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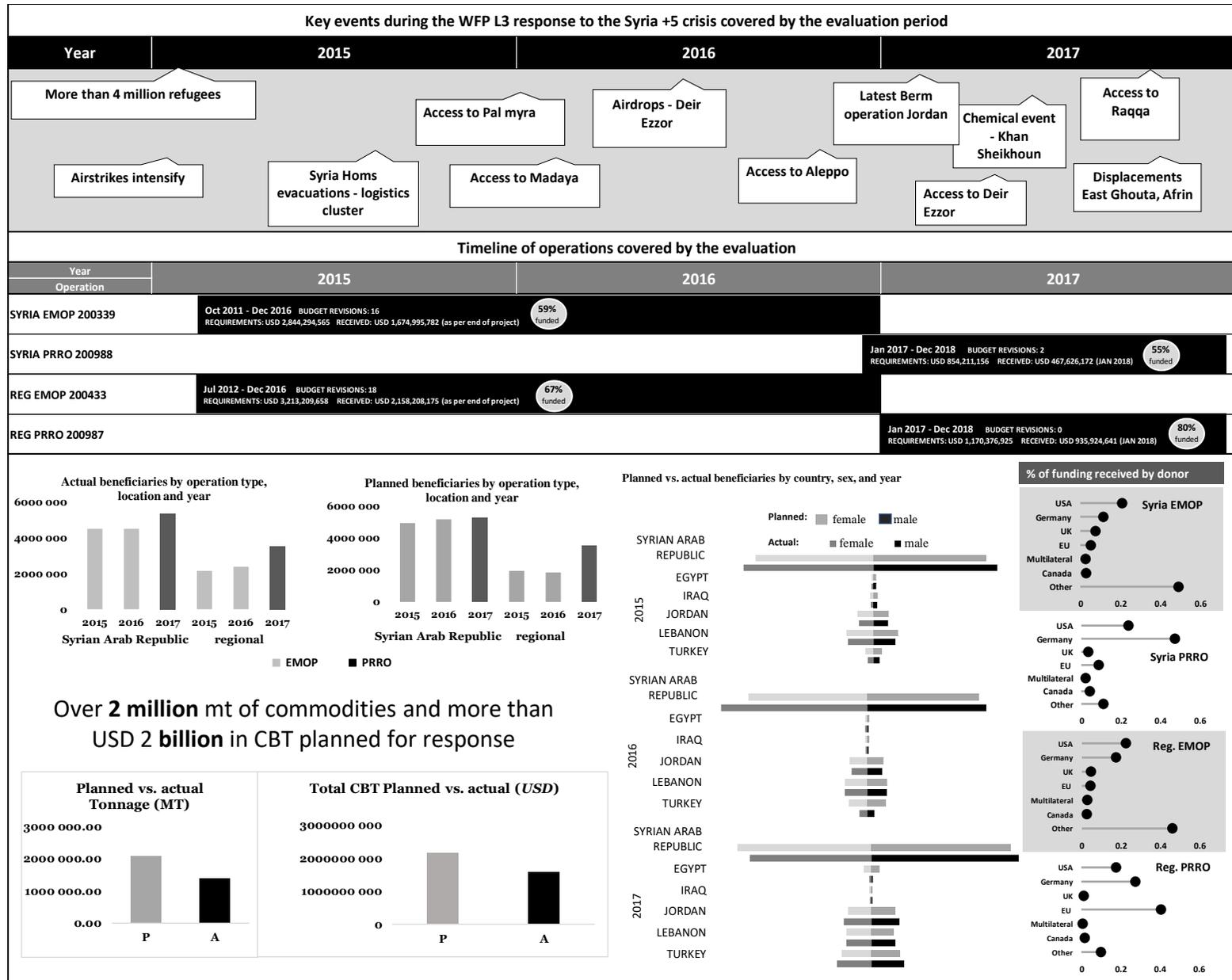
Summary report on the evaluation of the WFP regional response to the Syrian crisis (January 2015–March 2018)

In line with the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) (WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1), to respect the integrity and independence of evaluation findings the editing of this report has been limited and as a result some of the language in it may not be fully consistent with the World Food Programme's standard terminology or editorial practices. Please direct any requests for clarification to the Director of Evaluation.

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Executive summary

An evaluation of the World Food Programme (WFP) response to the Syrian Arab Republic regional crisis between January 2015 and March 2018 was commissioned by the Office of Evaluation. The evaluation covered the WFP response in the Syrian Arab Republic and in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. It assessed the use of partnerships and synergies; alignment with needs; efficiency and results achieved. It applied a systematic approach, including document review, interviews with staff, partners and WFP-contracted retailers, focus groups with beneficiaries and direct observation of activities.

The evaluation finds that, overall, WFP executed a high-powered, professionally adept and technically-sophisticated response to the Syrian regional crisis from January 2015 to March 2018. Despite a lack of contextually appropriate corporate guidance, or comparable experience, WFP's general food and basic needs assistance served millions in need, applying innovation and adapting/piloting where necessary. It applied new technological models for cash-based transfers on a vast scale and to a high level of technological complexity.

WFP activities were mostly well aligned with the needs of affected populations, helped by strong food security analysis and the use of vulnerability-based targeting and caseload prioritization. The exception was certain resilience activities, which suffered from weak designs. Activities have been diversified since 2017.

WFP acted overall as a conscientious humanitarian partner within the collective response, despite challenges in the use of cash-based approaches. It successfully navigated some politically sensitive operating terrain to earn relations of mutual respect with host governments.

The response was highly time- and cost-efficient. Most beneficiaries received a reliable flow of essential assistance, whether in kind (inside the Syrian Arab Republic) or cash based (in refugee-hosting countries). This was achieved through a professionalized approach to the supply chain in the Syrian Arab Republic and technological innovations in cash-based delivery in refugee-hosting countries. Both generated lessons that can serve WFP and the wider humanitarian community.

