

Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Contingency Planning 2002 - 2008

Context

Early calls for United Nations entities to improve emergency response through planning and preparedness gained momentum in the 1970s in the wake of major emergencies when performance gaps were identified and increasingly more robust preparedness and response mechanisms called for. The trend within the international systems suggests a continuing evolution from *ad hoc* humanitarian actions to more structured systems of support to emergency response, with increasing focus on preparedness at the country office level.

Contingency Planning in WFP

As of 2000, concerted attention to contingency planning was part of a new approach to provoke a cultural change in WFP, from being responsive to being more forward-looking and anticipatory. Concepts, initiatives and systems were introduced, including contingency planning, early warning, emergency response training, etc. WFP defines contingency planning as "The process of establishing programme objectives, approaches and procedures to respond to specific situations or events that are likely to occur, including identifying those events and developing likely scenarios and appropriate plans to prepare and respond to them in an effective manner".

Contingency planning has been mainstreamed within WFP since 2002 when the related guidelines were issued. Extensive training in contingency planning was conducted between 2003 and 2006, with over 400 people trained. IASC guidelines on contingency planning were produced in 2002 and updated in 2007, with WFP playing a leading role. Between 2002 and 2008, 125 contingency plans were recorded and WFP also participated in 84 inter-agency contingency planning exercises.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

The objective of this evaluation was to identify the achievements and shortfalls of WFP's work in contingency planning as a strategic and operational process firmly rooted within the broader WFP emergency preparedness and response framework, and to learn from these how to improve performance and outcomes.

The evaluation covered the period 2002–2008 and was carried out between March and July 2009 by a team of independent evaluators.

The evaluation report was presented to the Executive Board in October 2009.

Key Findings and Conclusions

The Practice of Contingency Planning in WFP

Participation in contingency planning processes has varied greatly from senior management in country offices providing leadership to being unresponsive and disengaged. The participation of staff has varied from an entire office being involved to a plan being written by a single person. There was little involvement of partners as the process was perceived as internal. When mandatory, it tended to be treated as a bureaucratic requirement only, but when left to be implemented when needed, it could disappear from the agenda altogether.

While the *process* of analysis and planning is more important than the final *plan*, contingency planning is often undertaken with the sole aim of preparing a plan, whose existence becomes the principal measure of preparedness of an office.

Contingency planning is typically implemented as a distinct, stand-alone planning activity with few linkages to regular planning or other risk management processes. Routine planning, especially annual work-planning rarely benefits from risk analysis and corrective measures identified in contingency planning hardly ever make it into programme processes.

The linkages with business continuity planning, security planning, enterprise risk management and pandemic planning are unclear while they require similar analyses of the risks and vulnerability. This profusion of unrelated and uncoordinated HQ-inspired initiatives is confusing for country offices and inefficient.

Organizational Framework

Contingency planning has contributed to a culture of preparedness across WFP but the organization support systems remain weak. There is no specific policy or directive for preparedness. The guidelines are appreciated but need updating. While training was systematically organized in the first years of the rollout, it diminished substantially recently due to diminishing financial resources.

Except for the head of office, the accountability for contingency planning by technical units, operational units and management, remains ambiguous. The early robust HQ support has weakened substantially over the years even if corrective measures have recently been initiated. At regional level, support has varied depending on the priority given to preparedness by regional directors and staff, and on resources raised.

Between 3 to 5 million US\$ is invested per year in contingency planning and that the return on investment is worthwhile, as the impact of contingency planning on the effectiveness and efficiency of response exceeds this investment level – potentially within a single emergency.

Contribution to Emergency Preparedness and Response

Contribution to preparedness

Contingency planning exercises contributed to enhanced awareness of potential threats, to improved understanding of potential response strategies and to building common understanding and inter-personal relationships that aided coordination and problem-solving in subsequent crises. However, these benefits depend on the extent of participation in the process and accrue only to the participants in contingency planning exercises, which were often very few and rarely included partners.

Most contingency plans recommended preparedness measures, but few of these were actually implemented for reasons that include insufficient resources, lack of management commitment, and the view that the plan was complete without follow-up action.

Contingency planning thus had a relatively limited impact in terms of such concrete preparedness enhancements as pre-positioning of stocks, logistics arrangements, improved access to sources of information, and pre-approved agreements with partners or authorities. Such contributions have been realized in only a minority of cases and primarily when planning was undertaken for well-defined, imminent threats.

Also, the baseline data essential to WFP efforts were rarely updated during or as a result of contingency planning – notably comprehensive food security and vulnerability assessment (CFSVA)/vulnerability analysis and mapping (VAM) data on populations, food security and nutrition conditions, markets, etc.; and logistics capacity assessment data.

