investing in technology to respond quickly to the needs of food assistance recipients. For me, the Logistics Execution Support System (LESS) is not only a major innovation but also a technology that makes it possible to trace the activities of the supply chain in real time. The challenges remain the training and running-in of the staff supposed to use this technology. ”
- WFP staff survey respondent

WFP does not take advantage of the knowledge it has gathered while using digital technologies in constrained environments. There is no system to share experiences across the various levels of WFP. Any knowledge sharing is done among individuals. Specifically, the role that the regional bureaux play in sharing knowledge on digital technologies is not consistent. Sharing of information and lessons learned with external actors is also very limited.

WFP has no guidance on monitoring and evaluating the performance of digital technologies and data. There are no systematic processes across the various levels of the organization for monitoring digital solutions and data quality. The evaluation found that continued use of solutions was more dependent on interest from senior management than on their performance assessment.

The ability of WFP to raise funds for technological innovation has sharply increased over time. However, resource limitations are still a problem, for example in supporting specific processes relating to the deployment, support and oversight of digital technology in constrained environments. In such environments, digital technology offers an arguably higher return on investment if it is appropriately designed and adapted to the context and includes adequate support for human resources. Yet, because of the decentralized structure for funding digital solutions and innovation, the evaluation team found it difficult to assess whether current funding levels (or management of such funds) were appropriate to needs.



Partnerships

HOW WELL DOES WFP MANAGE ITS PARTNERSHIPS IN RELATION TO THE PROVISION AND USE OF TECHNOLOGIES IN CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENTS?

WFP is leading the provision of digital technology services across the humanitarian sector. It makes its systems and solutions available for international and national organizations. It also collaborates in data collection and analysis and shares beneficiary registration data with other humanitarian actors. WFP does not, however, use systems or technologies developed or managed by other humanitarian organizations.

WFP has benefited from data partnerships over the years and enhanced its approach to data ownership and sharing. Yet several challenges exist. These include: differences in mandates and policies, a lack of data sharing agreements and the fact that there are no common standards between systems. Similarly, although WFP could be well positioned to further its role of providing common technological platforms for the humanitarian community – including at the onset of emergencies – politics, mandates and policies of organizations hinder cooperation.

WFP is well recognized for providing necessary digital technologies and transferring skills to its partners. This support was particularly well recognized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, some cooperating partners and governments still lack sufficient resources and skills to fully benefit from WFP technologies. WFP has mainly helped to build its partners' capacities to use the technologies required to conduct work with WFP. WFP has made less progress in helping partners to build their capacities in the general use of digital technologies and data. The role and responsibilities of WFP are not well defined with regard to capacity building for partners, although this has become more important as the humanitarian agenda has shifted towards localization.

On partnerships with digital technology service providers, WFP is considered a pioneer in working with the private sector to develop innovations for its operations. At headquarters, partnerships with the private sector are strongly represented. Partnerships with the private

sector help to strengthen innovation capacities. WFP has a rigorous due diligence process when selecting private service providers. However, some partnerships are seen as controversial. Headquarters and country offices have not consulted appropriately in the past when deciding on sensitive partnerships. There is strong demand at the country level for more partnerships, even though efforts have been undermined in the past by a lack of resources, unclear procedures, market competition and unclear definitions of roles and responsibilities. The establishment of the technology industry engagement committee in 2021 provides a forum for discussing technology partnership opportunities. It comprises director-level representatives from WFP technical units, country offices and regional bureaux.

WFP is now more aware of the need for data privacy and protection. There are more tools for reviewing privacy and protection in data sharing, such as privacy impact assessment. However, standards and guidance are used more regularly at the corporate level and when developing new technologies and partnerships. Implementation is lagging at the country level and for older applications. At the country level, for example, data are not always shared through secure and safe channels. There are no systems in place to ensure that data are being handled by partners in the way that WFP has instructed. Data-sharing agreements with some key partners are being developed, but they take time to complete and there does not seem to be enough resources to make them work appropriately with national laws on data privacy. However, some partnerships are seen as controversial and the due diligence process did not always consider reputational risks enough.

