



**UNEG**

United Nations Evaluation Group



DAC NETWORK ON  
**DEVELOPMENT EVALUATION**

# **Peer Review of the Evaluation Function at the World Food Programme**

May 2021



**World Food  
Programme**

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# Executive Summary

## Peer review features

1. This peer review of the evaluation function at WFP was carried out in accordance with the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of United Nations organizations and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It is the third peer review of WFP's evaluation function and was conducted at the request of WFP.
2. The purpose of the peer review is to inform the strengthening of WFP's evaluation function so that it can more effectively contribute to WFP's organizational decision making, programme effectiveness, learning and accountability for results. The terms of reference and guiding questions for the review were structured in line with the UNEG framework and aimed to "provide an independent and professional assessment of the WFP evaluation function on the extent to which the UNEG Norms and Standards<sup>1</sup> have been adopted by WFP". The assessment focuses on the independence, credibility and utility of the WFP evaluation function and on how effectively evaluations were used and followed up on throughout WFP to promote accountability, learning and improvement.
3. The review covers both the centralized and decentralized components of WFP's evaluation function and assesses the role and strategic positioning of financial and human resourcing, evaluation planning, evaluation use and quality assurance mechanisms. It focuses on the period of the current evaluation policy, which covers 2016–2021, and builds on findings from prior assessments, the most recent of which is the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) assessment covering the period from 2017 to 2018.<sup>2</sup>
4. The peer review panel was formed in March 2020 and reviewed and adopted terms of reference in May, when an external consultant was recruited. To prepare for the peer review the Office of Evaluation (OEV) produced a comprehensive self-assessment report against UNEG norms and standards. The review panel considers that OEV's self-assessment constitutes a very frank and constructive reflection on WFP's evaluation practice and endorses its judgments. Drawing on the self-assessment, interviews and an extensive literature review, the consultant produced a comprehensive preliminary assessment. Building on the observations in the preliminary assessment, the panel then held remote meetings between 12 and 26 October 2020. As well as OEV, the panel met a broad range of stakeholders including senior management from WFP departments, divisions and regional bureaux, members of the Executive Board, country directors and members of regional evaluation units. The present report presents evidence and analysis from these sources. Because of travel restrictions related to COVID-19, the entire assessment was conducted remotely. WFP's regional evaluation units were leading mid-term reviews of their regional evaluation strategies at the same time as the peer review was being conducted.
5. The peer review panel comprised six members:
  - Marco Segone, Peer Review Chair, Director, Evaluation Office of the United Nations Population Fund;
  - Sven Harten, Deputy Director, German Institute for Development Evaluation;
  - Maurya West Meiers, Senior Evaluation Officer, Methods Advisory Team, World Bank Independent Evaluation Group;
  - David Rider Smith, Senior Evaluation Coordinator, Evaluation Service, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees;
  - Silvia Salinas Mulder, President, International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation; and
  - Anu Saxén, Director, Development Evaluation Unit, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland.

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<sup>1</sup> UNEG. 2016. [Norms and Standards for Evaluation \(2016\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> MOPAN. 2019. [MOPAN 2017-18 Assessments. World Food Programme](#).

Daniel Arghiros was the senior evaluation consultant for the panel.

6. The panel would like to thank the Director and Deputy Directors and staff of OEV for facilitating the review through a strongly collaborative approach. OEV's organization of the review was exemplary. The panel would also like to thank all the people to whom they spoke for their open and frank contributions.

### **The WFP evaluation function**

7. The 2016–2021 evaluation policy<sup>3</sup> sets out the vision, strategic direction and model of the evaluation function. The policy commits WFP to:
  - i) maintaining a high-quality centralized evaluation function while applying a phased approach to developing a decentralized function over the life of the policy, with OEV setting the framework of evaluation norms and standards, accountabilities and coverage;
  - ii) enhancing capacity to meet stakeholders' requirements for accountability throughout WFP; and
  - iii) strengthening WFP's culture of learning, along with that of its partners, and facilitating evidence-based decision making.
8. The evaluation policy sets out a clear vision and purpose in its theory of change (see Annex 6). Its purpose is to ensure that evaluation results are "consistently and comprehensively incorporated into WFP's policies, strategies and programmes". WFP's evaluation strategy<sup>4</sup> sets out a phased implementation plan with a comprehensive set of indicators. Each of the six regional bureaux has a regional evaluation strategy that mirrors the structured approach of the corporate evaluation strategy but is attuned to regional conditions.
9. Successive annual evaluation reports show that WFP is achieving the evaluation targets it sets itself. It has increased the number of centralized and decentralized evaluations, achieving the coverage required by its current coverage norms. For example, 16 of WFP's 26 policies have been evaluated, and OEV is on track with the roll out of country strategic plan evaluations. In addition, 40 percent of country offices have conducted at least one decentralized evaluation in their current planning cycles, in line with WFP's current coverage norm. There has also been progress in evaluation quality, with independent post-hoc assessments of quality showing steady improvements.
10. Since the adoption of the policy the financial resources available for the evaluation function have almost tripled. In 2020 they totalled USD 26.02 million, or 0.31 percent of WFP's contribution income. WFP has also increased the number of evaluation professionals in OEV and the regional bureaux, enabling it to deliver its work programme to the required standard.