General food and basic needs assistance met or exceeded internal targets and maintained the food security of beneficiaries at acceptable levels even though intended transfer values were sometimes not achieved. WFP also helped open up humanitarian access in the Syrian Arab Republic and delivered significant economic benefits for, and shared technical knowledge with, host countries. Assistance was provided in accordance with international humanitarian principles, though the mass scale of the response sometimes challenged the ability of WFP to track and ensure full adherence to neutrality and operational independence at the local level.

The response paid insufficient attention to gender equality and protection concerns. Mechanisms for accountability to affected populations (AAP) did not fully meet beneficiary concerns, needs or expectations, particularly in terms of communication with affected populations. The mass scale of the response meant that WFP had a reduced 'line of sight' to beneficiaries.

The evaluation raises the question of how WFP and the wider humanitarian community define a successful humanitarian response, particularly when balancing the challenges of responding to scale and sensitivity to beneficiary needs. For WFP, it suggests a need to place beneficiaries' concerns and expectations more centrally within its response. The evaluation recommends strengthening AAP, gender and protection as immediate priorities and enhancing adherence to humanitarian principles, particularly at the local level. Looking ahead, improved knowledge management will support learning and knowledge transfer. WFP should define its own vision of success by developing a regional-level strategic statement of 'where to from here'.

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the summary report on the evaluation of the WFP regional response to the Syrian crisis (January 2015–March 2018) set out in document WFP/EB.2/2018/7-B and the management response WFP/EB.2/2018/7-B/Add.1 and encourages further action on the recommendations, taking into account the considerations raised by the Board during its discussion.

Introduction

Evaluation features

1. The WFP Office of Evaluation commissioned an independent evaluation of WFP's response to the Syrian regional crisis between January 2015 and March 2018. The evaluation addressed the WFP response to the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic and in five regionally-affected countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. It followed a previous evaluation covering the period from 2011 to 2014.¹
2. The evaluation was conducted between December 2017 and June 2018. It asked four main questions:
 - To what extent did WFP maximize the use of partnerships and synergies to improve its response?
 - How well did the response align with needs?
 - How efficient was the response?
 - What results were delivered?
3. Given the fluidity and fast pace of the crisis, as well as its politically-sensitive nature, a highly systematic approach was adopted. Evidence at the country and regional levels was collected through:
 - Review of over 1,500 documents;
 - Interviews and consultations with 377 stakeholders, including 232 internal interviewees (WFP staff and management) and 145 external interviewees (representatives of partner governments, United Nations and donor agencies, cooperating partners and financial service providers, the WFP Executive Board and the Red Cross/Crescent movement);
 - 35 single-sex and mixed focus groups including: 9 groups in Lebanon, 13 in Jordan and 13 in the Syrian Arab Republic, speaking with over 300 beneficiaries of WFP interventions;
 - Interviews with 33 retailers;
 - Observation of activities and visits to WFP-contracted shops, camps and activity sites in Lebanon, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic; and
 - Analysis of the supply chain, gender, protection and cost efficiency and effectiveness.

* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

¹ The evaluation was also timed to support the development of the programme of work for the Syrian Arab Republic for 2019–2020, including the interim country strategic plan.

4. Fieldwork was carried out in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic. Missions to Turkey and the WFP regional bureau in Cairo were conducted.
5. A gender-sensitive approach was applied to data gathering and analysis, and ethical issues were taken into account. Data from different sources were triangulated to confirm the validity of findings and conclusions. A validation meeting with WFP staff involved in the response was conducted in June 2018.
6. The evaluation had learning and accountability aims. While focused on the needs, interests and priorities of affected populations and the wider humanitarian community, its main direct intended users are WFP country offices, the regional bureau in Cairo and WFP management.
7. Limitations included the lack of available data to permit robust analysis of cost-effectiveness and the use of a desk study alone in Iraq and Egypt owing to time and resource constraints and the relatively small caseloads in those countries.

Context

8. The regional crisis is taking place in a middle-income setting and is marked by large-scale armed conflict and massive refugee flows. It comprises events inside the Syrian Arab Republic, and regionally-experienced effects.
9. **Inside the Syrian Arab Republic**, hostilities continue in 2018. Despite increasing humanitarian access, the situation remains extremely volatile, with large-scale internal displacement ongoing. Food and nutrition insecurity are widespread: the number of people who require food assistance has risen from 9 million in 2017 to 10.5 million in 2018, including 6.5 million facing acute food insecurity.²
10. **Regional effects:** 5.6 million registered refugees reside mainly in five host countries, where caseloads have been largely stable since 2015. Eight percent of Syrian refugees live in organized camps in Turkey, Jordan and Iraq; the remainder live in urban or peri-urban areas. The poverty rate among Syrian refugees is exceptionally high;³ they also face diverse legislative and policy environments in host countries.
11. The crisis has been characterized as a protection crisis, both inside the Syrian Arab Republic and in the wider region.⁴ Gender inequalities also feature prominently.

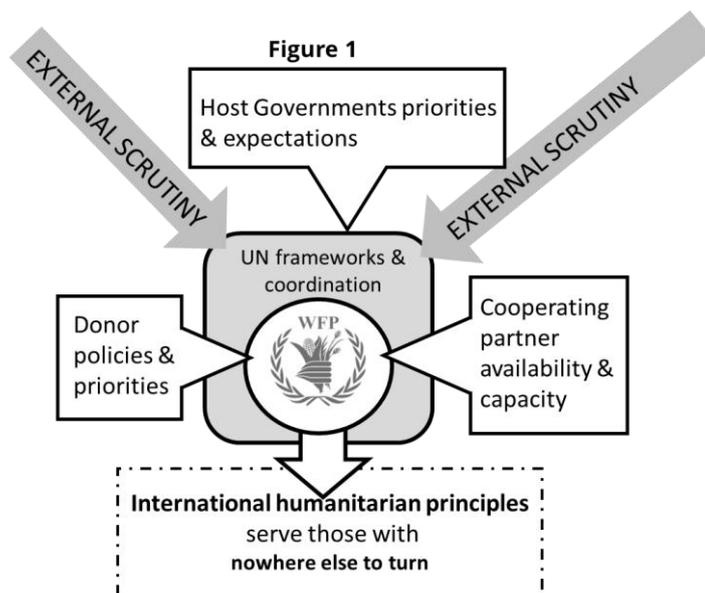
² 2018 humanitarian needs overview.

