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EVALUATION OF WFP'S SUPPORT TO SMALLHOLDER FARMERS AND ITS EXPANDED PORTFOLIO ACROSS THE AGRICULTURE VALUE CHAIN IN BHUTAN

JANUARY 2019 TO JUNE 2021

Decentralized Evaluation Report

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Evaluation features.....	1
1.2. Country context.....	2
1.3. Subject of the evaluation	8
1.4. Methodology, limitations and ethical considerations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Evaluation findings.....	15
2.1. Relevance of WFP farmer-to-school feeding interventions	15
2.2. Results of WFP's Activity portfolio in agriculture.....	18
2.3. WFP responsiveness to the changing development context.....	25
2.4. Strength of WFP programme integration and partnerships	29
2.5. Sustainability of WFP's emerging agriculture portfolio	34
3. Conclusions and recommendations.....	41
3.1. Establishing WFP's role and positioning for agriculture in Bhutan.....	41
3.2. WFP's value proposition for agriculture	43
3.3. Enabling WFP's strategic contributions	44
3.4. Recommendations.....	49
Annexes.....	Volume 2

Lists of figures, boxes and tables

Figure 1. Food consumption by commodity type relative to national guidelines (percent)	5
Figure 2. Inflation across Consumer Price Indicator categories (2020-2021 Financial Year)	7
Figure 3. Evaluation coverage and WFP agriculture intervention area, 2019-2020	9
Figure 4. WFP-Government institutional arrangements for agriculture portfolio, 2019-2021	17
Figure 5. Infographic map of Bhutan's fresh produce market for school feeding.....	20
Figure 6: WFP framework for assistance to agriculture value chains in Bhutan.....	27
Figure 7. WFP Bhutan fundraising cycle	33
Figure 8. Organisational readiness conceptual framework.....	39
Figure 9. Learning from the portfolio: establishing WFP's programme identity for Agriculture in Bhutan.....	44
 Box 1. Raising of Bhutan's School Stipend.....	 4
Box 2. Adoption of the developmental evaluation approach.....	11

Box 3. Summary of evaluation mixed methods	12
Box 4. DAMC reorganisation, January 2022.....	25
Box 5. WFP PLUS menu optimiser	37
Box 6. Benefits of WFP adoption of an integrated approach to home-grown school feeding in Bhutan.....	37
Table 1. WFP support to agriculture Research and Development.....	22
Table 2. Financial Resources and revisions to WFP's agriculture portfolio (USD) (2019-2023).....	24
Table 3. Government COVID-related Annual Work Plan requirements for UN agencies (2020).....	28
Table 4. Donor priorities for agriculture (2021)	33

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. This Evaluation Report summarises the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the “Evaluation of WFP’s support to smallholder farmers through an expanded portfolio across agriculture value chains in Bhutan over the period January 2019 to June 2021”. The evaluation period covered a phase when WFP shifted its operational modality from direct implementation to supporting government implementation of the national School and Hospital Feeding Programme (SHFP).
2. The evaluation was commissioned by WFP Bhutan. Its purpose was to support strategic learning and accountability. Priority was given to capturing learning in the form of conclusions to guide WFP’s future agriculture sector support.
3. The evaluation objectives were to: (i) draw lessons from limited WFP agriculture sector assistance under its Country Strategic Plan (CSP, 2019-2023); (ii) establish the extent to which WFP helped build farmer-school supply chain linkages and responded to COVID-19; (iii) build understanding of WFP and Government contributions to gender, climate, and nutrition; (iv) review digital innovation promoted by WFP; and (v) identify scaling-up opportunities by developing a WFP value proposition.
4. The main users of the evaluation included the Royal Government of Bhutan, as represented by the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC); the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests and Ministry of Education; UN Resident Coordinator’s Office and Rome Based Agencies; and WFP’s Country Office and Regional Bureau Bangkok.