### **Summary assessment against the peer review criteria**

11. The panel's assessment of the independence, credibility and utility of WFP's evaluation function is substantially positive. WFP's evaluation function operates in line with UNEG norms and standards for evaluation. Centralized and decentralized evaluations are useful for both learning and accountability purposes, and the evaluation function serves an increasingly important role in contributing to WFP's ability to be a learning organization. The panel fully endorses the MOPAN assessment's conclusion that in WFP "[a] highly strategic independent corporate evaluation function oversees the production of high-quality centralised and decentralised evaluations".
12. The panel considers that all aspects of WFP's evaluation architecture are well articulated and that the governance structure that frames WFP's evaluation function is effective. Much of that structure has been established in direct response to the 2014 peer review.<sup>5</sup> The panel found that UNEG norms and standards have been embedded throughout WFP's evaluation function in all the systems established to support centralized and decentralized evaluations, and they have been updated to reflect recent changes. OEV's evaluations and other products are respected by staff throughout WFP and by the

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<sup>3</sup> [Evaluation Policy \(2016–2021\)](#) (WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1).

<sup>4</sup> WFP. 2016. [Corporate Evaluation Strategy \(2016–2021\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Summary report of the peer review of the evaluation function at the World Food Programme](#) (WFP/EB.A/2014/7-D).

Executive Board. OEV's mandate for evaluation is strong. The evaluation policy clearly describes the governance structure and approval and follow-up mechanisms. It covers all UNEG criteria and other recommended practices identified by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) of the United Nations system. OEV has a strong and respected institutional identity. The evaluation function steering group, mandated by the current evaluation policy, has served as an effective champion for the evaluation function. Senior management appears to appreciate the role and added value of evaluation, and there is evidence of high levels of support for the function within the organization.

13. In the period reviewed, OEV adapted the evaluation function to keep it aligned with WFP's evolving priorities and organizational changes, ensuring that the function was relevant and added value. Mirroring the organization's emphasis on country-level action, since 2016 OEV has invested heavily in creating a support system to help country offices manage decentralized evaluations to UNEG standards.
14. There has been real progress towards the vision set out in the current evaluation policy that "by 2021 evaluative thinking, behaviour and systems are embedded in WFP's culture of accountability and learning". However, not surprisingly given WFP's size and operational scale, that culture is not yet fully established. This report provides suggestions and recommendations aimed at helping WFP to achieve its vision.
15. The panel finds that WFP's centralized evaluation function is mature and well-grounded. Decentralized evaluation has made great progress since 2016: the creation in 2017 and 2018 of regional evaluation units to support regional bureaux and country offices has made a huge difference. While the centralized evaluation system is mature, the demand-led decentralized evaluation system is still being established, and this is where WFP will need to focus most attention.
16. The panel notes that across WFP and its stakeholders there is also broad appreciation of the way in which the Director of Evaluation and her team have strengthened OEV's impact on the organization. There is high regard for the professionalism of OEV. It is also clear that OEV contributes actively at the international level to UNEG and other major specialized evaluation fora, helping to influence the international evaluation community with WFP's perspective and experience.

## **Independence**

17. WFP's central evaluation function has a high degree of independence despite being an office within WFP. The Director of Evaluation plans, manages and delivers evaluations without the need for approval from WFP management, while consulting appropriately. Overall, the function meets UNEG's evaluation norms and standards and has a high degree of organizational independence. This attribute is not new. In a 2014 assessment of evaluation functions in the United Nations system, JIU judged WFP to be one of only two organizations with the "most comprehensive systems for addressing all five criteria of independence".
18. Conditions embedded in the evaluation policy and evaluation charter secure a sufficiently high degree of independence in the appointment of the Director of Evaluation. While the director is appointed by the Executive Director, the Executive Director must present the final selection to the Executive Board for approval – an arrangement that ensures sufficient independence. However, WFP may want to explore the possibility of further strengthening that independence by having the selection and appointment of the Director of Evaluation managed directly by the Executive Board.
19. The evaluation function also has a robust degree of financial independence. The centralized evaluation function is financed from separate resources that are largely stable and sustainable and that allow OEV to finance the evaluation coverage mandated by the evaluation policy. The budget for OEV's annual workplan is approved by the Board as part of WFP's management plan. The panel considers that the target approved by the Executive Board of committing 0.8 percent of WFP's contribution income to evaluation has helped to secure the financial independence of the evaluation function.

## **Credibility**

20. OEV has put in place robust systems for securing the validity and reliability of both centralized and decentralized evaluations. This represents a real strength. OEV also consistently uses a set of carefully designed and mutually reinforcing controls and stakeholder involvement to support the credibility of evaluations. The panel considers these to be robust.
21. The evaluation function is supported by guidance on the various kinds of centralized evaluations that it undertakes and on decentralized evaluations. The Evaluation Quality Assurance System consists of a comprehensive centralized Evaluation Quality Assurance System, a similarly comprehensive decentralized Evaluation Quality Assurance System and a body of technical notes that apply to all evaluations. These elements incorporate UNEG criteria.
22. OEV has a high degree of professional integrity. There is also a high degree of professionalism in evaluation at the regional bureau level. Both OEV and the evaluation units of the regional bureaux have in place robust professional and technical standards intended to uphold impartiality and balanced perspectives.
23. OEV invests well in the professional development of its staff. It is seeking to be more strategic in its planning of capacity development for evaluation throughout WFP with its recent evaluation capacity development strategy.<sup>6</sup> The level of technical competence in evaluation among OEV staff is uneven as a consequence of WFP's human resources policy and OEV's adaptation to it. The current evaluation policy commits OEV to "continue to be staffed by a 50:50 mix" of externally recruited evaluation specialists and current WFP staff with the required competency for evaluation, appointed in line with WFP's reassignment policy.

## **Development of the decentralized evaluation function**

24. The most strategically important change introduced by the current evaluation policy, and since the last peer review, is the creation of a demand-led decentralized evaluation function. OEV has defined the strategy and role of the decentralized evaluation function well and has also, in collaboration with the evaluation function steering group, adapted the function during the period of the current evaluation policy. With the introduction of regional evaluation officers and regional evaluation units, WFP has built a regional system that supports the decentralized evaluation capacity of country offices.
25. OEV's support for the decentralized evaluation function is an area of strength. OEV has established a comprehensive set of mechanisms that support country offices and help regional evaluation units to fulfil their roles. The panel considers that together these constitute an extremely strong system and serve as an example for other agencies seeking to build decentralized evaluation functions. WFP country directors interviewed for the peer review value highly the guidance, quality assurance systems and support from regional evaluation units. Despite being in place for only three years, the units have achieved real traction in all the regions. Inevitably it will take longer for regional evaluation units to ensure that all country offices are competent in planning and commissioning evaluations.
26. While the adequacy of financial and human resources for decentralized evaluations at the country level is uneven, by creating a targeted contingency evaluation fund WFP has taken steps to ensure that funding shortfalls do not stop country offices from undertaking decentralized evaluations. As stated in paragraph 34, further investment in strengthening the decentralized evaluation system is needed.

## **Utility – the added value of the evaluation function**

27. The value that WFP's evaluation function adds is clear both in terms of helping to improve WFP's performance – by generating validated better practices – and in terms of accountability. WFP has a track record of producing centralized evaluations that are highly relevant and that add to learning. The extent to which evaluation is being institutionalized is therefore increasing.
28. Evaluative thinking is strongest at the headquarters level; at the decentralized level it is weaker, but it started from a lower baseline and is heading in the right direction. The panel heard of strong buy-in from the small sample of country offices interviewed but a significant proportion of staff and country

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<sup>6</sup> WFP. 2020. [WFP Evaluation Capacity Development Strategy \(2020–2024\)](#).

offices see evaluation as a bureaucratic exercise. The panel therefore feels that there is room for OEV and regional evaluation units to enhance utility even further, and many of its comments relate to this.