³ Inter-agency information sharing portal for the Syria regional refugee response, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

⁴ European Union/United Nations (2018) Brussels II Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region' (24-25 April 2018) – Document annex – Situation inside Syria.

The WFP response

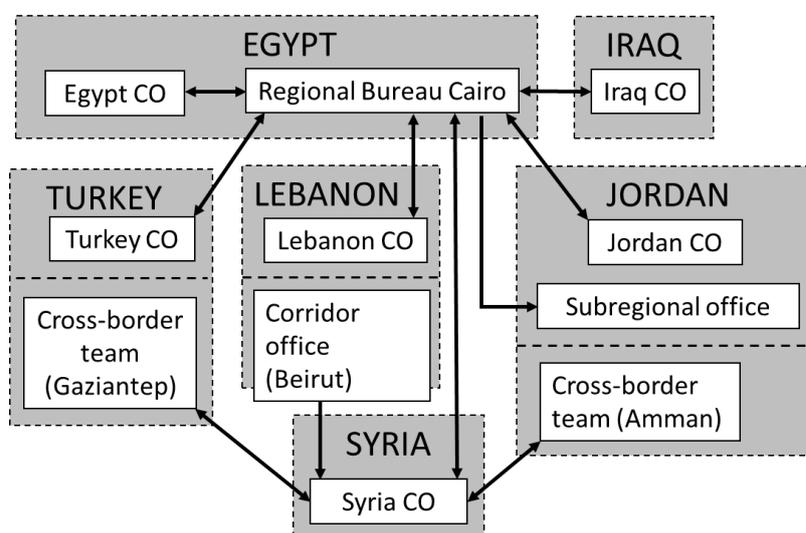
12. The WFP response has been high-pressure and high-stakes. Under fluid, fast-moving and politically-charged operating conditions, WFP has had to act upon its mandate to serve humanitarian needs while adhering to humanitarian principles and United Nations Security Council resolutions; responding to host government expectations; addressing diverse donor priorities; and cohering with the wider United Nations response – all amidst the intense scrutiny that accompanies a high-profile crisis (figure 1).



Source: Evaluation team

13. WFP's arrangements for implementing its response have evolved since 2015. It is the only United Nations agency to have implemented the Whole of Syria⁵ organizational model. The WFP offices currently involved in the response and the flow of cooperation between them are depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2: Implementing architecture



Source: Evaluation team, reconstructed from WFP project documents and fieldwork

Abbreviations: CO = country office

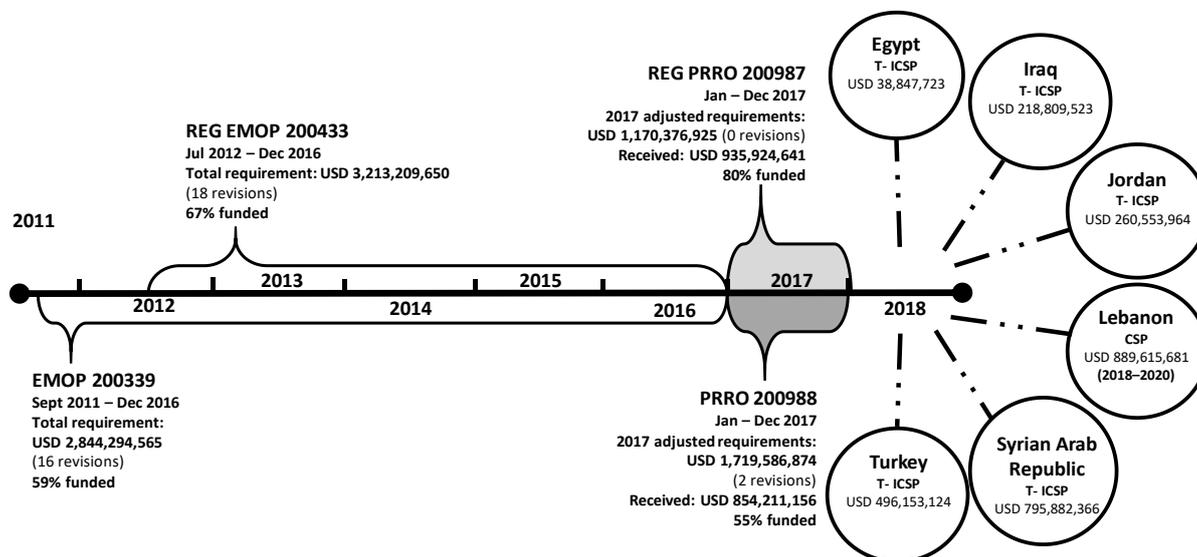
14. The regional emergency response, as illustrated in figure 3, included two programmatic components:
- **Syrian Arab Republic:** Emergency operation (EMOP) 200339 (2011), expanded through 16 revisions, targeting 4.5 million beneficiaries in 2016. Protracted relief and

⁵ The Whole of Syria model for the response involves coordination hubs in Damascus, Amman and Gaziantep (see explanation and figure 11 in annex 7 of the full evaluation report).

recovery operation (PRRO) 200988 targeted 5.74 million beneficiaries from January 2017 onwards.