Evaluation context

5. Bhutan is a landlocked country in the Eastern Himalayas with a population of 727,145. In the decade to 2020, economic growth averaged 7 percent and contributed a significant fall in poverty. The health and nutritional status of children also improved with reductions in stunting and wasting among children. However, Bhutan continued to face a triple burden of malnutrition involving high rates of stunting, micronutrient deficiencies, and overnutrition, and the benefits of economic progress remained uneven. Of the 5 percent of Bhutanese identified as multi-dimensionally poor in 2017, 93 percent resided in rural areas where limited opportunities for local employment had contributed to rural out-migration, particularly among men and youths. By 2020, women made up 58.8 percent of those directly employed in farming compared to 41.7 percent of men. Despite significant government efforts to provide emergency investments into the agriculture sector under its Economic Contingency Plan, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further exacerbated development outcomes by exposing gaps in food supply chains that compounded problems in food distribution, market reliability, and increasingly high food prices especially for fresh produce.

Evaluation subject

6. The evaluation subject built on WFP’s efforts to improve farmer-school linkages as a sub-component of Activity 1 of its CSP (2019-2023). The geographical scope focused on the four Districts of Trongsa, Zhemgang, Lhuntse and Samtse: a fifth of Bhutan’s 20 Districts. Each represented a distinct agro-ecological zone and was identifiable as one of Bhutan’s poorest districts.
7. No sector-specific CSP Strategic Outcome, Activity, or intervention logic for agriculture was developed by WFP. Agriculture budget and beneficiary targets were developed for donors.
8. From 2019 to 2021, WFP received USD 257,000 to support Output 2.1 (“Farmer-Based Organizations organize farmers to produce for the school meals market”) of the project, “Consolidating a fully integrated universal National School Nutrition Programme in Bhutan”. The 5-year project (2019-2023) targeted 9,000 smallholder beneficiaries, 50 percent of them women.
9. In 2020, WFP also received USD 200,000 Multi-Partner Trust Fund support under the UN’s COVID-19 Socio-Economic Response Plan for the project, “Protecting livelihoods and reinforcing the tourism and

agriculture sectors in Bhutan”.¹ No beneficiary target was agreed. In line with Bhutan’s COVID-19 Emergency Contingency Plan, GNHC channelled all WFP MPTF funds through District Agriculture Offices.

Methodology

10. The evaluation’s inception, data collection and analysis phases were conducted from June to December 2021. Five overarching evaluation questions (EQs) were explored, including: EQ1 – How relevant was the agriculture portfolio? EQ2 – What results were achieved? EQ3 – How flexibly did WFP respond to changes in the development context? EQ4 – How well did WFP integrate its portfolio with those of its partners? and, EQ5 – What is the potential for the results to be sustainable?

11. In response to the new WFP portfolio, rapidly shifting context, COVID-19 pandemic and policy adjustments following the 2021 Mid-Term Review of the country’s 12th FYP (2018-2023), a “developmental evaluation” approach was adopted. This integrated a summative review of evaluation findings with formative learning processes involving the evaluation team, WFP staff and external stakeholders. This learning was captured in the conclusions which were structured against the key strategic, programmatic, operational and organisational themes that emerged from the cross-cutting analysis of evaluation findings.

12. A mixed methods approach was used. Sources included: key informant interviews with WFP employees (6 females; 9 males) and external stakeholders (13 females; 26 males); focus group discussions with WFP staff, 6 farmer groups (50 females; 5 males), and 5 Schools (15 males; 8 females); four workshops involving government, WFP, civil society and independent groups; and an extensive document review.

13. Three analytical frameworks supported the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data across EQs. A retrospective ‘Intervention Logic’ was used to frame WFP planning and results; an ‘emergent modelling’ analysis engaged stakeholders in shaping a WFP value proposition for agriculture; and an ‘organisational readiness’ framework was used to assess WFP’s ability to deliver it.

