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Summary report on the review of the implementation of recommendations from thematic evaluations of a strategic/global nature

Executive summary

This review of the implementation of recommendations from global evaluations aims to promote the use of evaluation evidence for learning and accountability purposes and highlights areas for action where WFP can maximize the achievement of its mission. The review covered ten global evaluations published between 2016 and June 2020. It generated one report for each of the evaluations in addition to this synthesis report, which presents the overarching findings, conclusions and recommendations of the review.

The ten evaluations resulted in 65 recommendations with multiple sub-recommendations. Management agreed with 54 of the recommendations and partially agreed with the remaining 11. The review identified four reasons for partial agreement, which in most cases related to disagreement with a sub-recommendation: the recommendation contradicted WFP policies; the recommendation did not sufficiently consider financial or human resource constraints; the recommendation went too far in addressing the finding; or the recommendation did not fit the pragmatic nature of the organization.

The review team scored the actionability of management responses to the recommendations and sub-recommendations of each evaluation using a weighted scoring system. The responses to five of the ten evaluations met or surpassed the criteria of being fully actionable based on an assessment of the specificity, measurability, assignability and time boundness of the actions agreed in the management response.

In line with the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) (WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1), to respect the integrity and independence of evaluation findings the editing of this report has been limited and as a result some of the language in it may not be fully consistent with the World Food Programme's standard terminology or editorial practices. Please direct any requests for clarification to the Director of Evaluation.

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In the WFP risk and recommendations tracking system, known as R2, there were 156 actions that corresponded to the agreed actions in the management responses to the ten evaluations. Among these, 99 were marked as “implemented”. In interviews conducted by the review team, 61 of these were confirmed to have been fully implemented and 23 partially implemented. The remaining 15 either had not been implemented or were no longer relevant or could not be assessed with regard to the status of their implementation.

All focal points responsible for the implementation of the agreed actions and their line managers stated that the evaluation findings and recommendations, and to a lesser extent the management responses, were very useful for guiding their actions and for obtaining Executive Board endorsement of actions already taken.

Through interviews the review team identified factors that facilitated the implementation of recommendations, including the availability of flexible funds, focused leadership in thematic areas, commitment and collaboration across functional units and the quality of the evaluations. Factors that hindered implementation included earmarked and short-term funding, limited donor appetite for funding human resource costs, and limited communication of corporate prioritization and allocation decisions. Respondents also noted that some recommendations for financial and human resource allocations had been formulated from a thematic perspective without considering competing priorities and without a full understanding of the financial environment in which WFP operates. Completion timelines for the implementation of actions agreed by management were frequently not met, often because little consideration was given to interdependencies by which the implementation of certain recommendations required that other matters be addressed as well, for instance when the same completion deadline was set for a series of actions that by necessity required sequential implementation.

Two relevant strategic themes arising from the review are funding and human resources, which are the subjects of the evaluation of the funding of WFP’s work and the evaluation of the WFP people strategy for 2014–2017. While some actions remain outstanding, the review could not clearly identify whether the evaluations had led to action on some of the more systemic underlying issues raised. Funding actions yet to be implemented relate to the consolidated planning of development work, ongoing capacity building to improve services related to funding, timely and transparent internal resource allocation decisions and an advance financing mechanism for operational sustainability. Most outstanding or incomplete human resource actions refer to strengthening human resource capacity in specific technical areas by increasing staffing, creating more permanent staff positions and offering more training programmes. These are being addressed. However, decisions about staffing levels and contract modalities cannot be guided by technical needs alone but must also reflect the level and structure of funding for headquarters, regional bureaux and country offices; meanwhile, training programmes are ongoing activities that require continuous revision as new lessons are learned and new staff members are recruited.

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the summary report on the review of the implementation of recommendations from thematic evaluations of a strategic/global nature (WFP/EB.A/2022/7-D) and management's response (WFP/EB.A/2022/7-D/Add.1) and encourages further action on the recommendations set out in the report, taking into account the considerations raised by the Board during its discussion.

* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1. The use of evaluations is high on the agenda of WFP's evaluation function, prompting the commissioning of this review of the implementation of recommendations from global evaluations. The review covers global evaluations that were published between 2016 and 30 June 2020.
2. In 2016 the Executive Board approved the WFP evaluation policy for 2016–2021,¹ which is based on norms, standards and guidance issued by the United Nations Evaluation Group. All evaluations are subject to WFP's evaluation quality assurance system and to independent post hoc quality assessment. Based on the evaluation quality assurance system, the formulation of recommendations for centralized evaluations is guided by a technical note² issued by the Office of Evaluation (OEV).
3. The Corporate Planning and Performance Division coordinates the compilation and finalization of the management response matrix for centralized evaluations.³ The Corporate Planning and Performance Division reports to the Executive Board on management's follow-up to centralized and decentralized evaluation recommendations and, for centralized evaluations, is responsible for tracking actions and responses in order to determine their implementation status. The process for responding to evaluation recommendations, including roles and responsibilities, has recently been revised in WFP's risk and recommendation tracking tool, R2, which was launched in January 2021. The Corporate Planning and Performance Division has also revamped its annual report to the Board on recommendation follow-up and created a dashboard that allows all staff to obtain live updates on the status of implementation of any evaluation recommendation.