- **Refugee-hosting countries:** Regional emergency operation (EMOP) 200433 (2012) passed through 18 budget revisions and targeted 2.4 million beneficiaries in 2016. Subsequently, regional PRRO 200987 targeted 3.54 million beneficiaries.⁶

Figure 3: Syria +5 WFP operations portfolio timeline



Source: Evaluation team, reconstructed from WFP project documents and country strategy papers

Abbreviation: BR = budget revision

- The response is extremely large-scale. During the period evaluated it comprised 18 percent of total WFP requirements in its programme of work for 2015–2017, with aggregate needs across operations funded at 65 percent over the three years. The bulk of funding came from five donors: Canada, the European Union, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Average annual expenditure was USD 1 billion per year. The combined operations targeted the food assistance needs of an average of 7 million beneficiaries per year between 2015 and 2017. Over 9 million people were targeted in 2018.
- The main activity was general food assistance (including basic needs assistance in Lebanon and Turkey), which constituted 82 percent of the total assistance from 2015 to 2017 across all six countries of the response.⁷ In the Syrian Arab Republic 98 percent of general food assistance took the form of in-kind rations, while in the five refugee-hosting countries 98 percent was provided as cash-based transfers. Resilience,⁸ school feeding and nutrition activities in the Syrian Arab Republic expanded after 2017 under the PRRO but remain a small part of the overall portfolio.

⁶ From January 2018, under the WFP Integrated Road Map, the country offices moved to country strategic plans (in the case of Lebanon) and transitional interim country strategic plans (all other countries, including the Syrian Arab Republic). The plans for Egypt and Iraq include Syrian refugee responses.

⁷ Calculated for planned beneficiaries 2015–2017, using WFP standard project report data. Annual percentages: 85 percent (2015), 84 percent (2016) and 77 percent (2017).

⁸ Referred to in the evaluation as food for assets, food for training and other livelihoods activities, as reflected in the WFP categorization in its corporate reporting and programming documentation and by staff and donors interviewed for the evaluation. However, the concept of resilience is being developed more broadly in the region.

17. In the Syrian Arab Republic WFP delivered assistance through three separate mechanisms: regular programming (wholly inside the Syrian Arab Republic), cross-(conflict) line operations and cross-border operations.

Evaluation findings

Partnerships and synergies

18. The evaluation found that, overall, WFP acted as a conscientious humanitarian partner in the collective response to the crisis.
19. **United Nations partnerships.** WFP aligned closely with strategic frameworks⁹ for the response, particularly on life-saving. It implemented its cross-border and cross-line deliveries for hard-to-reach and besieged areas of the Syrian Arab Republic within the framework of relevant United Nations resolutions.¹⁰
20. WFP played a critical and leading role in the United Nations Whole of Syria mechanism, particularly the food security and logistics clusters. It also made significant contributions to country and regional coordination forums such as food security working groups and sectors in refugee-hosting countries and the Access Working Group in the Syrian Arab Republic led by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Operational partnerships for school feeding, nutrition and resilience had scope for expansion.
21. Relations with some agencies were tested, notably with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and particularly in 2016 following donor selection of WFP as the main partner for cash-based delivery. This impeded the spirit of partnership for several months. The evaluation found that relationships were however continuing to heal.
22. **Government partnerships.** Despite needing to clarify its role and comparative advantages in the collective response, WFP earned mutual respect from partner governments over time. This was supported by alignment with national response strategies and increased operational coordination since 2017 (see box 1).

Box 1: Joint implementation in Turkey

In Turkey, the emergency social safety net programme is jointly implemented between the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the Directorate General of Migration Management, the Directorate General of Population and Citizenship, the Turkish Red Crescent and WFP. It is coordinated by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency. A joint management cell is operated by the Turkish Red Crescent and WFP.

23. Government stakeholders perceived WFP as a capable and professional partner, although they noted challenges in its adaptation to the middle-income context of the crisis and were critical of high staff turnover.
24. **Cooperating partner relationships.** The range of WFP cooperating partners expanded over time, particularly with regard to resilience activities.¹¹ WFP also partnered with more local organizations. In the Syrian Arab Republic it gradually reduced its previous dependency on the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. However, the use of cash-based transfers delivered

⁹ Such as the humanitarian response plans for the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq and the regional refugee and resilience plans for refugee-hosting countries.

¹⁰ Namely, Security Council resolution 2165 of 14 July 2014 (reaffirmed in part and renewed in part in resolution 2393 of 19 December 2017).

¹¹ WFP. 2015. An evaluation of WFP's Regional Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2011–2014: Evaluation Report.

through banks, retailers and shops in refugee-hosting countries curtailed the frequency, duration and quality of cooperating partners' face-to-face contact with beneficiaries. Although partly necessitated by the mass scale of the response, cooperating partners were dissatisfied with this shift.

25. **Private sector engagement.** WFP made strong use of the private sector and invested in retailer capacities and in networks to increase the purchasing power of beneficiaries. Arrangements varied from country to country, for example with different fees paid as part of cash-based transfers.
26. **Internal synergies.** The evaluation found the "Syria+5" programmatic model appropriate for the period 2015–2018. It distinguished the Syrian Arab Republic strategically and operationally and provided a compelling vehicle for regional-level advocacy and coordination. However, it did not act effectively as a driver for regional synergies, with limited knowledge transfer across countries. The role of the regional bureau and its subregional office in Amman in providing programmatic guidance and advice to country offices was unclear.

Aligning with needs

27. The evaluation found that the response mostly aligned with the needs of affected populations. Key features included:
28. **Evidence base.** Following the previous evaluation of the regional response,¹² WFP strengthened the evidence base for its interventions. Its high-quality and technically-sophisticated food security analyses provided a major asset to the collective humanitarian response. However, gender, protection and vulnerable group analyses were inconsistent, and there were gaps in consultations with affected populations. The use of evidence to inform programming was also unsystematic.
29. **Targeting.** As recommended by the 2014–2015 evaluation, WFP increased the use of vulnerability-based targeting, with rigorous and appropriate methodologies for general food and basic needs assistance. Other activities applied geographic and population-based targeting. In some countries, for different reasons,¹³ WFP had limited direct visibility to individual beneficiaries. Vulnerable host populations were included in Jordan and Lebanon, in line with national government requests.
30. **Caseload prioritization.** Funding shortages meant that beneficiaries had to be prioritized. Rationales were explicit and vulnerability-focused. In Lebanon, for example, WFP switched to a desk-based proxy means testing formula in 2016, enabling transfer values to be maintained while prioritizing beneficiaries according to vulnerability categories.
31. **Activity relevance.** Most WFP activities were relevant to needs. A lack of alternative forms of support for affected populations merited the use of general food assistance. The basic needs approach model applied in Turkey diverged from standard WFP rationales for interventions but was validated by poverty data. Poor nutrition indicators justified the nutrition focus of school-feeding activities. However, resilience activities were less relevant to needs, due to unsuited designs, short design and implementation timeframes, the late arrival of funding and tight disbursement timelines. Some country offices developed more context-appropriate models, but these were not fully concept-tested.
32. **Modality relevance.** Modalities were appropriate for the context. In refugee-hosting countries, conditions were suitable for cash-based transfers, including access to functioning

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ These include for example stringent data protection laws and limited access to cooperating partner lists

markets, available technical capacity, regulated banking services and suitable infrastructure. In the Syrian Arab Republic, evidence of feasibility was still required, and expansion of cash-based approaches likely to be incremental.

