

Evaluation Brief

WFP Office of Evaluation: *Measuring Results, Sharing Lessons*



Sri Lanka: An evaluation of WFP's Portfolio (2011-2015)

Context

A 26-year war between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ended in May 2009. The most evident humanitarian legacy of the war was the displacement and loss of livelihoods experienced in Northern and Eastern Provinces, which continue to lag behind the rest of the country economically.¹ Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country changing from a post-conflict to a developing economy. Gross domestic product per capita grew at 5.6 percent per year between 2002 and 2013.¹ The country performs strongly in most health and education indicators. However, economic growth has not alleviated regional disparities. One quarter of Sri Lankans are considered “nearly poor”, living above the official poverty line of USD 1.50 per day but with less than USD 2.50 per day. Food insecurity – chronic, seasonal and occasional – is widespread and Sri Lanka's nutrition situation is unusual, with an exceptionally high wasting prevalence of 19.6 percent contrasting with a relatively low prevalence of chronic malnutrition (stunting) at 13.1 percent. For reasons that are not well understood, these indicators have changed little over the past decade.² After a peak following the 2004 tsunami, both humanitarian aid and other official development assistance to Sri Lanka declined throughout the evaluation period.

WFP Country Strategy and Portfolio in Sri Lanka

Since 1968, a basic agreement between WFP and the Government has designated the Government as the primary implementer of all WFP operations, bearing all costs associated with in-country transportation and distribution of food commodities and sharing responsibility for project monitoring.

Two draft country strategy documents were prepared for 2013–2017 and 2014–2017, but not formally approved. The portfolio comprised early relief and recovery activities in the conflict-affected Northern and Eastern Provinces through two protracted relief and recovery operations (PRROs), a mother-and-child health and nutrition (MCHN) development operation in the same provinces and elsewhere, and three emergency responses in flood- and drought-affected areas. A Special Operation to support logistics capacity was concluded in 2011. The total budget for these operations was USD 178 million, of which 66 percent was funded.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

This country portfolio evaluation covered all WFP operations in Sri Lanka during 2011–2015. It assessed WFP's alignment and strategic positioning, its strategic decision-making, and the performance of the portfolio as a whole; including WFP's application of humanitarian principles and the comparative cost analysis of cash-based transfers (CBTs). The evaluation was timed to assist the country office in its next round of strategic planning and in programme design.

Key Findings

Alignment and Strategic Positioning

The evaluation found that WFP's portfolio in Sri Lanka was relevant to humanitarian needs in the aftermath of the war, responding to emergencies and addressing enduring nutrition problems. The challenge was in adapting activities to remain relevant to the country's changing circumstances amid waning donor resources. The slow release of land in the high-security zone and the decline in donor support meant that WFP's assistance to returnees was often inadequate. WFP's strategic positioning evolved with the changing context, moving from emergency programming towards a more strategic orientation.

Against the background of the United Nations' reflections on its actions during the war, the evaluation reviewed WFP's application of the humanitarian principles. WFP's peacetime dilemmas were less dramatic than during the conflict and the evaluation found that humanitarian principles were generally well reflected in WFP's work.

While the 1968 basic agreement provided a strong basis for dialogue and operational alignment between WFP and the Government, it risked being an obstacle to WFP's operational independence. However, WFP's independent monitoring mitigated the risk of undue political influence. The quality of collaboration and alignment with national policies was more mixed however, reflecting strained relationships between the Government and international agencies for much of the period concerned. This limited the space for policy dialogue and restricted WFP's ability to engage with non-governmental organizations. Inter-agency communications were generally perceived to be good. However, strategic coherence and operational integration between WFP and other United Nations agencies were weak.

Factors and quality of Strategic Decision-Making

The principal factors affecting WFP's strategic decision-making were the diminishing funds available to the country office, a shrinking staff base and the difficult relationship with the Government.

Despite the absence of a formal strategy document, the strategic choices implicit in the portfolio's evolution and implementation had positive features: the PRROs have been succeeded by a country programme, the “upstream” orientation of the portfolio is reflected in the activities linked to nutrition and climate change interventions, project documents set the objectives of integrating nutrition programming into national systems and handing over responsibility for the School Meals Programme to the Government, although neither of these objectives has yet been achieved.

The country office undertook useful analytical work, although the collation and use of regular monitoring data were weak, partly because of constraints in staff capacity. The use of economic analysis throughout the portfolio was also weak.

WFP's programmes targeted vulnerable groups through impartial

¹ World Bank. 2015. *Sri Lanka – Ending Poverty and Promoting Shared Prosperity: A Systematic Country Diagnostic*.

² United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Government of Sri Lanka. 2012. *National Nutrition and Micronutrient Survey*.

beneficiary selection, and its focus on displaced persons and returnees resulted in an important contribution to peacebuilding. The PRRO extension for 2012 incorporated a move away from blanket GFD towards needs-based targeting; the 2015 emergency operation used a community-based approach to beneficiary selection targeting women-headed households, elderly people and people living with disabilities; MCHN preventive activities were dropped to concentrate limited resources on MAM treatment; and WFP advocated – unsuccessfully – for the Government’s adoption of a more targeted approach to the use of *Thripasha* (a fortified blended food produced in Sri Lanka since 1970s).

