

Regional Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation in Central America

WFP assistance to Central America

Vulnerability in Central America is the result of structural economic causes, civil wars and natural disasters. In the past three years, the region has not been struck by crises on the scale of those before 2003. However, chronic vulnerability has had a cumulative effect that has eroded the livelihoods of many households, especially those in which families have more than five children and households that lack access to productive resources such as land or long-term employment.

The three-year US\$57 million protracted relief and recovery operation (PRRO), "Targeted Food Assistance for People Affected by Shocks and for the Recovery of Livelihoods" (No. 10212.0), began in January 2003 and was designed to assist 690,000 beneficiaries in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The operation aimed to prevent acute and chronic malnutrition among these food-insecure families, particularly women and children, and to rebuild livelihoods eroded by natural disasters. The operation also sought to be complementary to the activities of WFP's corresponding country offices.

Objectives and scope of the evaluation

The independent mid-term evaluation took place between April and August 2005 to assess results and inform the design of a possible next phase of the PRRO. The evaluation team visited 77 of the 331 municipalities assisted under the PRRO and conducted some 1,000 interviews with beneficiaries, government counterparts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations partners and WFP staff. The team also reviewed relevant documents.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Amount of food used for WFP activities

At the time of the evaluation, only 26 percent of the food planned had been allocated. The disparity was a result of a dramatic shortfall in donations (only 31 percent of funding targets had been met) and slow implementation by cooperating partners. Moreover, the overall effectiveness of the PRRO was diminished by an increase in the number of distribution sites and beneficiaries, reflecting a desire to respond to all needs in all places, instead of maximizing its impact on smaller population groups.

Analysing the impact of the resource shortfall

An analysis of the impact of the shortfall in resources was not possible because country offices monitor and report on actual resources distributed in terms of the distribution plans, which are based on the food available in the country. In addition, the report to donors on needs and shortfalls does not explain the impact of the shortfall.

Improving operations through multi-level government partnerships

To compensate for slow implementation capacity among partners, country offices have tried to strengthen links with ministries of agriculture, regional development commissions, municipalities and groups of municipalities. Such measures could improve efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability, but they could pose problems of neutrality in a charged political environment.

Reaching malnourished children

In Guatemala, nutritional assistance to moderately and severely malnourished children under five is given through family rations, with the result that assistance does not go only to malnourished children but instead is distributed among the entire family, especially during the lean season.

Monitoring improvements in nutritional status

In Honduras and Nicaragua, WFP baseline studies carried out in 2003 and 2004 made it possible to analyse the evolution of the nutritional situation of the beneficiaries (in this case, the weight-for-age indicator showed a 25 percent improvement among children under 24 months and those under 5). However, this improvement cannot be attributed to WFP's operation alone. In addition, it was not possible to determine the impact of normal seasonal change on the basis of the information available. Furthermore, the intake of micronutrients is not monitored, although the lack of micronutrients is the main cause of anemia in the region.

Acceptance of the food basket

Beneficiaries accepted WFP's food basket, partly as a result of efforts made to educate them on the characteristics, value, preparation and use of the food. In particular, corn-soy blend was fully accepted and used, even though it does not form part of the normal diet of children and rural families. Beneficiaries preparing the food were taught many recipes, which helped to diversify eating habits.

School feeding

In Honduras and Nicaragua, school feeding was given priority, with the aim of stabilizing school enrolment and attendance. The cost of rations was significantly higher in areas such as the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, but the results were substantial: in Nicaragua, retention rates in schools rose to 96 percent in 2003 and to 98 percent in 2004. In Honduras, school dropouts fell from 8 percent to 4.9 percent during the PRRO, and repetitions fell from 9.7 percent to 6.7 percent. In spite of the good results and high level of community interest, other organizations have given little support to school feeding, particularly in terms of water and sanitation, which reduces the impact of this activity.

Food for work (FFW) and the value of beneficiary inputs

FFW allows communities to address structural problems in order to respond more effectively to natural hazards – for example, by increasing yields, protecting land from erosion or building roads in remote areas. It receives a great deal of interest and support from the communities. However, the outcomes achieved during the PRRO were limited because the rations received were few and irregular. The value of beneficiaries' inputs should be higher than the cost of technical assistance and food aid, or should at least constitute a significant part of the total value. In practice, however, the reverse occurred. In some cases FFW was carried out on privately owned lands because only landowners could afford counterpart funding such as transport between the municipality and the communities.

Recommendations

Achieving regional objectives

In order to achieve the regional objectives, monitoring systems and staff numbers of the PRRO at both regional bureau- and country office-levels should be strengthened. In addition, it may be necessary to streamline certain implementation principles, such as targeting, and selection of activities and partnerships, as much as country contexts will allow.

Acknowledging the impact of shortfalls on beneficiaries

Monitoring of results should be separate from the distribution plan in order to prevent information on the impact of shortfalls on beneficiaries from being lost. Donors should be informed about how a lack of resources affects the beneficiaries, and contributions from communities and counterparts should also be reported.

Strengthening targeting

In preparation for the next PRRO, a new and comprehensive Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) study should be conducted to help orient targeting. The study should be enhanced with findings from external sources such as censuses, population projections and agricultural data. The capacity of national counterparts in managing VAM needs to be increased, particularly as it regards WFP's exit strategy. In addition, country office capacity to analyse nutritional indicators should be improved in order to strengthen targeting and contribute to regional analyses.

Further promoting growth and development of children

The food aid period for children should be increased to up to three years of age, in order to assure that risks of acute malnutrition are fully monitored.

Understanding the impact of food aid on micronutrient deficiencies

New indicators should be created to enable the effect of food aid on micronutrient deficiencies to be verified, especially iron. Changes in the rates of anemia could be detected through micronutrient surveys already being carried out in the four countries. The data from these surveys could be very useful at the beginning and end of the PRRO.

Maximizing sustainability of FFW assets

The contribution of non-food inputs and of other partners must be better ensured. Agreements on the design and implementation of activities should specify contributions and include WFP, government, NGOs and municipalities or community organizations. The agreements must be closely monitored.

Increasing impact of relief and recovery components

A stronger synergy needs to be created between relief and recovery, as well as with other agencies and municipalities. Given the small size of food inputs, there is no risk of "over-distributing", even when there are multiple activities in the same community. This will also improve the visibility of WFP in the field.

Improving implementation rates

Country offices should consider assessing their current cooperating partner and, if necessary, changing them. In addition, more attention needs to be paid to building the capacity of partners.

Reference: Full and summary reports of the Central America PRRO 10212.0 evaluation are available at: www.wfp.org/operations/evaluation

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