33. The response provided a testing ground for new ways of delivering cash-based assistance at scale. Modalities included restricted e-vouchers, unrestricted cash and a 'choice' of both. The choice modality supported beneficiary preferences while protecting their dignity and allowing WFP to achieve its food security aims.
34. **Corporate guidance.** Some corporate guidance, notably on resilience, was unsuited to the middle-income context of the response. No guidance was available on large-scale cash-based responses or basic needs approaches, and in these areas lessons from the response have informed the concurrent development of WFP corporate guidance. Conceptual refinement for resilience was under way, led by the regional bureau with support from headquarters.

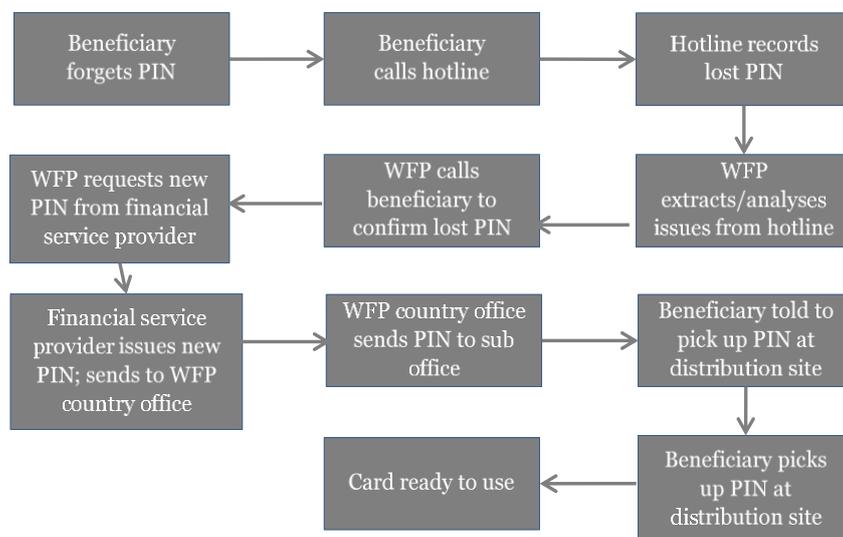
Efficiency

35. The response was highly time and cost efficient overall.
36. **Timeliness.** Despite the challenging operating terrain inside the Syrian Arab Republic, no major (total) pipeline breaks arose. WFP reduced delivery lead times from nearly 4 months to just 40 days over the evaluation period. It also successfully managed pipeline cessation from Turkey in December 2017 without affecting lead times.

37. For cash-based responses in refugee-hosting countries, most registered beneficiaries received timely monthly uploads. A minority of beneficiaries experienced routine card issues¹⁴ in Lebanon and Jordan, losing access to assistance for 1-3 months (figure 4).

38. Other activities faced delays caused by contextual and operational challenges. For example, WFP found it difficult to identify capacitated partners for resilience activities in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

Figure 4: Process of obtaining a new PIN in Lebanon



Source: Evaluation team, based on interviews with WFP staff and cooperating partners

39. **Cost-efficiency**¹⁵ was high for both in-kind and cash delivery. For the Syrian Arab Republic, key cost items for in-kind delivery were kept low. For refugee-hosting countries, WFP gradually achieved cost savings in the amount transferred to beneficiaries. This was accomplished in part through cost-efficient partnerships with private sector providers;

¹⁴ Such as a forgotten PIN code, a lost or damaged card, etc.

¹⁵ The evaluation explores cost-efficiency through unit cost indicators for amounts distributed (whether amounts of money transferred or amounts of in-kind food). Annex X to the main Evaluation Report provides a full explanation of the methodology applied.

savings in field level agreements with cooperating partners; and the scale and duration of WFP operations, which facilitated cost savings over time.

40. **Operational improvements and innovations** A professionalized supply chain in the Syrian Arab Republic and technological innovations in cash-based transfers to refugees helped keep delivery to beneficiaries consistent and reliable. The lessons generated can serve the wider humanitarian community, as well as WFP (boxes 2 and 3).

Box 2: Syrian Arab Republic in-kind supply chain: operational improvements

- Using food supply agreements, which involved purchasing specific food volumes at an agreed price, with commodities drawn directly from suppliers' factories or warehouses
- Using long-term agreements with suppliers to keep costs low
- Packaging inside the Syrian Arab Republic, close to beneficiaries
- Diversifying the market for ground transport through a tariff system
- Investing in food quality assurance systems at source
- Improving internal management through a supply chain working group with weekly conference calls; a supply chain dashboard providing real-time oversight; and internal systems linking upstream and downstream supply systems

Box 3: Innovations in cash-based transfers

- Using at-scale iris scan technology in camps (jointly with UNHCR) to verify beneficiaries identities for each transaction (Jordan)
- Working through a multi-agency platform and common e-cards (Lebanon)
- Producing retail strategies to enable at-scale purchasing (Lebanon)
- Piloting blockchain technology (Jordan)
- Using technology to generate near-real-time transaction data, allowing WFP to monitor purchasing and retail patterns closely (Jordan, Lebanon)

Results

41. General food and basic needs assistance met or exceeded internal targets and maintained the food security levels of beneficiaries, even though intended transfer values of entitlements were not always achieved. Other activity areas also showed some emerging improvements.
42. The evaluation found more systematic and rigorous results monitoring in the response than had been found during the 2014–2015 evaluation. In particular, food security outcome monitoring permitted regular and consistent insights into the effects of WFP interventions.
43. **Food security.** WFP consistently reached or exceeded its planned number of beneficiaries (table 1).