14. Data limitations were caused by the short time period during which agriculture interventions were undertaken, WFP resource constraints, COVID-19 restrictions to field access during 2020 and 2021, and government limits to the gathering of groups prior to local elections during the data collection phase. These were mitigated by extended inception and data collection processes, remote interviews and flexible, iterative data analysis. With high levels of consistency across summative and developmental analyses the evaluation team did not consider these limitations affected the quality of evaluation findings.

Findings

15. 14 findings were identified against the 5 evaluation questions:

EQ1 – Relevance of the agriculture portfolio

16. In focusing technical assistance and resources to support government strengthening of farmer-school linkages, WFP operations demonstrated relevance to national agriculture, education, nutrition and health policies, including the *Rural Natural Resources Strategy 2040 (2020)* and *Marketing Policy (2017; 2021)*.

17. Although WFP field interventions were coherent with government, donor and UN agriculture programmes, and managed through government structures, the portfolio was recent, and the Country Office had yet to establish a sector reputation with government and potential UN partners.

EQ2 – Results achieved

18. Despite resource and COVID-19 access constraints, WFP interventions supported the School and Hospital Feeding Programme to establish farmer-school linkages and the emergence of a national fresh produce market providing incomes to 7,516 smallholders, two-thirds of them women.

19. However, WFP failed to promote rural women’s economic empowerment or adjust its technical assistance to support gender mainstreaming by government leading to an over-dependency on the local intermediation of government staff who lacked gender training and support.

¹ The tourism sub-component was managed by the United Nations Development Programme

20. WFP project expenditures through government partners were an effective and efficient use of available resources and operated in accordance with UN inter-agency agreements with government.

EQ3 – Flexibility of WFP response

21. WFP responded flexibly to government requests for agriculture policy and programme contributions and support to the Economic Contingency Plan. However, limited resources, and the absence of a clear intervention logic meant WFP resources were used by government to support its production ambitions rather than the wider food and market systems needs of smallholders.

22. Although WFP agriculture activities continued as a sub-Activity of the CSP (2019-2023), during 2021 the WFP made significant efforts to develop its sector positioning and establish a modified programme portfolio.

23. WFP home-grown school feeding was coherent with its 2016 evaluation findings. However, COVID-19 restraints on evaluations and assessments led to gaps in evidence-based analysis were apparent in 2020. With their relaxation in 2021, WFP introduced a post-harvest assessment to support its agriculture portfolio.

EQ4 – Integration of the agriculture portfolio

24. Despite WFP efforts to promote a food systems approach during the COVID-19 response, field access restrictions and the channelling of WFP funds through government led to a dominant focus on production.

25. While WFP reached out to partners and promoted sector coordination, its recent entry into the agriculture sector meant the Country Office only started to gain the trust and support of government and UN counterparts towards the end of the evaluation period when new collaboration efforts emerged promoting smallholder resilience and market access.

26. To address inefficient resource mobilisation efforts, a weak funding position, and support the expansion of the country office, a more structured fundraising approach was introduced in 2021 based on a funding cycle with associated tools and clearer roles and responsibilities that showed early signs of success.

EQ5 – Potential for sustainability

27. Although the school stipend provided an incentive for producers to sell fresh produce to schools, many smallholders started to explore wider market opportunities due to the limited level of standard payments which may have limited sustainability. In following the Economic Contingency Plan's emphasis on production stimulus WFP failed to attend adequately to post-harvest losses and the marketing needs of farmers.

28. With WFP support still in its infancy, the Bhutan country office nevertheless began to build linkages to nutrition and disaster risk management through investments in digital innovation and de-risking agriculture but left gaps in its support for market systems development and business incubation.

29. In the context of an external environment that was supportive of an amplified role for WFP in agriculture, the country office struggled to consolidate its management arrangements for a balanced portfolio of programmatic, capacity strengthening and resource mobilisation support to government.

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