

Evaluation Synthesis

Four Strategic Evaluations on the Transition from Food Aid to Food Assistance: A Synthesis (short version)

27 March 2012

Office of Evaluation

Measuring Results, Sharing Lessons

Prepared by:

THE KONTERRA GROUP

Terrence Jantzi – Lead Analyst

Everett Ressler – Senior Advisor

[Report number: 2012/007]



wfp.org

World Food Programme

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge with appreciation the timely and patient support provided throughout the process of developing this synthesis by the Office of Evaluation, particularly Sally Burrows, the Evaluation Officer overseeing the process. Appreciation is also expressed to Jamie Watts, Diane Prioux de Baudimont - Evaluation Officers - and Helen Wedgwood, Director of the Office of Evaluation, for their consultations. Finally, the evaluation team acknowledges the strong collective foundation of the four Strategic Evaluation reports upon which this synthesis was built.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed are those of the Evaluation Team, and do not necessarily reflect those of the World Food Programme. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the authors. Publication of this document does not imply endorsement by WFP of the opinions expressed.

The designation employed and the presentation of material in the maps do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of WFP concerning the legal or constitutional status of any country, territory or sea area, or concerning the delimitation of frontiers.

Evaluation Management

Synthesis Manager:	Sally Burrows
Director, Office of Evaluation:	Helen Wedgwood

1. This paper synthesises seven common messages that emerge from the set of four strategic evaluations¹ that aimed to inform WFP's transition from food aid to food assistance, which is at the core of the vision in the Strategic Plan 2008-2013. Conducted midway in the Plan period, the evaluations were intended to provide timely and relevant learning to the Organization about progress on four different dimensions of this transition. They do not constitute evaluation of the Strategic Plan itself².

2. The evaluations visited a total of 16 countries with 3 others analysed through desk review, including telephone interviews with key stakeholders in country³. This was supplemented by a review of programme documents, a wider thematic literature review and selected interviews with global-level external stakeholders and staff interviews in Regional Bureaus and WFP Headquarters. ⁴

3. The Strategic Plan 2008-2013 authorised WFP to make more choices on how it responds to needs than in the past. The Programme has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to respond rapidly and with agility to emergencies. Conscious that the Strategic Plan foresees a similar agility to adapt programmes to recovery and development situations as they emerge and retreat in cycles with emergencies, these evaluations gave considerable, but not exclusive, attention to post-crisis and non-emergency contexts.

4. Although the evaluations were conducted by four different, independent teams, there were some striking similarities to the findings and conclusions across the four, especially concerning systemic issues that WFP can address. These 'key messages' are highlighted below to maximise the corporate learning contribution, as WFP prepares its next Strategic Plan. This in no way substitutes for the rich learning from the individual findings from each evaluation concerning its distinct subject area.

5. **Message 1: Shift from food aid to food assistance is relevant, widely welcomed and very demanding.** The shift from food aid to food assistance as envisioned in the Strategic Plan is relevant to on-going changes in the external context in which WFP operates, especially given FAO estimates that nearly a billion people are categorized as 'hungry'. The evaluations found widespread agreement among stakeholders – both external and internal - on the need for WFP to have made adjustments, especially to post-crisis/non-emergency contexts. The newly endorsed tools and operating principles on which the programme shift is being implemented also have broad support.

6. At the same time, the shift is very demanding and the related changes have significant organizational implications. The Change evaluation suggested that the current process is probably the most substantive strategic shift since the organization was founded, affecting virtually every aspect of WFP's approach and operations.

7. **Message 2: Expansive and positive change is underway.** The evaluations all found an expansive process of change and innovation underway within WFP at all levels. In their respective area of focus, all the evaluations found positive adaptations and innovations by the organization towards the new strategic direction. These comprised new forms of strategic engagement as well as modifications to 'traditional' interventions. They included:

¹ The four were: 1) WFP's Role in Social Protection and Safety Nets; 2) WFP's Role in Ending Long-Term Hunger; 3) From Food Aid to Food Assistance – Working in Partnership; and 4) An Evaluation of How Country Offices Adapt to Change. Hereafter they are referred to as the evaluations of Social Protection, Long-Term Hunger, Partnerships, and the Change evaluation.

² This would need to be larger in scope and use different methodology.

³ Countries visited or reviewed: **Africa:** Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia. **Asia:** Bangladesh, Cambodia, Georgia, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal. **Latin America/Caribbean:** Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti, Guatemala.

⁴ Some country offices were engaged in more than one strategic evaluation.

