

Evaluation Brief



An Evaluation of WFP's Response to the Syrian Crisis (2011-2014)

Civil unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2011 marked the advent of a major regional crisis, declared a United Nations Level 3 emergency in January 2013. By 2014, the number of refugees in the main receiving countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Egypt and Iraq had increased to 3 million, and 4.5 million displaced people had become food-insecure in Syria. Complicated by competing and divided international, regional and national interests, WFP's response in this fast-paced crisis is among its largest and most complex undertaken.

Scope and Evaluation Focus

This evaluation covered WFP's response to the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2014 through two emergency operations under the Regional Emergency Coordination (REC) office in Amman, specifically set-up to support the L3 response: a) EMOP 200339, in Syria, and; (b) EMOP 200433, in the region. Serving both accountability and learning purposes, the evaluation assessed four main elements: i) strategic direction and positioning; ii) organizational effectiveness; iii) programme strategy; and iv) performance and results. Fieldwork was undertaken in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey; information on Egypt, Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic was collected remotely.

Key Findings

Strategic Direction and Positioning

1: Initial response and analysis - WFP recognized and responded quickly and at scale, based on its understanding of needs and awareness of context from previous programmes, leading overall to appropriate programmes. However, specific design decisions were based on insufficient conflict, gender and transfer modality selection analysis

2: Coordination - WFP has built good working relationships with governments and participated positively in regional processes, coordinating effectively. WFP's leadership in the logistics cluster was characterized as exemplary. Limited overlap with Non-Governmental Organisations within cross-border/line operations in Syria were noted, now being addressed through the Whole of Syria approach started in July 2014.

3: Alignment and trade-offs - WFP faces complex, sometimes competing pressures, especially in Syria. Although a strategic task force to provide senior-level direction and support was set up, in practice given the pace and complexity of events, it remained mostly tactical. Many stakeholders expressed concern that WFP, as a major humanitarian actor, was perceived as not making sufficient use of its influence to advocate for humanitarian space.

Organizational Effectiveness

4: REC establishment - This was found appropriate, providing a close link between management and operations, and assessed as particularly useful in Syria, enabling field staff to focus on programming and operations.

5: Staffing - An institution-wide challenge in emergencies, the REC faced difficulty in maintaining adequate staffing levels/skills sets in all six countries, with high turnover in core positions.

6: REC support to programming and operations - Support to country operations was effective, particularly in terms of financial and administrative functions, however less so for programmatic and operational issues, namely during the establishment of large-scale voucher programmes, where staff reported limited knowledge of each other's approaches on similar issues. Such challenges are common among institutions under pressure and with dispersed responsibilities.

7: Linking operations to expertise - WFP's effectiveness was limited by a lack of up-to-date guidance, and challenges in linking time-pressed field-based staff – many of whom short-term consultants – to relevant expertise.

Programme Strategy

8: Coverage - WFP's initial response focused on breath over depth. Targeting work started only in the second half of 2013 in Lebanon (and more recently in Egypt and Jordan), later than appropriate given the: i) varied levels of food insecurity assessed; and ii) sustainability of funding to protracted needs. Delays in targeting were also influenced by governments and by WFP's harmonization with other United Nations agencies.

9: Transition Planning¹ - Until September 2014, WFP focused on short-term contingency plans in response to resource availability. Longer-term plans for transitioning to more sustainable assistance models have only recently been emerging in the regional discussions, and should have begun sooner

Operational Performance and Results

10: M&E systems and programme uptake - Data gaps constrained results measurement, some related to context (access in Syria, or data collection by authorities), others under WFP's control. Systematic harmonised regional monitoring started only in mid-2013, and systems did not, at the onset, prioritize some key indicators e.g. assistance encashment, or robust baselines until 2014). WFP's focus on evidence and data did not lead to well-staffed vulnerability analysis and mapping and M&E units, and staff prioritized data gathering over analysis to inform programming.

11: Scale - WFP covered an impressive number of beneficiaries, reaching, in 2013 88 percent of targeted refugees in Egypt and 98 percent of all registered refugees in Jordan. In 2014 WFP reached over 4 million people in Syria and close to 2 million refugees across the region, accounting for 26 percent (in US dollar terms) of WFP's global operations.

12: Food security - The evaluation found that WFP's food assistance both improved and stabilized beneficiaries' food consumption levels; further analysis of the former is needed to account for contextual factors.

13: Local economies - WFP's assistance had beneficial economic impacts - on reported monthly earnings, job creation, and capital investments particularly amongst private actors involved in the large scale voucher programmes in Lebanon and Jordan.

14: Relations with host communities - By reducing visibility of distributions, the switch to vouchers and especially e-vouchers mitigated tensions and host communities' sense of exclusion..

15: Timeliness - The response was scaled up quickly in all six countries, although delays linked to slow refugee registration processes were noted where vouchers were used.

16: Operational efficiency - Limited access and direct monitoring including of aid diversion in Syria constrained assessment. However, several good-practice approaches in logistics and supply-chains were developed to increase efficiency and cost effectiveness while mitigating risks. Measuring efficiency and cost effectiveness in the regional EMOP was also impaired by WFP's inability to

provide data for comparing beneficiary costs by modality.

17: Encashment - Efficiency in the region was also affected by conversion of WFP voucher assistance into cash, described as a persistent challenge, the monitoring of which was not yet standardized.

18: Market dynamics and cost control - WFP's use of vouchers, applied good humanitarian practice of working with functioning markets. Vouchers periodically resulted in beneficiaries paying higher than market prices (in Lebanon, and camps in Jordan and Turkey), and WFP has taken steps to address this.

19: Gender and Protection - WFP field staff demonstrated understanding of gender and protection issues, however analysis was poorly integrated in programme design, implementation, monitoring and risk analysis.

Overall assessment and Recommendations

WFP has delivered and rapidly scaled up a large-scale and complex humanitarian response. In Syria, WFP established good operational practices and in the region, e-voucher programming was scaled up to new levels for a humanitarian operation, successfully expanding WFP's collaboration with the private sector. WFP will rarely have a better opportunity to refine systems and adopt further innovations, including the OneCard multi-agency e-voucher platform. Further analysis of i) attribution; ii) modality cost effectiveness; and iii) food security comparison among WFP-assisted and non-assisted refugees is needed. The protracted nature of the crisis demands addressing strategic issues including: i) management of perceptions and risk; ii) advocacy towards vulnerable refugees living outside camps in Iraq, and Turkey especially; iii) vulnerability-based targeting assistance; and iv) transition planning.

Summary of recommendations

The evaluation made ten recommendations for management of both the on-going Syria Crisis response, and future crisis responses, covering: transition planning, perceptions management and humanitarian access, evidence-based programming, targeting, modality selection, results measurement, lesson-learning, and human resource management.



Reference:

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

For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@WFP.org

¹ "Transition" refers to a range of options, from closing operations, handing over to national authorities or other actors, scaling down assistance through enhanced targeting or reduced transfer values, to

exploring alternative cost-effective approaches for improving the food security of vulnerable populations.