

WFP's School Feeding Policy

Context

This evaluation is one of four strategic evaluations conducted in the current biennium and that are related to the WFP's strategic shift from food aid to food assistance. In recent years WFP school feeding (school meals, biscuits and take home rations) has reached over 20m children annually, almost half of them girls. The School Feeding Policy was approved by WFP's Executive Board (EB) in November 2009 and it was one of the first Policies to follow through the principles of WFP's Strategic Plan 2008 – 2013.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

This evaluation was required to: i) assess the quality and the results of the policy and activities to implement it (accountability); ii) determine the reasons behind these findings in order to draw lessons for the future (learning). The evaluation took place during the roll out of the Policy. This meant the evaluation was a review of work-in-progress, not a final assessment. Moreover, it was not an evaluation of the impact of School feeding (SF) per se, but it did address the Policy's consistency with emerging evidence of impact.

The evaluation took place in April - November 2011. It drew on document and data reviews, interviews with over 300 stakeholders, and case studies for eight countries (Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique and Tajikistan) selected to represent pilot and non-pilot countries, different levels of government management of SF systems, and geographical variety. The terms of reference excluded emergency SF from the evaluation, and specified a focus on the primary school level.

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

Key Findings

The Policy had important strengths. It was clearly written, and it was grounded on evidence. The Policy was relevant and timely in seeking to codify and seek consensus around good practices in SF.

The Policy was coherent with WFP's Strategic Plan and other key policies. It included an innovative, and commendable effort to propagate general standards for SF systems. The Policy was also generally coherent with international standard concerning nutrition, education and aid effectiveness.

The Policy had three "elements of novelty": i) framing SF as a safety net intervention with multiple outcomes; ii) working closer with Governments (focusing on the strengthening of sustainable national SF systems); and iii) introducing eight standards for quality and sustainability.

The Policy proposes social protection as an overarching framework for outcomes which can include a direct safety net (value transfer) function, educational benefits (incentives for enrolment and attendance, while also enhancing the ability to learn), and nutritional benefits (alleviating short-term hunger and improving children's nutritional status, particularly when food is fortified and accompanied by de-worming). The effect is to multiply the stakeholders that WFP potentially has to deal with, especially at country office (CO) level. SF's potential to

support gender equality is also highlighted.

The Policy could have been stronger in several important respects.

The Policy should have distinguished more carefully between generic objectives for SF and corporate goals and objectives for WFP. It was left to later documents to explain the objectives of the Policy as (a) improved SF quality, (b) wider SF coverage, and (c) effective capacity for school feeding. Both the purpose of the policy document and its corporate implications for WFP would have been clearer if these goals and objectives had been spelled out.

The Policy should have distinguished more carefully between advocacy and guidance. There is a tension between the advocacy role of the document and its role as corporate guidance for WFP, with advocacy tending to dominate.

The Policy should have been more emphatic about the need for focusing on a subset of objectives in a specific operation. There was not enough recognition that the potential benefits of SF are not automatically realised, and that in practice there are usually trade-offs between objectives. By exalting all the potential benefits of SF, the Policy runs the risk of over-simplifying, providing a reference point under which all SF objectives can be justified, without emphasising that most operations will need to focus on a subset of the possible objectives.

The SF Policy focuses mainly on the "value transfer" aspect of SF, and does not adequately bring out the promotive aspects. The radical implications for WFP of a social protection approach are not brought out. The Policy does not follow through the concept of social protection as an overarching system, within which SF would be one among many possible interventions.

The Policy was strongly evidence-based, and the evidence-gathering that preceded it was very impressive. However, the Policy tends to cite positive findings about the potential benefits of SF without adequately stressing the other factors on which those benefits also depend. The Policy presented the "investment case" for school feeding as a demonstration of its high economic returns. This was misleading, because it presented a hypothetical model as if it was an empirical finding.

Most seriously, available evidence on the costs and the cost-effectiveness of school feeding is conspicuously weak. Given that costs are at the heart of making choices, the Policy could have been more emphatic about the importance of addressing cost issues, and of using cost-effectiveness as a criterion not only in the design of SF interventions but also in choosing between SF and other means towards achieving specific outcomes.

In general, practicability is an area of relative weakness in the Policy. The Policy would have been stronger as a practical document if it had included (a) more acknowledgment of the scale of the challenges that would be faced in adopting these new directions, and of the need for prioritization of objectives in specific cases; (b) more systematic discussion of the realistic

scope of WFP's responsibility for SF outcomes; and (c) a clear statement of WFP-specific objectives, together with an outline of the main activities envisaged to pursue those objectives.