- a) Expanded collaboration with a wider array of government entities, including, for example, greater integration into existing social protection programs, as well as greater coordination with other on-going government programming;
- b) Increased use of non-food aid approaches in operational modalities, including initiatives to enhance local production and local purchase, vouchers or cash;
- c) Building on the basic finding that WFP is overall considered a good partner, there has been restructuring of the nature and quality of WFP partnering relationships to meet new needs. At the same time, the strength of strong performance in WFP's established roles in emergency preparedness and response is being maintained, both individually and as a partner (especially in logistics);
- d) Increased involvement in such non-operational arenas as policy development, advocacy, and participation in inter-agency coordinating bodies;
- e) The initiation of a new more strategic programme planning approach (through the Country Strategies)

8. **Message 3: But to enhance effectiveness, greater leadership, guidance and support are needed to this process of change.** Each of the four evaluations concluded that WFP's effectiveness in the areas they assessed was weak enough to require substantive corrective measures. There was striking commonality across the evaluations on the underlying issues and factors affecting this performance. All four evaluations found that the principal constraints to improving effectiveness in the transition from food aid to food assistance were internal – in other words, factors within WFP's control – and related largely to how WFP has approached implementation of the Strategic Plan.

9. Up until now, the approach to managing implementation of the Strategic Plan has been to provide overall strategic direction, giving Country Offices the authority to adapt and innovate, with gradual development of support systems and structures. This has not provided sufficient leadership, guidance or support.

10. **Message 4: Lack of clarity on concepts and programme priorities leads to multiple interpretations and uncertainty among external stakeholders about WFP's positioning.** At the heart of it, all the evaluations reported an absence of conceptual clarity to underpin the new ways of working, which leads to multiple interpretations of core concepts from 'food assistance' itself to 'safety nets' to 'partnership'. They each found ambiguities and uncertainty among stakeholders - both within and outside WFP - as to what the shift to "food assistance" involves, particularly related to "what" WFP should do and "how" it should carry out those functions.

11. Greater clarity is needed on the conceptual framework, program prioritization and operating principles. Conceptual clarity drives programme direction and priority setting, priorities for investment in systems and staff competencies and, ultimately, programme performance and organizational credibility. This in turn drives the ability to establish strategic partnerships and attract funding.

12. *Clarity of Conceptual Framework.* All four evaluations emphasized the importance of developing a deep, theoretical understanding of a range of new concepts, including social protection approaches, the nature of long term hunger, and developing a shared understanding regarding the principles of partnering.

13. *Program Prioritization.* Without conceptual clarity, there is no clearly articulated framework for coherent program prioritization nor adequate understanding of WFP's role and positioning in the larger system of actors. In practice, the evaluations found program prioritization was pragmatically built on a set of operating principles. The key principles included: a needs-based approach, enhancing national capacity, promoting government ownership, a greater role in policy and advocacy, encouraging widespread participatory engagements, ensuring general alignment with government priorities, and harmonization with UN general strategies.

14. Others included: the need to give priority to building long-term engagements predicated on predictable funding, moving from partnering for operational purposes to more strategic partnering relationships, and maintaining high flexibility in the organization to respond to situational shifts.

15. While these operating principles are valuable and derive from the Strategic Plan, they are not enough alone to ensure coherence. In particular, the needs-based approach has been frequently interpreted as “gap-filling” and not sufficiently focussed on specific objectives. It forms a weak foundation on which to build operations and organizational capacity. It has led in some instances to an array of interventions, offering a certain contribution and in line with government priorities, but lacking conceptual coherence and prioritization leading to ambiguous organizational identity. Changes that have been made have been driven by factors external to WFP and largely reactive, rather than proactive.

16. **Message 5: That clarity needs to be communicated widely.** The lack of clarity prevents WFP from being able to communicate clearly on the ‘front line’ about how the new ways of working flow from WFP’s mandate and how WFP envisions its roles and responsibilities in relation to other players in the larger system. The absence of clear communication feeds a common perception among external stakeholders of lack of focus, concerns about duplication and fears of “mission creep”.

17. **Message 6: Changes to internal WFP systems and processes are lagging behind the needs arising from new ways of working** – especially in the areas of: funding; planning; monitoring and evaluation; targeting and needs assessment; support to learning (knowledge management); and partnering.

18. *Funding:* The inadequacy of the processes available to WFP to acquire multi-year, predictable funding is a significant operational barrier, creating a cascade of undesirable effects for expanded programming in the “food assistance” arena. In addition, roll-out of the New Financial Framework has not reached country level, delaying progress on capacity development work.