Portfolio Performance and Results

At the output level, WFP succeeded in maintaining beneficiary numbers close to planned levels. However, tonnage shortfalls meant that beneficiaries received smaller amounts or were assisted for shorter periods than planned. Underfunding was a serious constraint to programme efficiency. At the outcome level, shortfalls in necessary complementary support and WFP resources reduced the effectiveness of relief and recovery activities for IDPs, and often prevented the attainment of durable solutions.

GFD/FFA - The PRROs met and far exceeded output expectations as GFD was extended to 175,000 persons, twice as many as planned. There was no compromise on the quality of GFD packages as they still contained enough nutrition for daily recommended intake. However, the period of GFD per family was cut drastically – from 6 months to as little as 45 days. Only 60 percent of planned beneficiaries participated in FFW/FFA activities.

School Feeding - WFP’s SMP in Northern Province was effectively delivered; it fulfilled its safety net function and contributed to the post-war recovery of basic education. However, there is little justification for providing in-kind assistance using imported food, considering the cash-based SMP being implemented by the Government elsewhere in the country and the positive results of the SMP cash pilot. The intended hand-over was delayed by the absence of a national school feeding policy and WFP’s concerns that switching to the Government’s modality would lower nutritional standards.

Nutrition - Nutrition activities were adequately aligned with national systems, but efforts to address MAM and prevent low birthweight through supplementary feeding were not effective, and national indicators remained poor. This was partly because of difficulties in delivering WFP assistance at the intended scale, but mainly because of chronic bottlenecks in *Thripasha* production and the lack of an effectively targeted approach to the distribution of supplementary foods. The “upstream” focus of the trust funds and advocacy for a more targeted approach to supplementary feeding were appropriate, given WFP’s limited resources.

Capacity development – WFP can point to some capacity development successes. Its relationship with HARTI³ has been fruitful, including developing the capacity for regular Cost of Diet reviews. However, there was much less progress than anticipated in the two principal areas of capacity development linked to handover strategies. During 2011–2015 there was little progress in strengthening *Thripasha* production, or in securing preparation of a national school feeding strategy that would facilitate integration into the national system of the Northern Province SMP.

Cash-Based Transfers and Cost Analysis - Cost analysis focused on the cash voucher programme implemented in Jaffna

from 2012–2014. Results indicated that the cash voucher is clearly superior in terms of outcome level efficiency (cost-effectiveness), with each percentage point Food Consumption Score increase achieved at only 79 percent of the cost of the in-kind alternative. However, the exercise found that the cash voucher was 22 percent more expensive than the in-kind alternative in terms of purchase and delivery cost for equivalent quantities.

Gender - Despite the attention paid to gender considerations in planning and monitoring, Sri Lanka was not exempt from the characteristic weaknesses identified in the 2013 evaluation of WFP’s Gender Policy. There are signs that the 2015 Gender Policy is beginning to raise the quality of gender analysis, for example, by including gender marker codes in all project documents

Sustainability - While the portfolio was strongly oriented towards institutional sustainability – as reflected in close cooperation with government agencies, including on capacity development and technical support for national policy-making – there was little progress on the hand-over strategies envisaged in WFP’s project documents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

This marked a difficult period for the country office, which needed to adjust to a new peacetime context and to Sri Lanka’s ascent to middle-income status. The adjustment was not easy in a context of declining resources and, until 2015, strained relations between the Government and its development partners. Despite awareness of the need for strategic reorientation, most of the country office’s strategic planning efforts were unsuccessful, and the portfolio remained more a collection of inherited activities and continuing obligations than a coherent expression of an explicit, proactive strategy. However, in all of its main focus areas, including humanitarian relief, nutrition, school feeding and related analytical work, WFP had a relevant mandate and distinctive expertise, and achieved significant results.

The evaluation found positive features in the evolution of the portfolio, but the challenge is for WFP to move further “upstream”, with more focus on technical support and capacity development and less direct support to service delivery. These services are likely to include technical support to the formulation of nutrition policy, including on the role of specialized foods; technical support to school feeding; and continued support to nutrition and food security assessments, including emergency assessments and emergency preparedness linked to analysis of the implications of climate change.

Recommendations

The evaluation makes six recommendations, most of which need to be implemented in collaboration with the Government and/or other international agencies. These include: i) working with the Government to identify “upstream” areas where WFP can add the most value in the future, while agreeing a phased hand-over to the Government of direct service delivery, notably school feeding; ii) encouraging all United Nations agencies to coordinate and streamline their activities in line with Sri Lanka’s new circumstances; iii) working with government and other agencies to develop an adequately resourced plan for completing the resettlement of displaced persons; iv) continuing to offer specialist support to multi sector nutrition approaches; v) hand-over of the school meals programme and vi) strengthening the cost analysis linked to modality choice and assigning higher priority to assessing the performance of cash-based transfers.

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Reference:

Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation
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