TABLE 1: AGGREGATED ACTUAL BENEFICIARIES AND IN-KIND AND CASH-BASED TRANSFERS TO BENEFICIARIES, 2015–2017, FOR THE SIX COUNTRIES, AS A PERCENTAGE OF PLANNED BENEFICIARIES AND VALUES					
	Actual vs planned beneficiaries			Actual vs planned transfers	
	Male	Female	Overall	In kind (mt)	Cash-based transfers (USD)
2015	103%	104%	104%	64%	55%
2016	96%	108%	102%	80%	77%
2017	96%	105%	100%	56%	81%

Source: Standard project reports, 2015–2017

44. Because of funding shortages, however, WFP could not fully realize its planned transfers to beneficiaries. Instead, it delivered approximately two-thirds of the intended quantity of in-kind transfers between 2015 and 2017 (achieving higher volumes when funding permitted) and a similar proportion of cash-based transfers.
45. Food consumption scores and dietary diversity scores among WFP beneficiaries were also maintained, in contrast to those of non-beneficiaries, while the use of negative coping strategies was reduced. Food security indicators showed marked declines when assistance was cut, for instance because of insufficient funding.
46. Gains were more tentative in other activity areas. However, in 2017, resilience activities helped ensure food security improvements in Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic, as did school-feeding activities in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.
47. **Additional results.** The evaluation found evidence of achievements in expanding humanitarian access, generating economic benefits for host countries and sharing technical expertise with partner governments. For example:
- WFP leveraged its relationship of mutual respect with the national authorities to help open up humanitarian access to different areas of the Syrian Arab Republic. It was considered generous in sharing convoy and air delivery space to enable the delivery of humanitarian supplies from other United Nations agencies.
 - For refugee-hosting countries, high volumes of cash-based transfers and other WFP expenditure translated into considerable economic contributions. Nearly USD 1 billion¹⁶ was injected into local economies in 2017, with concomitant multiplier effects.
 - Particularly in the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Turkey, WFP shared its expertise in nutrition, needs assessment and monitoring with national partners.
48. Contributions to social cohesion were variable. Sometimes WFP activities helped to reduce tensions, for example when host communities were included in resilience activities. Sometimes the provision of cash assistance exacerbated existing social tensions between refugee and host communities.
49. **International humanitarian principles.** Despite the challenging operating terrain, WFP assistance adhered to international humanitarian principles. This was accomplished largely by applying needs-based targeting; expanding the range of cooperating partners; adhering to United Nations resolutions to cross conflict lines; applying rigorous vulnerability assessments; and prioritizing vulnerable groups. In the Syrian Arab Republic, WFP struck an

¹⁶ Based on internal WFP data sources, with figures including transfer values to beneficiaries; local and regional food procurement; and other expenditures made by WFP within the response.

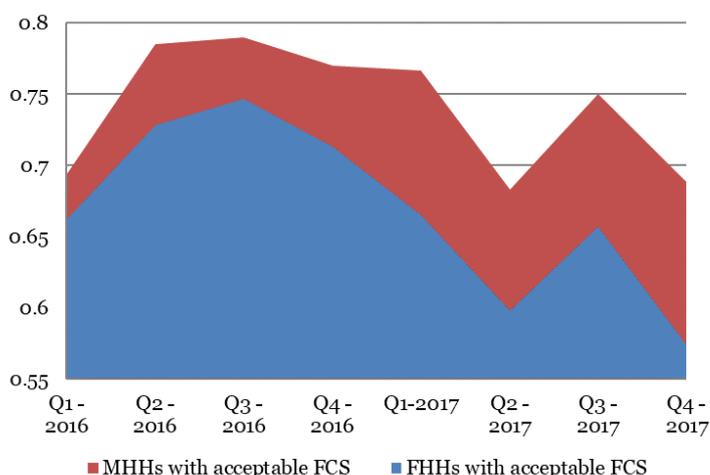
appropriate balance between maintaining relationships to facilitate delivery while advocating to maximize humanitarian access. However, the mass scale of the response challenged the ability of WFP to track and ensure full adherence to neutrality and operational independence at local level.

50. The response highlighted the complex operational choices faced by staff, such as how to balance donor priorities, national government requirements and adherence to the WFP mandate under high-pressure operating conditions. Such choices were sometimes challenging for technical staff who lacked experience in delivering a politically sensitive response in middle-income contexts, where governments took strong national leadership over the international assistance delivered on their territories. They were also demanding for cooperating partners, who were not always familiar with the humanitarian principles. The evaluation observed a 'knowledge gap' for WFP staff and partners on applying the principles in the practical humanitarian action of the response.
51. **Gender.** The evaluation found that the "shift in gear" promised by the WFP Gender Policy (2015-2020) and Gender Action Plan had not materialized in the response. This was reflected in gender action plans of varying depth and quality; insufficient human and financial resources; inconsistent gender results networks; and limited management attention. Despite the gender policy commitment to achieving gender parity in staffing, including in senior management, the senior management cohort for the response was largely male-based.

52. Indicators showed that female-headed households¹⁷ benefitting from WFP assistance were more food-insecure than male-headed households and a widening gap was evident. However, the response had not moved to adjust transfer values to female-headed households, nor taken any other actions to narrow this gap.

53. **Protection** WFP's 2012 humanitarian protection policy¹⁸ commits it to "[d]esigning and carrying out food and livelihood assistance activities that do not increase the protection risks faced by the crisis-affected populations receiving assistance." Operations in the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey paid greater recent attention to protection concerns than those in the other affected countries. Overall, however, staffing for protection – as for gender – was limited, and planning documents paid little attention to the issue. Instead, it was addressed programmatically, mainly through UNHCR referral systems.

