

# Evaluation Brief



## From Food Aid to Food Assistance – Working in Partnership: A Strategic Evaluation

### Context

This evaluation of WFP's partnerships is one of four strategic evaluations undertaken in the 2010–2011 biennium that relate to the shift from food aid to food assistance as called for in WFP's 2008–2013 Strategic Plan. The evaluation analysed how WFP's partnerships and its role within them are affected by this strategic shift. Recognizing that the shift is an on-going process and that the evaluation took place at the mid-point of the strategic planning cycle, the evaluation aimed to support organizational learning.

Partnership is an essential element for effective international humanitarian and development assistance. The new development environment calls for better coordination by United Nations organizations and stronger government leadership in the development process. In addition to inter-UN and government partnerships, non-governmental organizations, foundations and private companies are also becoming increasingly important humanitarian and development partners.

### Partnership

Partnership is a key element of WFP's Strategic Plan. The Plan makes a commitment to working more coherently with different actors so as to achieve WFP's goals and contribute to overall UN goals. The Plan recognizes that governments are the key actors in meeting the hunger needs of their populations, and that WFP's overarching partnership objective should be to complement the government's own capacities and support eventual handover.

WFP does not have a partnership policy; partnerships are addressed in its sector level policies such as the NGO Partnership Framework and the capacity building policy. Although there is not an agreed definition of partnership in WFP, the evaluation defined partnership as a voluntary collaboration sustained over a period of time in which each party shares benefits, costs and risks to achieve jointly defined objectives.

Three types of partnerships were considered: delivery partnerships; knowledge building/skills-transfer partnerships; and framework-setting/policy partnerships.

### Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

The objectives of the evaluation were to assess the quality and results of WFP partnerships in light of the on-going strategic transformation; and to determine why certain changes have or have not occurred and draw lessons from this evidence. It focused on two domains: nutrition and health; and emergency preparedness and response.

The evaluation addressed four main areas:

1. Implications of the shift from food aid to food assistance on WFP's partnerships;
2. Effectiveness and efficiency of WFP's partnerships;
3. Effect of factors in WFP's external operating environment – including donors, the policy environment, and a country's social,

political, economic and cultural conditions – on WFP's partnerships;

4. Effect of internal factors – including processes, systems, culture and staff capacity – on WFP's partnerships.

Evaluation methods included: visits to three country offices (Laos, Kenya and Haiti) and three regional bureaux (Bangkok, Panama City and Nairobi); desk reviews of work in two countries (Niger and Colombia); a survey of WFP's external partners and stakeholders; a survey of WFP managers and senior professionals; benchmarking with good-practice standards; and document review.

The evaluation was presented to the WFP Executive Board in February 2012.

### Key Findings and Conclusions

#### Lack of clarity about the shift from food aid to food assistance and about partnership

Interviews with WFP staff and partners at different levels found a wide variation in understanding about the nature of the transformation from food aid to food assistance. Many were unable to identify specific effects of the transformation on operations other than the shift to voucher or cash transfer programmes.

There was also a lack of clear understanding among WFP staff and partners about partnership. Virtually any form of collaborative relationship was viewed as a partnership. There were also widely differing views about what constitutes an effective partnership. These ambiguities have led to uncertainty about how partnerships can impact WFP's transformation.

WFP's communications about partnerships and food assistance – two cornerstones of its current Strategic Plan – were uneven at best. There was a lack of substantive understanding or clear definition provided by WFP leadership concerning these two core elements of the Strategic Plan.

#### WFP as a valued and respected partner

In spite of some limitations, WFP is considered to be a valued and respected partner. External stakeholders rated WFP most highly for its results-oriented approach and degree of responsibility. The majority of respondents rated WFP lower in its degree of transparency. WFP staff are seen as trustworthy, open and honest, which are core values needed for an effective partnership. Country-level NGOs rated WFP highly in terms of respect for others; responding in a timely manner; communicating openly; ensuring that the main contact point is clear; and playing an active role in meetings. Areas of relative weakness included flexibility and fulfilling commitments on time, which is likely related to payment delays and, more importantly, delays in the delivery of food and pipeline breaks. Such problems on the part of WFP spill over to affect the reputations of its front line partners.

