



Needs assessments and decision-making: how strong is the link?

A review of the links between needs assessments and decision-making in response to food crises.

Study undertaken by James Darcy (Overseas Development Institute), Stephen Anderson and Nisar Majid (82 pp) May 2007.

Purpose of the study

In 2005, WFP embarked on a three-year initiative to strengthen its capacity to conduct high quality assessments. While strengthening the assessment methodology is essential, it is also important to understand how needs assessments are used by decision-makers: whether they serve their purpose by providing the analysis required for timely, appropriate and proportionate responses to food crises.

The ODI study identifies key actions to improve the crucial links between Emergency Needs Assessments (ENA)¹ and decision-making. These links are analysed according to three main ENA functions:

- *Inform* WFP's decisions about responses throughout the life of a programme;
- *Influence* the response decisions of WFP's donors and partners; and
- *Justify* response decisions and appeals for funds.

Main conclusions

“WFP has a significant opportunity to take a lead in establishing good assessment practice across the sector. This involves a combination of rigour, adaptability to context, effective collaboration and good communication - providing timely information to decision-makers in a form they can use.”

Informing internal decisions

➤ **WFP response options are increasingly informed by adequate needs assessments, either conducted by its own staff or jointly with others. The quality of assessments has also improved significantly.**

➤ **The situation analysis available to decision-makers has strengthened in the last three years, with the introduction of new tools, such as for market analysis. However, the analysis does not always**

¹ The review takes a broad view of ENA, which includes all data gathering, analysis and monitoring required to inform WFP's humanitarian programmes.

answer decision-makers' information needs and questions. For example, information on people's relative dependence on food aid is missing. Needs assessment should also provide a better analysis of social and political factors, and understanding of contexts, in particular livelihoods.

➤ **The link between needs assessment and WFP internal decision-making is usually strong at the onset of a crisis. This is not matched by an ability to make informed decisions throughout the life of a programme, because of the relative under-investment** in predictive analysis, monitoring and re-assessments. There appears to be little incentive for a country programme to re-assess situations or monitor changes, particularly if this is likely to indicate a scaled-down programme.

➤ The analysis derived from existing information and analysis mechanisms - early warning, Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) baselines, monitoring systems and emergency needs assessments - is not well integrated.

➤ Micro-level analysis, crucial for programme design and modification, tends to be neglected compared to more macro-level or aggregate analysis.

➤ WFP assessments have embraced a wider food security perspective but are still largely geared towards one set of questions: how much food aid is required and by whom? The rationale for the proposed food aid strategy is not always clear from the analysis of context and is rarely articulated against a wider range of potential response options.

Influencing external decisions

➤ **The influence of WFP needs assessment on others' decisions (NGOs, donors and UN agencies) is much weaker.** This is largely dependent on the way main findings are communicated and their perceived credibility. For example, the way WFP currently conveys messages to the media can

compromise the credibility of ENAs. Furthermore, many other sources of information, and political and strategic priorities influence external decisions.

➤ **Recent efforts to strengthen needs assessments lead to more credibility.** Various factors contribute to credibility in assessments. These include collaboration and joint ownership of the process with the host government, openness, transparency and flexibility, wider political and economic context analysis, and a relatively open methodology. A collaborative and transparent process limits the room for the negotiation of need. However, increased credibility hasn't necessarily led to more trust by donors.

➤ The diversity of donor practice in decision-making was identified as one of the biggest variables. Greater harmonisation of donor decision-making is a necessary condition for the more timely and appropriate allocation of funds.

➤ Donors often claim that WFP does not help them to prioritise between contexts, pointing to the need for a common reference standard and more explicit WFP judgments on relative priorities.

Justifying decisions

➤ WFP's efforts towards greater **transparency** – notably by publishing assessment reports on its website – is providing stronger justification for response decisions, as well as enhancing the influence of assessments.

➤ There is a need to more clearly **distinguish situational analysis of food security from the response options analysis**, while keeping a strong rational link between the two. This would ensure more objectivity and that assessments are not perceived as been heavily geared towards WFP's response options.

Main recommendations

Informing decisions

➤ An **information strategy** should be developed and budgeted as part of programme design, encompassing all internal and external information needs relating to crisis response: monitoring, re-assessment and evaluation. It should be linked to a clear communication strategy. Developing a corporate information strategy would involve:

- Revisiting the relationship between VAM baselines, ENAs, and food security monitoring.
- Identifying a few key indicators to track the evolution of, and to estimate households' dependence on assistance.
- Including political and social analysis in assessments, and engaging livelihoods and market specialists to better understand the context.

- Increasing the predictive ability of current mechanisms and making greater use of risk analysis.
- Regularly fine tuning programmes in light of feedback from re-assessments, monitoring systems and implementing partners.

➤ Appropriate re-assessment should be a condition for yearly continuation of programmes. In-depth assessment should be a prerequisite for all new Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations and for Emergency Operations continuing beyond one year.

Influencing external decisions

➤ To maintain credibility, WFP may have to provide independent cross-checks on its analysis.

➤ WFP should continue to engage in collaborative assessment processes, while seeking to offset the potential disadvantages by maintaining sufficient independence of analysis.

➤ WFP should more clearly articulate its judgement of relative priorities across different contexts and proposals, based on needs assessments.

Justifying decisions

➤ The rationale for programme decisions should be documented and referenced to the assessment results.

➤ A clear, standard response option framework is needed. Decisions to respond in ways not indicated within the framework need to be justified.

➤ If WFP is concerned with the quality of its programmes and with the question of appropriate and proportionate response, it must find ways of rewarding intelligent programming.

Main recommendations for donors:

- harmonise decision-making at field and headquarters levels, based on shared analysis and adoption of mutually complementary strategies;
- invest in their own assessment capacity at field levels, and participate in assessments;
- consider investing in monitoring, surveillance and re-assessments.

* * * * *

How was the study undertaken? It is based on four case studies (Pakistan earthquake, Darfur crisis, Somalia, and Malawi), a review of other country examples, and interviews with WFP staff, donors and partners at headquarter, regional and country levels.

For questions, please contact: Darlene Tymo, SENAC Senior Project Coordinator at darlene.tymo@wfp.org. For a copy of the study or to learn more about SENAC, go to: <http://www.wfp.org/ODAN>