Results of the Policy

Attribution of results to the Policy is difficult as it is too soon to expect outcomes and impacts from operations commenced since the Policy was adopted. Most judgements are qualitative, because it is early for data trends to emerge, but also because the effects of the Policy on WFP's Portfolio are ambiguous.

The evaluation noted many positive features in the implementation of the Policy, including the energy that has gone into efforts to roll out the Policy and to support it with guidelines and tools within WFP.

The evaluation also found that WFP's valuable relationships with core SF partners have been reinforced. Relationships with two emerging donors, Brazil and Russia, have clearly been strengthened by the Policy.

The Policy endorses many good practices and initiatives that COs are already following, and it embodies principles, such as government ownership, that are already familiar elements of the Policy, without crediting it as a guide. The SF Policy is reflected in the majority of CSs to some degree, but even in the ones that are more strongly aligned, there is only limited analysis of the prospects for sustainable national SF systems. Three main documents (the Concept Note (2009), the Implementation Approach (2010) and the Implementation Update (2011) have given the Policy a more practical orientation, and they have been complemented by an impressive amount of work on guidelines and tools to support policy implementation. However, the Policy falls short of a conscious commitment to implementation, and neglects important elements such as the eight quality standards, which are not being systematically used in monitoring and reporting on SF programmes.

The evaluation found that awareness of the Policy itself is patchy. There is limited external awareness of it beyond direct partners (and EB members). Within WFP, there is no doubt that HQ staff in both the policy and programme units are highly committed to implementation of the Policy, and that it provides their main agenda. At country level, with some exceptions, there is much less familiarity with the Policy as such.

The sustainability of national SF systems is highly dependent on how deeply embedded and affordable they are for the country concerned. WFP's ability to sustain its support for the Policy will depend on following through the radical reorientation of WFP approaches that the Policy requires.

Reasons for results

A number of external trends have facilitated implementation of the Policy. The changing patterns in food assistance have made it more practical to espouse a more flexible policy that is not driven by the food aid available.

At the same time, the evaluation found a number of factors that have tended to hold back the implementation of the Policy. There was a lack of consultation with WFP's field level during the preparation of the Policy, and internal dissemination was weak. There was ambiguity between rolling out the Policy across WFP and focusing on pilot countries (with pilot chosen as high-potential countries for the Policy). Human resources for implementing the Policy was severely constrained – both in the limited numbers of professional staff at HQ, and in the hugely demanding roles implied for scarce CO staff, given the breadth of the Policy.

Above all, the full implementation of the Policy depends on major changes in WFP systems, incentives and procedures. Most of the necessary changes are identified in the Strategic

Plan, but their implementation is slow.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Policy had important strengths. It was timely and persuasively written. It responded to a dynamic international context as well as strategic developments within WFP. The Policy is already reflected in WFP's portfolio and activities in several positive ways, but there is room for more progress. The Policy had also significant weaknesses. It did not distinguish enough between the general case for school feeding and the specific role(s) that WFP should play in school feeding. It drew on solid evidence, but it tended to overstate the case, allowing advocacy to undermine balanced guidance, thus eroding WFP's credibility.

This evaluation tends to confirm the relevance of much of the Policy's agenda, but at this early stage, there has not been much tangible progress in implementing (or accelerating) that agenda as would have been hoped.

Recommendation 1: Clarify and update the policy.

WFP should prepare and seek EB approval (probably in June 2013) for an "Update on WFP's School Feeding Policy". The update would augment the existing Policy, not replace it. The update should: a) Bridge the gap between policy and implementation strategy; b) Update the treatment of key themes.

Recommendation 2: Operationalize the policy more effectively.

Better operationalization requires: a) Strengthening staff skills and support for implementation at file level; b) Further development of guidance material; c) More attention to costs and cost-effectiveness; d) Strengthening relationships with external partners.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the financing of the policy.

Financial resources and financial and budgetary incentives are key to the operationalization of the Policy:

- a) **Cost and ensure additional financing for the budgetary implications of Recommendation 2(a) (such as CO staff training and specialist support)** within an overall policy implementation plan to enable PSS, ODXP and Regional Bureaus to support the Policy more effectively across all COs.
- b) **Roll out WFP's new financial framework as rapidly as possible.**
- c) **Seek more predictable funding.**
- d) **Strengthen WFP's ability to analyse SF's budgetary implications for governments.**

Recommendation 4: Strengthen learning and further development of the policy.

Reference:



Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation
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