### Capacity gaps and lack of clarity, particularly in the area of nutrition

There were a number of weaknesses in WFP's partnering performance related to nutrition that were not observed in emergency preparedness and response. Major weaknesses included: i) a lack of technical expertise to support participation in these programmes; ii) a lack of senior professional staff to undertake WFP's work and partner effectively with NGOs, governments and others; iii) a lack of clarity regarding WFP's strategic aims in nutrition as it shifted from food aid to food assistance. WFP staff faced challenges in sustaining financial resources for nutrition given WFP's tonnage-based financing model, since high-cost but low-tonnage nutrition products deplete budgets and result in less discretionary funding for capacity development and related activities.

Ambiguity about WFP's roles and responsibilities in the area of nutrition was expressed by virtually all United Nations stakeholders at the regional and global levels. At the country level, stakeholders from NGOs and other United Nations agencies had similar concerns about a lack of clarity regarding nutrition, with calls for "higher levels of authority" to provide this clarity. WFP is currently developing a new nutrition policy that might clarify this issue.

### Benefits and costs of partnership

Working in partnership is seen to be beneficial and to increase the effectiveness of WFP's operations and those of its partners. WFP staff reported that benefits are greater than costs in all areas except management costs, which implies that partnership increases management costs. Strong positive impacts were seen on beneficiaries, financial resources, complementarity and WFP's main activities.

External stakeholders' perspectives on the costs and benefits of partnership are similar to those of WFP staff, with impact on beneficiaries, financial resources and complementarity rated as most positive. Management costs were also rated more negatively by external stakeholders. The added values of partnership include: access to increased information in order to improve decision-making; synergies and the opportunity for collective or better-coordinated initiatives; increased impact on beneficiaries; cost savings; knowledge transfer; and increased sensitivity to local conditions. Negative factors related to partnership include: the time needed to manage relationships; the impact of personalities on the effectiveness of partnership; lack of information sharing about the logistics of joint activities; and bureaucratic processes related to authorization and payment.

### Internal factors

Most staff who responded to the survey reported that several of WFP's financial systems, reporting systems and policies are inadequate to support partnerships. Only 60 % of staff found WFP's project planning and monitoring systems to be supportive of partnership, and 54 % found the programme guidance adequate to support partnership. WFP's administrative and management systems cannot readily track costs and benefits, which reduces WFP's ability to learn from and better manage its partnerships. Both WFP and external stakeholders agreed that knowledge and learning are promoted in WFP's partnerships.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Overall Assessment

Virtually all stakeholders consider WFP to be a valued and respected partner and that working with WFP results in an increased impact on beneficiaries. WFP staff members also recognize that working in partnership increases access to beneficiaries, and increases WFP's overall effectiveness.

Ambiguities and uneven communications about the nature of food assistance and partnership have implications for effective partnering. Lack of clarity about WFP's core objectives affects WFP's ability to negotiate with partners, maximize comparative advantages and maintain trust.

A long-term approach and investments in capacity development are needed when working with governments and other development partners. A significant impediment to partnership is WFP's short-term, project-based planning system.

Shortfalls in technical expertise (as was notable in the area of nutrition) undermine WFP's credibility with partners. A shortage of well-trained and senior staff makes working with partners more difficult and inhibits building long-term relationships.

### Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** WFP should empower the Executive Management Council, reporting to the Executive Director, to articulate a comprehensive partnership strategy, including a communications strategy.

**Recommendation 2.** WFP should consider additional resources to enhance its capacity in nutrition and health, and build partnership skills including: increased staff training; engaging partners in jointly setting standards for good partnership; and creating management incentives to promote good partnership.

**Recommendation 3.** WFP should enter into discussions with United Nations partners, especially FAO, UNICEF, and WHO, to clarify roles and responsibilities in relation to WFP's shift to a food-assistance model, specifically with respect to mutual roles and responsibilities related to nutrition.

**Recommendation 4.** WFP should amend its global and (if relevant) regional framework agreements with other United Nations organizations to reflect new conditions and to incorporate aspects of good partnering agreements.

**Recommendation 5.** WFP should consider developing a mechanism to complement the standardized field-level agreements and lay out mutual expectations between WFP and local partners with respect to the mutual exercise of good-partnership practices.

**Recommendation 6.** WFP should consider amending its project planning and reporting systems to include specific references to good partnership and partnership-related outcomes, and to promote the longer-term approach needed to sustain partnerships and contribute to capacity development.

**Recommendation 7.** WFP should expand and formalize the country-level partnership evaluation system based on the principle of mutual accountability; an example to build on was seen in Kenya.



### Reference:

**Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at [www.wfp.org/evaluation](http://www.wfp.org/evaluation)**

**For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation [WFP.evaluation@WFP.org](mailto:WFP.evaluation@WFP.org)**