Figure 5: Food insecurity indicators for female-headed households



Source: Regional monitoring and evaluation; food security outcome monitoring reports

Abbreviations: FCS = food consumption score; FHH = female-headed households; MHH = male-headed households

¹⁷ Data based on WFP minimum monitoring requirements; head of household is indicative only because of a lack of representative sampling.

¹⁸ WFP Humanitarian Protection Policy (WFP/EB.1/2012/5-B/Rev.1).

54. Standard WFP corporate data showed few protection concerns. Beneficiaries, however, described experiencing a range of protection challenges. Local-level WFP staff acknowledged that they had limited insight into these challenges.
55. **Accountability to affected populations.** The 2016 AAP strategy commits WFP to “ensuring that programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes and decisions are informed by and reflect the views of affected people”.¹⁹ However, few staff were dedicated to AAP, and feedback mechanisms in place did not provide an adequate channel for beneficiaries to express their concerns. Combined with limited face-to-face contact with cooperating partners, this resulted in the incomplete protection of beneficiaries’ dignity, and the AAP elements of “do no harm” not being fully upheld.
56. Specifically, communication weaknesses included the following:
- Uncommunicated duration of assistance (given funding uncertainties), which created anxiety among beneficiaries and a fear of being cut off;
 - Poorly communicated reasons for prioritization and targeting, which caused frustration among cooperating partners and distress to beneficiaries;
 - Withholding eligibility criteria in Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon, due to concerns about potential misuse; and
 - Impersonalized communication and inadequate beneficiary feedback mechanisms arising from the mass scale of the response, which drove WFP towards methods such as SMS and WhatsApp messages and hotlines in refugee-hosting countries. These proved unsatisfactory for beneficiaries, who found hotlines difficult to navigate and who experienced decisions on prioritization communicated through these methods as traumatic.
57. **Sustainable gains.** Although its general food and basic needs assistance was focused on maintaining and improving beneficiary food security, WFP resilience activities also sought to reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance and increase self-reliance. However, these activities did not lead to sustainable livelihoods or self-reliance, as intended by PRROs. Integration into local social safety nets faced practical and political barriers.
58. WFP adopted mature and robust risk management, reflected in rigorous procedures and extensive internal and external auditing. However, contingency plans for potential financing shortfalls were not comprehensively in place, even at the regional bureau level.
59. Vision 2020, the main regional strategic framework for the response, sets out operationally-oriented objectives rather than clear strategic guidance. It was also not comprehensively institutionally ‘owned’ by staff. WFP has, however, begun to plan for the future, for example by holding meetings on organizing for potential returnees.

Conclusions

60. Overall, the evaluation found that WFP executed a high-powered, professionally adept and technically-sophisticated response to the Syrian regional crisis from January 2015 to March 2018. The response was hard-fought, facing humanitarian needs on an unprecedented scale, in politically-sensitive environments. In the absence of contextually-appropriate corporate guidance, or any comparable experience, the response largely forged its own path through the crisis.
61. Despite some challenges along the way, WFP acted overall as a conscientious humanitarian partner within the collective response. It successfully navigated some politically sensitive operating terrain to earn relations of mutual respect with host governments.

¹⁹ WFP. 2017. *WFP’s Strategy for Accountability to Affected Populations*.

62. Through its general food and basic needs assistance, WFP served millions in need by innovating and adapting; piloting new approaches and, where necessary, leading on behalf of the humanitarian community. WFP operations, particularly in its cash-based approaches, also achieved a scale and technological complexity unprecedented in the humanitarian community's experience around the world, while being highly time- and cost-efficient.
63. Donor partners placed considerable trust in WFP to implement a complex humanitarian response. However, in some areas such as resilience and cash-based transfers, WFP did not benefit from fully cohesive support.
64. In its own terms, therefore, and also in those of many of its funders, WFP rose to meet the challenges of the crisis. Its achievements are a measure of its technical abilities under highly complex emergency conditions. However, the evaluation found that, in addressing needs on a mass scale, WFP resources and institutional energy were largely focused on the supply side of the response – that is, geared to delivery. This reduced attention to some demand-side concerns and created some 'blind spots', including a reduced 'line of sight' to beneficiaries.
65. Such blind spots included gender, protection and AAP, all of which lacked adequate staffing as well as management and programmatic attention, particularly in terms of communicating with beneficiary populations. The complex operational choices faced by staff in the response would benefit from a more consistently politically-astute approach. Going forward, the response can also be improved through stronger learning and knowledge transfer and a clear articulation of the WFP regional-level vision of success.
66. The evaluation findings raise a central question for WFP and for the humanitarian system more broadly. In trying to balance scale and sensitivity in massive humanitarian responses, what defines success? For WFP, the evidence suggests that beneficiaries' needs, concerns and expectations should be placed more centrally within its future response. This indicates stronger communication channels, improved two-way feedback mechanisms and ensuring a clear 'line of sight' to beneficiary needs and concerns through partners.

Recommendations

67. The recommendations aim to improve the qualitative dimensions of the WFP response, mindful of the need to place beneficiaries at the centre. They also propose some steps for the next phase of the response, as the crisis continues to evolve.