19. *Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation.* All four evaluations noted that the existing planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems were largely geared to the food-aid and project approach, rather than more strategic programme approaches. Two of the evaluations explicitly noted the positive potential of the new Country Strategy planning approach, but this is not yet fully linked to operations nor yet reached its potential on quality of process. Monitoring and self-evaluation systems need significant re-design, especially to include outcome level monitoring that enables subsequent evaluation of outcomes and impact.

20. *Targeting and needs assessment.* The more sophisticated programming implied by these new ways of working requires more sophisticated targeting and priority setting/needs assessment than was previously necessary. WFP’s expertise in vulnerability mapping and analysis was repeatedly recognized as a core strength and comparative advantage and a positive contribution to the partnering mix. Its further development is essential to support the transition to food assistance and has the potential to provide an expanded basis for country planning strategies.

21. *HQ and Regional Bureaux Support and Learning:* The evaluations found strong affirmation for the need for proactive problem-solving guidance to help as staff and partners grapple with innovation in the changing context and using peer-to-peer exchanges as a means of promoting practical learning. Three of the four evaluations also reported perceptions of a need to refine HQ organizational structures.

22. *Partnering Mechanisms.* Many of the existing MOUs with sister agencies or governments pre-date the shift in programming approach affiliated with the new Strategic Plan and are predicated on assumptions not related to “food assistance” type activities. Current MOU templates were not yet adapted to strategic partnering as well.

23. **Message 7: Good staff but investment needed to ensure the technical expertise and skill sets needed to implement fully the ‘food assistance’ approach - whether within WFP or among partners.** All four evaluations found committed and pragmatic personnel with drive for addressing need and for organizational improvement. Staff were seen as having strong problem solving capabilities, flexible, and displaying a strong interest in learning regarding the implications of the strategic plan. Other assets included extensive operational knowledge of the actors and the socio-political dynamics of the field. Staff creativity enabled innovation in response to the changing environment in spite of insufficient direction and support from the organization in many ways.

24. However, the four evaluations noted a diverse range of issues related to human resources, resulting in the need to assertively adapt recruitment, promotion and development of capacity and expertise in new sectors and skill sets for new roles required for the “food assistance” approach. In developing that capacity, clear distinction needs to be made between which capacities and competencies should be developed among WFP personnel and which obtained through or developed in partners.

25. The required shift in skill sets and profile of staff include technical expertise in new sectors (e.g., nutrition, social protection, long-term hunger), partnering expertise (e.g., skills and principles), skills in policy making, advocacy and capacity development (enabling rather than doing); and monitoring expertise (e.g., research skills for enhanced analysis in new fields and the measure of progress toward attainment of new objectives).

26. **In sum, the conclusion** for future learning that emerges from reading all four evaluations is as follows. The changes initiated under the strategic shift from food aid to food assistance have the potential to enhance WFP effectiveness in addressing the complex dimensions of hunger in diverse contexts, including rapid and slow onset emergency, recovery and more stable development. Important adaptations and innovations have been made on the ‘front line’ with some promising results.

27. However, halfway through the Strategic Plan cycle, organizational support for the transition is weak, including leadership of the initiative, clarity of goals and priorities, and development of supporting systems. Adaptation of the systems, procedures, guidance and staff capacity has started, but has been slow in implementation and is lagging behind the pace of change in the field. Investment in leadership and management of the process of implementing the Strategic Plan has not yet matched the level required by the scale of change envisaged in it. Maximizing WFP’s impact will depend on concerted organizational efforts to address this.

The four evaluations are:

- 1) [WFP’s Role in Social Protection and Safety Nets](#)
- 2) [WFP’s Role in Ending Long-Term Hunger](#)
- 3) [From Food Aid to Food Assistance – Working in Partnership](#)
- 4) [An Evaluation of How Country Offices Adapt to Change](#)

See also the original [Concept Note](#) for the series.

Note: precise scope and titles of evaluations developed further at time of TOR design.

Acronyms

CO	County Office
EB	Executive Board
EMOP	Emergency Operation
EQAS	Evaluation Quality Assurance System
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FFW/A	Food for Work/Assets
HR	Human Resources
HQ	Headquarters
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MCHN	Maternal and Child Health Nutrition
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOU	Memo of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation
OE	Office of Evaluation
P4P	Purchase for Progress
PME	Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation
PRRO	Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation
RB	Regional Bureau
SF	School Feeding
TOR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank
WFP	UN World Food Programme

Office of Evaluation
www.wfp.org/evaluation



World Food Programme