“ We work in many conflict zones where human rights violations are a daily reality. Our teams collect a lot of sensitive personal information (biometric, ethnic etc) from beneficiaries, information which if not stored and shared responsibly can fall into the wrong hands and [...] that creates risks for the beneficiaries. ”

- WFP staff survey respondent



CONCLUSIONS



Strategy

WFP is a recognized leader in the use of digital technologies in humanitarian crises. Investments in digital solutions have led to gains in effectiveness and efficiency. Technologies have increased the relevance and flexibility of operations and enhanced respect for the dignity of the people that WFP serves. They have also adapted well in constrained environments and during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, regarding its use of technology in general, WFP does not have a clear and coherent vision that covers the whole organization. It lacks a vision that considers the implications, rights and responsibilities of providing humanitarian assistance while increasingly relying on digital technologies and data. It does not consider the specific opportunities and needs of constrained environments. WFP has not taken a clear position or strategic direction in the debates across the United Nations and the humanitarian community about the use of digital technology in constrained environments.

The main reason WFP uses digital technology is to improve effectiveness and efficiency of its assistance. WFP seems to give less priority to other important considerations such as protection (which covers inclusion, safety, integrity and dignity), localization or participation. This puts WFP at odds with implementing partners and donors and with industry best practices on the people-centred use of technology.

Critically, when working with digital technology, WFP does not pay much heed to the implications for the humanitarian sector or to its reputation. This undermines its ability to position itself as a champion and a credible leader within the UN system and in the eyes of donors. Donors are increasingly concerned with the responsible use of digital technology and data. Without getting involved in emerging debates that require clarity of vision and strategy, WFP may lose its current leadership position.



Governance

Over the period covered by this evaluation, WFP has experienced significant growth in the use of digital technology. However, adoption of digital technologies has been unequal across the organization and only limited consideration has been given to constrained environments. A degree of delegation and flexibility have been promoted, but the organization is still struggling to balance the need for country-specific, customized solutions and the advantages of corporate solutions in terms of coherence and security. Roles and regulations on the development and use of digital technology at various organizational levels have only recently been formalized, and awareness and compliance are still limited.

Country offices develop and scale up digital technologies and applications in a disjointed way and do not use the recently distributed guidance. The Innovation Accelerator has had some important successes (for example, with regard to blockchain technology) but does not play a central role providing guidance and structure to all digital innovation in the organization.



Risk and protection

In recent years, WFP has made serious and concerted efforts to tackle cyber security and digital risks. It has introduced dedicated processes and policies and practical guidelines. However, the application of measures for data protection is lagging. This creates significant risks for WFP and the people it serves. Importantly, finding solutions to risk and protection issues is not prioritized and solutions are not designed specifically around constrained environments. The organization does not analyse the constraints enough to better understand the issues. WFP needs to accept more responsibility for the large quantities of sensitive data it holds about the people it serves; and it needs to hold its partners accountable for their management of beneficiary data. Both these challenges are major concerns particularly in constrained environments. Generally, WFP knows it needs to address these challenges but appears unengaged in doing so. Its responsibilities in this area are at times unclear or not the subject of clear processes.



Appropriateness and sustainability

Because WFP has used digital technologies to streamline various business processes, country offices now have useful and reliable ways to perform WFP activities. However, these digital technologies frequently come from the top down: there is limited consultation and engagement with business units at all levels. Digital technologies are being designed for specific needs and lack flexibility and interoperability.

Recently there have been efforts to make digital solutions talk to each other so that WFP can reduce duplication and make its technology portfolio more effective and coherent. However, WFP does not yet have standards to ensure that digital technologies remain relevant to business needs and it seems unclear how much the technologies cost and how sustainable they are.

For people-facing technologies, despite an interest in developing people-centred digital technology, the people served by WFP, especially in constrained environments, have hardly ever been asked to get involved. In constrained environments, the use of digital technology is made more difficult by external challenges (such as limited connectivity or digital literacy) and by technical issues (such as ease of use and integration). Failing to take into account such challenging environments undermines the appropriateness, usability and sustainability of digital technologies.