Immediate: Prioritize demand-side issues			
What?	How? (operationalization)	Who? (responsible)	By when? (completion)
	<p>1. Strengthen AAP capacity and systems</p> <p><i>Regional Bureau Cairo (RBC) (supported by headquarters)</i></p> <p>a) Designate (and capacitate where appropriate) dedicated staff for AAP, allocating resources specifically for capacity strengthening and/or mainstreaming.</p> <p>b) Review current AAP mechanisms within country offices to inform strategization, and make proposals for improvement.</p> <p><i>Country offices</i></p> <p>a) Allocate staff and resources for dedicated AAP mainstreaming and capacitate them to set-up and support a network of field focal points;</p> <p>b) Provide a clear strategic statement that sets out intended actions to ensure that:</p> <p> i) beneficiaries are sufficiently informed of their entitlements and of complaint and feedback mechanisms; and</p> <p> ii) channels of communication with affected populations are improved based on best practices.</p> <p>This may include regular documented feedback meetings with cooperating partners; two-way communication and beneficiary feedback mechanisms within beneficiary contact monitoring systems and protocols; and robust links to ensure the trickle-up of monitoring findings to programme decision-making functions.</p>	<p>RBC</p> <p>Support from the Human Resources Division (HRM); Policy and Programme Division (OSZ) and Emergencies and Transitions Unit (OSZPH)</p> <p>All country offices</p> <p>Support from RBC, HRM, OSZ, including OSZPH</p>	<p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p> <p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p>

Immediate: Prioritize demand-side issues			
What?	How? (operationalization)	Who? (responsible)	By when? (completion)
<p>2. Centralize gender in the response</p> <p><i>RBC</i></p> <p>a) Allocate dedicated staff and resources at the RBC level to mainstream gender within the response.</p> <p>b) Conduct/continue conducting regular mandatory gender training for all RBC staff and management.</p> <p><i>Country offices</i></p> <p>a) Designate (and capacitate where appropriate) dedicated staff and resources at the country office level to ensure gender mainstreaming.</p> <p>b) Conduct gender training for WFP country office and suboffice staff to ensure that gender issues are recognized and addressed.</p> <p>c) Update country office gender action plans so they meet the standards required by the Gender Policy (2015–2020) and the WFP Gender Action Plan.²⁰</p> <p>d) Analyse available data on gender issues in the response and use the results to develop gender-sensitive programmatic responses.</p> <p><i>Headquarters/RBC</i></p> <p>a) At the next opportunity for reassignment, consider gender balance in staff selection.</p>		<p>RBC Support from the Gender Office (GEN)</p> <p><i>All country offices</i> Support from RBC and the Gender Office</p> <p>Reassignment Committee and Executive Director, with support from HRM</p>	<p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p> <p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p> <p>By the end of first quarter 2019</p>
<p>3. Reinforce protection</p> <p><i>Headquarters</i></p> <p>a) Given the limited nature of WFP's corporate indicators for protection, consider revision, drawing on existing resources such as the global protection cluster indicators.</p> <p><i>RBC</i></p> <p>a) Designate (and capacitate where appropriate) dedicated staff and resources at the RBC level to protection mainstreaming.</p> <p>b) Conduct regular protection training for all RBC staff and management.</p> <p><i>Country offices</i></p>		<p>Performance Management and Monitoring Division (RMP)</p> <p>RBC Support from OSZ and HRM</p>	<p>By the end of first quarter 2019</p> <p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p> <p>By the end of second quarter 2019</p>

²⁰ Gender Action Plan: *Walking the Talk* (WFP/EB.1/2016/4-B).

Immediate: Prioritize demand-side issues			
What?	How? (operationalization)	Who? (responsible)	By when? (completion)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Designate (and capacitate where appropriate) dedicated staff and resources to ensure that protection is mainstreamed in each country office. b) Conduct protection training for WFP country office and suboffice staff to ensure that protection issues are recognized and addressed. c) Prepare country office protection statements that include a clear vision and strategies. d) Analyse available data on protection issues within the response, and use this to develop appropriate programmatic responses. 		All country offices Support from OSZ and OSZPH	
Immediate: Enhance adherence to humanitarian principles			
4. Build capacity to improve adherence to humanitarian principles <i>Country offices</i>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ensure training for all staff on the humanitarian principles, protection and decision-making in complex (and highly politicized) operating environments, particularly at the local level. b) Conduct situation-based feedback sessions with staff on lessons learned from experience in the response. c) Provide focused and context-specific orientation to all incoming staff and consultants, including information on local political dynamics. d) Train cooperating partners and financial service providers in adherence to humanitarian principles in the local context. 		All country offices Support from RBC, OSZ, the Supply Chain Division (OSC), the Emergency Preparedness and Support Response Division (OSE) and HRM	By the end of second quarter 2019 (and ongoing thereafter)

Immediate: Prioritize demand-side issues			
What?	How? (operationalization)	Who? (responsible)	By when? (completion)
Planning for the future			
What?	How? (operationalization)	Who? (responsible)	By when? (completion)
5. Improve knowledge management Develop an RBC-led learning and knowledge transfer strategy for the response. Key areas should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Technical approaches to cash-based transfers b) Targeting and prioritization c) Resilience 		RBC Support from OSZ and all country offices and the subregional office	By the end of 2018
6. Define success – build a clear intended vision To better package the regional dimension of the response within the CSP environment, build on Vision 2020 and individual CSP objectives to develop an overarching strategic statement of 'where to from here'. The statement should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Clearly articulate the WFP regional-level vision of success for the response. b) Locate the beneficiary at the centre of the response, responding to diverse situations, needs and priorities. c) Include – beyond the operationally focused objectives of CSPs – the strategic intentions of the response at the regional level, such as the management of returnees; support for strengthened national social protection and safety net systems; future intended coordination and partnerships; intentions for resilience programming at scale; planned internal coordination mechanisms; and the intended role of AAP, gender equality and protection. d) Map potential scenarios and identify response options. e) Be linked to realistic resource planning and associated financing contingency plans. f) Be accompanied by an advocacy plan for donors, focused on the costs of adjusting the response from scale to depth, including the cost implications of resilience activities and the integration of AAP/gender/protection. 		RBC with contributions from country offices and the subregional office; support from OSE and OSZ, including the Direct Implementation Programme Service and units including the Asset Creation and Livelihoods Unit, OSZPH, the Safety Nets and Social Protection Unit and the School Feeding Service	By the end of first quarter 2019

Acronyms used in the document

AAP	accountability to affected populations
BR	budget revision
CBT	cash-based transfer
CO	country office
CSP	country strategy plan
EMOP	emergency operation
FSP	financial service provider
HRM	Human Resources Division
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OSZ	Policy and Programme Division
OSZPH	Emergencies and Transitions Unit
PRRO	protracted relief and recovery operation
RBC	Regional Bureau Cairo
T-ICSP	transitional interim country strategic plan
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees