

Evaluation Brief



Kyrgyz Republic: An evaluation of WFP's portfolio (2008-2012)

Context

The Kyrgyz Republic is a small, landlocked country classified as low-income, food-deficit, which gained independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991. The country has experienced some political turbulence and disputes with neighbours over trade and shared water resources. It is also highly exposed to natural disaster owing to its mountainous terrain.

Economic setbacks since 2008 have reversed a positive poverty reduction trend; the country is the second poorest in the region, with about one third of its 5.3 million inhabitants living below the poverty line in 2009. Food insecurity is strongly associated with poverty and is worse in rural areas.

National social protection includes safety nets as the Unified Monthly Benefit (UMB), a cash benefit aimed at children from low-income families and the Monthly Social Benefit (MSB), a cash income-replacement programme targeted at disadvantaged groups unable to work. Additional benefits include social payments to people in mountainous areas, and *ad hoc* food distributions.

Scope and Evaluation focus

The evaluation covered the period since WFP started operating there upon Government request in 2008 and the six operations implemented in the country, namely:

- Two emergency operations to assist from 2009 – 2011 populations affected by natural disasters (including extreme winter weather and drought) and economic crises.
- Two emergency operations and a special operation to assist populations affected by the conflict in 2010.
- A Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) to assist the most food insecure in a transition context, which started mid-2011 for two years.

The evaluation focused on assessing: i) the alignment and strategic positioning of WFP's operations in the country; ii) the drivers of key strategic decisions; and iii) the performance and results of WFP operations. Contributions to the portfolio total US\$ 56 million to date and, depending on the years, between 70 and 100% of the 1 million planned beneficiaries have been assisted.

Key Findings

WFP's initial emergency interventions were conceived as rapid responses to help buffer the effects of immediate and successive shocks. The PRRO articulates a more coherent strategy introducing a gradual shift from relief towards recovery activities and government capacity development, which acknowledges the remaining significant downside risks including, food price hikes, political instability and natural disasters.

Yet, despite an evolution of objectives and financing instruments over the period, the programme has remained largely the same, dominated by twice-yearly Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF). Food for work and food for training (FFW/FFT) have started to alter the nature of the programme, but by 2012 still only constituted 19% of the beneficiaries. Both of these activities were found relevant and cover critical gaps. The autumn VGF distribution contributes to households' reserves over the winter, and the spring one sees them through until the planting labour

starts. FFW/T provide critical income earning opportunities in the absence of formal employment prospects.

Alignment and strategic positioning

VGF programme, considered by WFP as a 'top up' to the national safety net payments, supports Kyrgyz poverty alleviation objectives. Yet, it is not fully aligned with efforts of partners in this regard nor is it integrated in government systems, which may ultimately amplify the inconsistencies of the national social welfare system.

WFP's direct implementation approach is justified on the grounds of limited government capacity, which does not fully stand up to scrutiny especially as WFP largely uses the government system at the local level to target beneficiaries and implement its VGF programme.

In contrast, FFW is better aligned to community development efforts and focus on: i) disaster mitigation; ii) repair of irrigation canals; iii) tree planting for reforestation; and iv) supporting women groups' agricultural practice. The new school feeding project is also seeking a better fit with the government and was conceived to work within national systems from the outset. This is also the case for the joint project with FAO, which seeks to develop the capacity of the National Statistics Committee (NSC) to monitor food security and production analysis and involves transfer of knowledge and tools.

Partnerships. WFP has an extensive field presence and is well connected at district and village level to its main partner, the government, which is highly significant to the effectiveness of programme implementation. At national level, WFP is yet to establish durable relationships, which has constrained a more strategic approach to date and is an area for improvement.

WFP has a valuable range of partnerships with local NGOs and sister agencies. All were highly appreciative and complimentary, noting that WFP delivered well on its commitments. It has also made strong efforts to be part of the donor community but WFP was found to be closely aligned to the thinking of its major donor, the Russian Federation, but less so with other main donors to the country.

Factors driving Strategic Decisions

WFP invested significantly in food security and operational analysis to determine where food insecurity was most prevalent in the population geographically and socially. This analysis, widely regarded as of high quality, informs programme work and is used by partners as contribution to their own analyses.

On the other hand, the CO does not appear to analyse the range of policies and measures, beyond food aid provision, needed to tackle food insecurity durably. While the Regional Bureau and headquarters provided some support for programme design, such a small office would benefit from greater and more sustained support for strategic analysis.

The rigidity of some WFP internal systems may also have constrained a more strategic and innovative approach including the funding formula linked to tonnage distributed, which creates an operational bias and limits resources for non-operational work such as policy functions. Single donor dependency may also have made WFP more conservative about changing its strategy and limited the evolution of the WFP programme.