Inclusion and engagement

WFP is strongly committed to broad inclusivity and gender equality and women's empowerment across its operations. However, when it comes to its use of digital technology, WFP has significant shortcomings in the way inclusivity and gender are tackled. The different impacts of digital technology in these groups are not monitored. Not much effort is made to uncover whether digital technology is causing marginalized groups, including women and girls, to be excluded. This is a potentially critical issue in constrained environments. Digital technologies could also be used more proactively and purposefully to empower women or marginalized and under-represented groups.

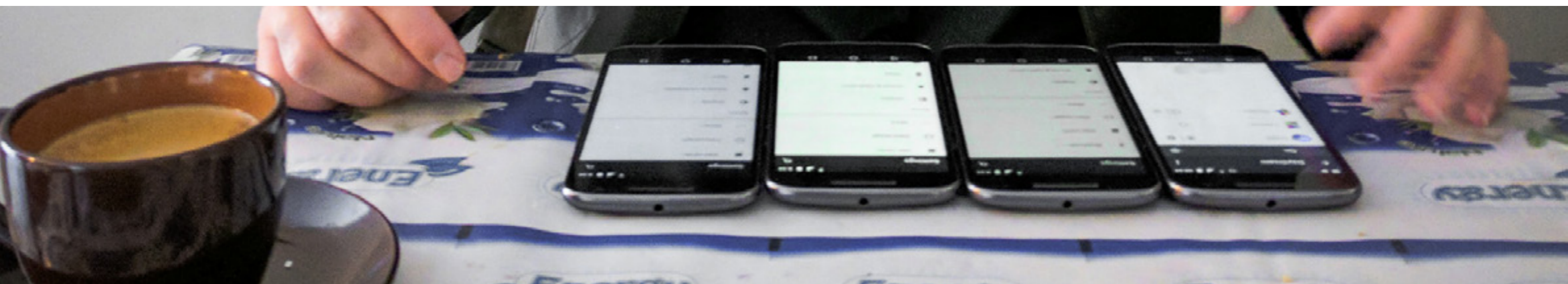
When it comes to which digital technology to use, WFP rarely makes an effort to engage, speak with, or be accountable to the people it serves. WFP recognizes the value of digital technology-based community feedback mechanisms but uses them largely for the reporting of technical issues and for notification purposes. It does not use them for meaningful engagement. There is no systematic incorporation of affected population's views. They do not participate in technology decisions, monitoring or evaluation and they do not help to identify the risks and unintended consequences of using digital technologies. WFP has made considerable investments in knowing people better through data acquisition, relying more and more on quantitative and remote approaches. This becomes concerning if it reduces time and resources for direct, engaged dialogue and localized understanding of people's experience, needs and perceptions.



Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge management

WFP has a unique level of experience with humanitarian technologies in constrained environments. Most of its knowledge, however, is in the form of experience held by its staff: WFP rarely formalizes or memorializes this experience. More generally, the fact that digital technologies do not always sit comfortably with changing needs in constrained environments is typical of a broader weakness in WFP: it lacks systematic processes for monitoring and evaluating the development, testing, deployment and use of digital technologies.

The broad gap in monitoring and evaluating the use of digital technology hinders efforts in knowledge sharing and management across all levels of WFP and outside of it too. This affects most critically those in constrained environments facing acute challenges, who are on average relatively ill-equipped with digital skills or infrastructure. The support provided by regional bureaux is unequal. Much knowledge is shared informally and never institutionalized. This also applies to knowledge regarding the outcomes of pilots. WFP makes little use of external partnerships that could enhance learning, for example with local research institutes.