1.2 Objectives and scope

4. In accordance with its terms of reference, this review aims to promote the use of evaluation evidence for learning and accountability purposes throughout WFP and to highlight areas where further action is recommended in order to maximize WFP's achievement of its mission. It is also expected to serve as a learning instrument for OEV that could help improve the formulation of evaluation recommendations.
5. Seven policy evaluations and three strategy evaluations were included in the review.

¹ "Evaluation Policy (2016–2021)" (WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1).

² WFP Office of Evaluation. 2020. *Technical Note: Quality of Evaluation Recommendations*.

³ WFP. 2018. *Standard operating procedures for management responses to centralized evaluations*.

TABLE 1: EVALUATIONS INCLUDED IN THE REVIEW		
#	Category	Title and year of the evaluation report
1.	Strategic	<i>Strategic Evaluation of Funding WFP's Work</i> , 2020
2.	Policy	<i>Evaluation of the Gender Policy (2015–2020)</i> , 2020
3.	Policy	<i>Evaluation of the WFP People Strategy (2014–2017)</i> , 2020
4.	Policy	<i>Evaluation of the Update of WFP's Safety Nets Policy</i> , 2019
5.	Strategic	<i>Strategic Evaluation of WFP Support for Enhanced Resilience</i> , 2019
6.	Strategic	<i>Strategic Evaluation of the Pilot Country Strategic Plans</i> , 2018
7.	Policy	<i>Evaluation of the WFP Humanitarian Protection Policy</i> , 2018
8.	Policy	<i>Evaluation of WFP Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts</i> , 2018
9.	Policy	<i>Policy Evaluation: WFP Corporate Partnership Strategy (2014–2017)</i> , 2017
10.	Policy	<i>Policy Evaluation: WFP Policy on Capacity Development: An Update on Implementation (2009)</i> , 2017

6. The main outputs of the review are ten individual reports on the recommendations and management responses of each of the evaluations in addition to this synthesis report, which analyses the findings and lessons generated by each of the ten reviews. It is intended to strengthen accountability to the Executive Board by highlighting areas of strategic importance where there are gaps in the implementation of recommendations. It also offers feedback that can be used to improve the guidance provided to evaluation teams about the formulation of recommendations based on the experience emerging from global evaluations over the past five years.

1.3 Methodology and limitations

7. The findings are based on a systematic content analysis of internal documents and the transcripts of key informant interviews with WFP managers and staff responsible for the implementation of actions agreed in response to recommendations. This primarily qualitative methodology was augmented with semi-quantitative methods such as the scoring of the actionability of agreed actions in management responses and the tabulation of progress made in implementing agreed actions.
8. The main limitation of this methodology is the exclusive use of internal data. Information about implementation progress, for instance, was only collected in interviews and R2 action updates from stakeholders who were themselves responsible for implementation. The inherent bias in this approach could not be avoided. It was, to some extent, mitigated by the collection of documented evidence of progress such as strategies, frameworks and guidelines that had been developed.
9. Some of the results reported by focal points could be validated through interviews with senior management staff covering the thematic areas of most evaluations; written feedback on the draft report on each evaluation review from WFP management and OEV evaluation managers provided additional validation. The draft synthesis report was also presented and discussed at a stakeholder workshop.

2. Synthesis findings

2.1 Level of agreement with the evaluation recommendations and relevance of planned actions for addressing them

2.1.1 Agreement with recommendations

Key findings

F1 – Management agreed or partially agreed with all 65 recommendations of the ten evaluations. The high level of agreement is due to high levels of staff engagement during formulation, OEV's close involvement in that process and a perception among staff, based on experience with audits, that disagreeing with a recommendation can involve complex processes.

F2 – The reasons that there was only partial agreement with 11 recommendations of six evaluations were that the recommendations did not match WFP's policies or pragmatic nature; did not consider financial or human resource constraints; or went beyond the action needed to address the acknowledged findings.

10. Management agreed with the 65 recommendations resulting from the 10 evaluations but only partially agreed with 11 recommendations in six evaluations. In three of these evaluations⁴ partial agreement was indicated at the level of main recommendations and only the narrative response provided information about which part of the recommendation, or which sub-recommendation, management disagreed with. In the remaining three,⁵ agreement or partial agreement was signalled in bulleted responses to sub-recommendations, although in these cases partial agreement with a sub-recommendation could also mean a *de facto* disagreement.

TABLE 2: LEVEL OF MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT WITH EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluation of ...	Recommendations		
	Total	Agreed	Partially
Policy on capacity development (2017)	6	3	3
Corporate partnership strategy (2017)	6	4	2
Policies on humanitarian principles and access (2018)	8	5	3
Humanitarian protection policy (2018)	6	5	1
Pilot country strategic plans (2018)	5	4	1
Support for enhanced resilience (2019)	7	6	1
Safety nets policy (2019)	5	5	0
People strategy (2014–2017) (2020)	6	6	0
Gender policy (2020)	8	8	0
Funding of WFP's work (2020)	8	8	0
Total	65	54	11

⁴ On partnerships, the humanitarian principles and humanitarian protection policy.

⁵ On capacity development, pilot country strategic plans and resilience.

11. In interviews with senior managers, the high level of management agreement with recommendations – which amounted to 83 percent of all recommendations and most sub-recommendations of the remaining 17 percent – was explained by three factors: WFP staff and evaluation teams were engaged in consultations during the evaluations and the formulation of recommendations; the process of formulating the recommendations was closely managed by OEV, possibly too closely; and managers might have been reluctant to disagreement explicitly because of experience with the complex processes that are triggered by disagreement with audit findings.
12. The sub-recommendations to which management only partially agreed, or in some cases *de facto* disagreed, were in all cases recommendations that involved actions with implications for timing, funding or other practical aspects of implementation, as opposed to strategic approach. Thus, they were not fully agreed to because of the following:
 - i) **The recommended action contradicted WFP policies.** For example, the evaluation of WFP's policies on humanitarian principles and access recommended that WFP should rely more strongly on its own transport assets in environments where there are risks of non-compliance with humanitarian principles. Management responded that WFP pursued a policy of relying on the local economy and capacity for its transport operations.
 - ii) **The recommended action did not sufficiently consider financial and human resource constraints.** For example, the evaluation of the policy on capacity development recommended the designation of a focal point for capacity strengthening for each country office and regional bureau. Management replied that efforts to enhance the capacity strengthening function in country offices and regional bureaux needed to take resourcing levels and current portfolios into account. Another example concerns the recommendation that partnership action plans be made mandatory components of country strategic plans (CSPs). While management embraced partnerships, it wanted to avoid a top-down approach that risked overburdening regional and country offices.
 - iii) **The recommendation went too far in addressing an acknowledged finding.** For example, the evaluation of the humanitarian protection policy recommended a revision of the information management system in order to strengthen WFP's analysis of contexts and protection issues. Management agreed that the analysis required improvement but argued that this could be achieved by strengthening current systems rather than revising them.
 - iv) **The recommendation did not match the pragmatic nature of the organization.** For example, the evaluation of the corporate partnership strategy recommended that management revise existing partnership agreements. Management argued that this was not needed because it was preferable to formalize partnerships on an as-needed basis in order to remain flexible and cost-efficient.

2.1.2 Management response: relevance and actionability

Key findings

F3 – The actionability of the management response actions, including their relevance, measurability, assignability and time boundness, varied among evaluations. According to the scoring system applied by this review, the management responses for five of the ten evaluations met the full criteria for actionability. Management responses most frequently scored low when instead of defining an action they described current WFP practice or did not fully address the recommendation.

13. This section assesses the extent to which WFP management adequately addresses the recommendations and the extent to which a management response can be considered actionable. Most evaluations formulated detailed actionable recommendations supported with evidence-based findings. Implementers considered them useful and followed them in planning, prioritizing and developing responsive actions. However, this relevance and actionability was sometimes lost in the agreed actions of the management response, which therefore did not contribute much to guiding implementation.
14. The relevance of a management response denotes the extent to which it addresses or is aligned with the recommendation. For example, the review team asked whether all elements of the recommendation were included in the management response and, if not, whether the response explained any omission. Relevance is reflected in the parameter “specificity” in the actionability score (see below). Some management responses addressed recommendations without defining actions, while others defined actions that did not fully or directly address the recommendations. In some cases, the responses raised the question of whether management actually agreed with the recommendations.
15. Several action statements in management responses were descriptions of what WFP was doing or had already done to address issues raised in the recommendation rather than agreements on actions to be taken. While useful for clarification, they did not constitute actionable responses. They were, nevertheless, entered into the R2 tracking system so that their implementation could be monitored.
16. Each of the 135 pairs of recommendations and responsive actions was independently reviewed by two team members and scored for the actionability of the response according to four weighted criteria:⁶
 - i) Specificity: Does the response define actions that adequately address the recommendation? (weight: 50 percent)
 - ii) Measurability: Can the results of the actions be verified? (weight: 15 percent)
 - iii) Assignability: Is the responsibility for implementing the actions clearly assigned? (weight: 25 percent)
 - iv) Time boundness: Do actions have a clear timeline for implementation? (weight: 10 percent)
17. A maximum score of 4 was assigned if the response surpassed the criterion and a score of 3 if it fully met the criterion. The weighted averages achieved by each action statement were averaged across all management responses of each evaluation and converted into percentages whereby an average of 3 (75 percent of the maximum score) indicated that management had responded to the evaluation with responses that were, on average, fully

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