Contribution to humanitarian response

Contingency planning, as a separate activity, had little impact on response. Plans themselves were almost never used as a basis for an operational plan or emergency operation (EMOP) document, even in the event of a crisis broadly similar to that planned for. The main benefits identified relate to timeliness of the response while the appropriateness or quality of response was not found to be significantly influenced by the existence of a contingency plan, even though staff competencies may be strengthened through the contingency planning process.

Contribution to Inter-Agency Processes

WFP played an important role in promoting and developing global guidance for inter-agency contingency planning and in the early years, also played a lead or facilitation role in the contingency planning efforts of UN country teams. While this has become an exception, WFP has nonetheless contributed to as many inter-agency plans as it has prepared WFP plans.

There is need to ensure greater complementarity between the inter-agency and WFP's own processes, as per the inter-agency contingency planning guidelines. Greater clarity is also needed on WFP's contingency planning-related role as leader or co-leader of the country-level food security, logistics and emergency telecommunications clusters.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Re-conceptualize contingency planning from a stand-alone operational planning activity to an element in an integrated strategic problem-solving process conducted within an overall inter-agency framework. Specific operational recommendations include:

- i) Focus on ensuring that WFP (and particularly each WFP country office) is aware of potential risks and prepared to respond appropriately when needed. Prepare detailed contingency plans only for imminent or well-defined threats. Develop and use other tools to ensure awareness and more general preparedness. Update the Emergency Preparedness and Response Framework accordingly.
- ii) Establish risk analysis and preparedness review – followed by contingency planning when needed – as an integral part of regular planning, management and reporting processes.
- iii) Integrate current contingency planning activities, pandemic planning, business continuity planning, security planning and risk management in a combined analysis and planning framework, in particular at country office level.

- iv) Reorient contingency planning more specifically to anticipate and solve potential problems and build preparedness capacities.
- v) Continue to be proactive in supporting and seeking inter-agency contingency planning and ensure that risk analysis and contingency planning by WFP complements (does not duplicate) inter-agency efforts, including those of clusters.
- vi) Reinforce the links between contingency planning and current and emerging early-warning systems within WFP and at the inter-agency level. Assure reporting on the evolving situation and preparedness action taken, or the reasons for inaction.

Recommendation 2. Reaffirm and consolidate commitment to and support and accountability for preparedness, including contingency planning, as and when appropriate.

Specific operational recommendations include:

- i) Re-affirm the priority that WFP accords to being prepared to respond to humanitarian crises and needs using all relevant tools including contingency planning when appropriate; develop quality indicators; and clearly define responsibilities with related accountabilities and incentives for staff in all functional areas.
- ii) Ensure, as a core function within WFP: a) the provision of necessary technical support to country offices (and regional bureaux) to facilitate risk analysis, preparedness and contingency planning processes; and b) systems to monitor the quality of the outputs of those processes and ensure the learning and dissemination of lessons and the sharing of experiences among regional bureaux and country offices.
- iii) Assure adequate long-term funding for the technical support and other functions outlined in these recommendations, and for specific contingency planning exercises as required.
- iv) Include assessment of the role and impact of prior contingency planning and related preparedness measures in the terms of reference of all future evaluations of emergency operations EMOPs and any protracted relief and recovery operation for which there has been a budget revision to respond to a new crisis during the period under review.
- v) Establish cost–benefit measurement processes at the country office level to be able to assess the value of contingency planning against investment in the activity.

Recommendation 3. Build on field experience and initiatives to update the guidance materials and develop skills while institutionalizing the recommended revised approach.

Specific operational recommendations include:

- i) Update the contingency planning guidelines and further develop the on-line tool kit to reflect the re-conceptualization proposed above, incorporate field experience, and emphasize the analysis of food security implications, response options, the anticipation of potential problems and the identification of ways to avoid or minimize such problems.
- ii) Review policies and recent practice and develop practical guidance on how to ensure confidentiality for sensitive scenarios while encouraging the widest possible participation in preparedness reviews and contingency planning.
- iii) Ensure appropriate skills development among staff in all functional areas, and include modules on preparedness and contingency planning in existing training activities.
- iv) Consolidate arrangements and practices for inter-country contingency planning and planning for situations that may become corporate emergencies.

Reference: Full and summary reports of the Evaluation are available at: <http://www.wfp.org/evaluation>
For more information, please contact the WFP Office of Evaluation at: HQ.Evaluation@wfp.org