Digital skills and partnerships

WFP staff are a critical asset who have uniquely contributed to the organization's leadership in the use of technology. However, there are important gaps in digital skills among staff. Staff increasingly need computer skills and technological know-how. Yet, WFP is lacking strategies for attracting, building and promoting digital skills and entrepreneurship, in particular amongst under-represented groups or women. Strategies for recruitment and staffing are also not tailored to the highly varied circumstances of country offices. Country offices differ in size and the level of hardship they are dealing with and so require different strategies and support. While some training is offered, WFP does not sufficiently invest in its staff's information technology skills or overall digital data literacy. This widens the gap between technological capacity and the rapid pace of technology use in WFP at all levels of the organization. Low digital skills are contributing to low awareness of risks and affect compliance with cyber security and data protection measures.

Beyond its own staff, WFP does not invest adequately in building the capacities of its partners. WFP is well recognized for providing partners with necessary infrastructure and access to digital technologies. It also provides system- and business-specific skills. However, these efforts are focused on implementing WFP technologies. Finally, decisions on sensitive partnerships with the private sector and state or parastate actors, need to be more transparent in how they have considered ethical, reputational and programmatic implications.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings and conclusions above, the evaluation proposes seven recommendations. Some recommendations relate to actions agreed in previous internal audits⁶ that have yet to be fully implemented by WFP. Importantly, while most recommendations are also relevant to the use of technology beyond constrained environments, the issues and the consequences that the recommendations aim to address are most acutely felt in constrained environments. Lastly, most recommendations cannot be implemented by a single entity within WFP but will require strong and consistent cooperation throughout the organization.

1 Strategy

As part of the implementation plan for the WFP strategic plan (2022–2025) and the new information technology strategy, consult with relevant divisions to create a strategy and vision for the use of digital technology and data. People and protection must be central concerns, and constrained environments taken into account. Translate this vision into clear standards, directives and practical guidance and share them internally and with partners.

2 Governance

Governance arrangements and resource allocation that drive the use of technologies in constrained environments should be clarified and made stronger. The division of roles and responsibilities across all levels of the organization should be clarified. This would improve the balance between product-driven efforts and business needs.

3 Risk and protection

Develop strategies and mechanisms to ensure the protection of affected populations and humanitarian personnel and the management of risks associated with the use of technologies. Focus on risks associated with constrained environments. Build a strategic position on protection and the rights of, and responsibilities to, affected communities with regard to the use of technologies.

4 Inclusion and engagement

Integrate inclusion, gender equality and women's empowerment in technology development and use. Meaningfully engage with diverse community members to inform the development and use of technologies.

5 Monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management

Develop a knowledge management approach to capturing, storing and sharing, both internally and externally, information regarding the use of technology by WFP. Build evidence and maximize synergies appropriate for constrained environments.

6 Digital skills and change management

Develop and implement a coherent capacity development and change management strategy. It should cover basic digital skills and data literacy for all WFP staff, especially in countries with low digital literacy and skills.

7 Partnerships

Invest in developing and supporting technological partnerships in, and for, operations in constrained environments. These should be focused on, but not limited to, local partners. A key principle for sustainability is that partnerships offer mutual benefits. Partnerships should include efforts to improve and sustain access to the internet.

Endnotes

1 The United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mercy Corps and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

2 See for example: UN. 2020. Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance (A/75/590).; HRW. 2021. UN Shared Rohingya Data without Informed Consent.; OCHA. 2021. From Digital Promise to Frontline Practice: New and Emerging Technologies in Humanitarian action.; The Engine Room. 2019. Unpacking 'Informed Consent'.

3 OIGA. 2020. Advisory assurance report on beneficiary data mapping.

4 South Sudan and Iraq case studies.

5 WFP. 2019. Management Review of Significant Risks and Control Issues and WFP. 2019. Audit of Vulnerability Management.

6 In particular: WFP. 2019. Internal Audit of Governance of IT-Enabled Projects in WFP; WFP. 2019. Internal Audit on ICT Management in Country Offices; WFP. 2021. Internal Audit of SCOPE WFP's Digital Management of Beneficiaries (2021).

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World Food Programme

Via Cesare Giulio Viola 68/70,
00148 Rome, Italy - T +39 06 65131

wfp.org