29. There has been a shift in internal perceptions of the evaluation function, resulting in much increased appreciation of evaluation as a contributor to learning. This is a very positive development. However, the panel noted an institutional tendency towards treating evaluation primarily as an accountability tool. To balance this institutional tendency, the panel considers that WFP will need to ensure that more value is attached to learning from evaluation. Such a message will need to come from the Executive Board and senior management as well as OEV.
30. The panel considers that OEV can enhance the responsiveness of the evaluation function by deploying a broader range of evaluation types and methodologies. OEV's piloting of a new, more strategic approach to impact evaluations is an important step in this direction, but there is still room for more innovation, including the piloting of developmental or formative evaluations.<sup>7</sup> The panel heard of demand for more timely production of evidence for informing programmes with short cycles, such as humanitarian interventions, and for real-time and interactive feedback loops that quickly provide management with emerging evaluative evidence.
31. The panel invites OEV and regional evaluation units to consider whether they can enhance value by seeking to more systematically contribute targeted evaluative evidence to decision makers when it is most needed and therefore likely to have the greatest potential impact. OEV and the regional evaluation units already do this in several ways – and coverage norms have been designed with learning needs in mind – but the panel considers that a more systematic approach could yield dividends. Over time this could enhance the value attached to evaluative learning and promote increased lesson learning at WFP more broadly. In practice, it means OEV and regional evaluation staff attending – as observers and without taking part in any decisions – key decision making events and providing targeted real-time evidence while maintaining independence and preventing the development of any real or perceived conflict of interest.
32. There are weaknesses in WFP's knowledge management system and a culture of using evaluation evidence in planning and programming has yet to be embedded. The lack of a solid and functioning knowledge management system inhibits the systematic use of findings from evaluations. OEV has had to work with policy and programme units to identify knowledge needs and contribute evaluative knowledge. Without functioning organization-wide systems, OEV itself will need to develop a systematic approach to the management of knowledge generated by evaluations.
33. There is demand from outside OEV for better communication, and OEV is developing a new communication and knowledge management strategy that will help to meet this need. The panel endorses this effort and encourages the adoption of cutting-edge methodologies for the evaluation function. The panel also feels that OEV could contribute more to learning beyond WFP by enhancing stakeholder access to evaluative evidence.

### **Strengthening the integrated evaluation function**

34. Centralized and decentralized evaluations together constitute WFP's evaluation function. The systems and procedures OEV has put in place establish the same expectations and standards for both. Largely because country offices have less evaluation management capacity than OEV, however, the panel considers that more investment is needed in the evaluation capacity of country offices, particularly to minimize the potential for qualitative differences.
35. The panel also invites WFP to give learning needs even more explicit attention in the evaluation planning process. In collaboration with the evaluation function steering group and the Executive Board, OEV could seek to anticipate future learning needs and ensure that its planned coverage addresses them. OEV could develop an evaluation learning plan and use it to inform the evaluation plans in addition to addressing accountability purposes.

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<sup>7</sup> A formative evaluation is one that looks at design and relevance issues rather than assessing results achieved. The distinguishing characteristic of a developmental evaluation is that it contributes to something that is being developed.

36. This approach may lead WFP to review the current coverage norm for country strategic plan evaluations. The panel appreciates that country offices are among the primary users of these evaluations, which generate learning on how to improve impact. Notwithstanding their potential value for country offices, the utility of universal coverage of country strategic plans could be less than expected for two reasons. First, it is likely that many of the 80-plus country strategic plan evaluations will generate similar findings and recommendations with regard to issues that they have in common. Second, apart from the country offices themselves there is limited absorptive capacity in WFP to learn from such a high number of evaluations, within both management and the Executive Board. WFP could therefore consider a differentiated approach to country strategic plan evaluations, proceeding with them in strategically important countries but undertaking lighter processes or engaging in joint or system-wide evaluations in others. The panel recognizes that the commitment to full evaluation coverage was made only recently and that an immediate change would be unhelpful. WFP could therefore continue with full evaluation coverage of the “first-generation” country strategic plans and then review the utility of such coverage for “second-generation” plans.
37. The panel also considers that there is scope to try to increase the strategic contribution that decentralized evaluations make to learning. Country offices could be encouraged to select topics that better contribute to meeting WFP’s strategic learning needs once they have been identified (as described in the previous paragraph). Currently, most decentralized evaluations focus on a handful of themes or programmes. OEV could encourage country offices and regional bureaux by providing incentives such as enhanced support for units that choose to evaluate designated topics. OEV and regional evaluation units could also encourage regional bureaux to commission multi-country decentralized evaluations on priority themes.

### Recommendations from the peer review

38. The following paragraphs focus on the panel’s other findings and related recommendations. These are aimed at strengthening the independence, credibility and utility of WFP’s evaluation function. The panel recommends that the evaluation policy be updated to incorporate changes in the external and internal environments and to take into consideration the six overarching recommendations that are presented below with action points for each. Some of the action points are relatively specific in terms of the measures that the panel recommends; others are phrased more generally, leaving WFP to reflect and decide on the best way forward. The text in parentheses at the end of each action point identifies the WFP entity that should implement the action point.

### Independence

39. To safeguard the future independence of the Director of Evaluation position it is important that all conditions underpinning that independence be approved by the Executive Board. The Executive Board approves the evaluation policy and therefore the conditions should be set out in the policy document itself as opposed to in the evaluation charter or strategy. The conditions should include conditions for the dismissal of the Director of Evaluation.

**Recommendation 1:** To support the independence of the evaluation function the panel recommends that all conditions relating to that independence be explicitly stated in the next evaluation policy, which should:

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