Portfolio performance and Results

Efficiency. WFP exceeded its beneficiary target in 2010, and was close to 70% in 2009 and 2011, a respectable performance. Female beneficiaries slightly outnumbered male in each year. Yet funding shortages has meant that some provinces or districts were not covered and the assistance has not always been delivered at the time of highest needs.

Targeting, logistics, implementation, oversight and quality control were all excellent. The targeting system draws on thorough food security analysis. No logistical or supply issues were reported, which is impressive given the challenging terrain and restricted access to many communities in the winter. Beneficiaries were unanimously appreciative of the food quality and timeliness of assistance. The monitoring system is extremely robust and adequate as an oversight mechanism, building trust in WFP in a context of endemic corruption.

Also, the programme was found to be good value for money with the cost of the WFP food delivered to the beneficiaries comparing very favourably with the price of food in the market.

Effectiveness. The assistance had a positive effect on household food consumption and limited negative coping strategies during the lean season. It also acted as a resource transfer with beneficiaries spending 10–20% less of their income on food following the distributions.

While the FFW/T portfolio of activities is still largely opportunistic, its contribution to community development was highly appreciated by the communities, officials and partners and some activities are showing impact potential. Projects were found most effective when carried out in partnership and integrated in broader partners' projects as illustrated by the truly collaborative initiative to provide self-help groups of women with improved seed varieties and training on how to farm better. The yields from the new seeds improved greatly, leading to increased household income. It also introduced community development principles and started shifting the mentality towards more lasting resilience.

Impact. The WFP assistance likely contributed to mitigating the impact of the succeeding shocks, not least the high food and fuel prices to which the country is highly sensitive, as a net food importer, with migrant labour and remittances constituting as much as a third of the economy.

Sustainability. VGF in its current shape was found unsustainable and question-marks remain about communities' willingness to maintain some FFW assets despite CO's efforts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

The evaluation found WFP activities appropriate and their delivery highly efficient. The country office was creative in using its resources and in its programming. It also established valuable operational partnerships at the regional and local levels.

When food assistance was provided, it made a measurable contribution to recipient households' income, leading to more predictable consumption of staples in some of the poorest households at critical times. FFW programmes were highly appreciated and showed various impacts. Yet, while WFP assistance reached more than half of the extremely poor, it did not suffice to counter more significant factors impacting negatively on poverty and food insecurity levels (which are closely correlated) including adverse global and regional economic factors and internal instability.

Issues related to the portfolio's strategic positioning and alignment may also have constrained impact. The portfolio gradually improved its strategic positioning in the local context and its alignment with government priorities but there is a need to position VGF better within the national social protection programme and to move from stand-alone assistance

programmes to supporting structural safety-net reforms, which are a priority of the Government and its partners.

Lessons for the future

WFP's shift to food assistance presents implementation challenges for small country offices as the funding model makes it difficult for them to cover policy and advocacy roles. However, as host countries progress they are likely to need proportionately more policy and technical support than direct implementation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Country Office should undertake a formal country strategy process to analyse WFP's comparative advantage in the Kyrgyz Republic and its complementarity with other actors with the view to move from implementation to policy support and advocacy for better targeting of national social protection schemes and for development of the rural economy. At the same time, WFP should ensure that the government safety net can respond quickly in emergencies.

Recommendation 2. The country strategy should seek to integrate the VGF programme into government safety net/social protection schemes and to use its experience to influence the conception and delivery of these schemes. This will require developing the office's capacity for policy analysis and advocacy work; using WFP vulnerability analysis and mapping and to inform targeting as part of an integrated government safety-net system. WFP should leverage its current programme with the European Union for this purpose. As the transition will take time, WFP may need to extend its PRRO.

Recommendation 3. The Country Office should continue increasing the proportion of FFW/FFT to facilitate the transition and should explore with the government the use of such public work schemes for more general poverty alleviation and development projects – as a productive safety net. This work should be linked to ongoing efforts to increase local administrations' capacity to plan and implement projects.

Recommendation 4. The Regional Bureau should help the country office design its social safety-net programme, drawing on regional experience, including through study tours and secondments. This requires knowledge management to facilitate sharing of expertise and experience across the region. A more coherent regional approach to evaluation could assist, with country teams helping to evaluate each other's programmes and the systematic sharing of evaluation reports.

Recommendation 5. WFP headquarters should rethink the role of smaller country offices and support them to work on influencing government policy and interventions as much as on delivering food aid. An additional budget line should be available to smaller offices for this work and they should be supported to fundraise in order to avoid single-donor dependency and keep flexibility. Also, WFP rules and procedures should allow small country offices flexibility to operate effectively and innovate.

Recommendation 6. WFP should engage donors in any change of approach in the Kyrgyz Republic, such as the transition from food aid to a food security approach integrated into general government social protection mechanisms. It should also encourage donors to support and fund WFP policy work as well as direct assistance and larger donors to engage with government on designing a more effective food security system.



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