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## Report on the field visit of the WFP Executive Board to Bangladesh

### Acknowledgements

The Executive Board Member States whose representatives participated in the field visit to Bangladesh would like to express their appreciation and gratitude to the WFP Secretariat and the WFP country team for their efficient planning and coordination in providing an opportunity to gain a holistic, first-hand overview of the situation in the country.

Members would also like to thank the Government of Bangladesh for hosting the visit, local partners and institutions, including members of the Bangladesh United Nations country team working with WFP and WFP staff for their hard work and dedication in the country.

### Introduction

1. From 18 to 25 October 2019 a team of seven representatives of Executive Board Member States visited Bangladesh. The aims of the visit were to view WFP's work in supporting, as an enabler of national hunger solutions, a lower-middle-income country in its efforts to reduce food insecurity and malnutrition in rural and urban settings; assisting the more than 880,000 displaced Rohingya affected by the situation in Myanmar and communities who kindly host them; and promoting innovative approaches to enhancing resilience and responses to climate-related stresses and natural disasters.
2. The specific objectives of the visit were to allow Board members to:

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- observe policies, procedures and structures put in place to support refugee operations;
  - obtain insights from the implementation of WFP policies and strategies in the field and the modalities of programme delivery, including, for example, national safety net programming;
  - gain insight into innovative cash-based transfer programming and livelihood projects;
  - in accordance with the WFP Strategic Plan (2017–2021), assess progress towards achieving the goals of the Bangladesh country strategic plan (2017–2020), approved by the Board at its 2017 first regular session;
  - acquire a sense of the challenges faced by beneficiaries and those responsible for carrying out activities;
  - observe WFP as a partner within the United Nations country team and other stakeholders, for example in the implementation of United Nations development system reform, Rome-based agency collaboration and common platforms such as the common multi-wallet e-voucher card, and
  - visit the Kutupalong refugee camp (and surrounding areas) near Cox’s Bazar, gain an understanding of existing threats and opportunities in the camp and learn what the future prospects for displaced Rohingya might be.
3. The visit provided an excellent and unique opportunity to assess and learn more about WFP’s activities and results at the country level and working in an emergency context. In this vein, participants had the opportunity to be briefed on WFP’s support for both refugee and host communities.
  4. The visit also served to illustrate how WFP is institutionally and operationally linked to authorities and partners within Bangladesh and to illuminate how WFP performs its role as a key agency in the humanitarian system in and around Cox’s Bazar.

## Background

5. The field visit began and ended in Dhaka, where Board delegates met with officials of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, the Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. The delegation also participated in an all staff meeting at the WFP Bangladesh country office, where they had an interactive dialogue with staff and were introduced to a new social media platform. At an event on the food assistance that WFP provides through electronic vouchers, delegation members met with local embassy representatives, members of the United Nations country team, representatives of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, cooperating partners and private sector partners.
6. The delegation spent over two days in Cox’s Bazar, where they visited camps to view general food distribution, e-voucher outlets, an integrated nutrition centre, a reforestation project conducted jointly with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) that also includes the SAFE Plus (Safe Access to Fuel and Energy) initiative, the large-scale engineering project run jointly with IOM, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and WFP known as the Site Maintenance and Engineering Project or SMEP and the Madhurchara Logistics Hub.
7. A visit to neighbouring Kulal Para, Rajapalong, allowed the Board representatives to meet with host communities and witness first-hand the livelihoods programmes being operated; the representatives also participated in the distribution of micronutrient-fortified biscuits in host community primary schools and education centres within the camp.

8. Government and camp officials informed the delegates of growing security concerns relating to drug and arms trade within the camps and across the Myanmar border, as well as to the existence of cells of the “Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army” within the camps. Due to these concerns, in particular after the peaceful Rohingya rally marking Genocide Day in the camps (August 2019), mobility, telecommunications and the use of cash in the camps were being restricted at the time of the delegation’s visit. Furthermore, the delegation was informed that the camp had reached its maximum capacity and that no further expansion was possible due to a scarcity of habitable land. The Government informed the delegation that due to these concerns it was planning to relocate 100,000 refugees to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal. It was suggested that should relocation take place WFP and other agencies provide humanitarian assistance to the people moved to the island.

### **Camp life and support for displaced Rohingya**

9. It was clear from the visit that WFP’s operations in Cox’s Bazar were being conducted on an impressive scale and were of high quality, constituting a true model of an efficient and effective humanitarian operation. WFP is helping to deliver life-saving assistance and restoring safety and dignity to nearly 1 million people. WFP’s commitment to strengthening protection and to advancing gender and disability inclusion across programming was also highly evident.
10. WFP has also moved from general food distribution to the roll-out of a comprehensive multi-purpose voucher system based on SCOPE serving as a common service platform for other United Nations organizations and private sector partners. This is supplemented by work in other areas such as nutritional care skills development and infrastructure construction. Other activities include a reforestation initiative to restore the environment of the camp, the distribution of liquid gas so that people do not have to burn wood, the creation of infrastructure for the camp and the operation of a nutritional centre to assist the camp population fight against malnutrition. The delegation also saw help desks and complaint boxes established at distribution points and retail outlets to receive direct beneficiary feedback. All these interventions have contributed to the significant improvement of the overall situation in the camps over the last two years.
11. WFP and United Nations partners voiced concerns over the increasing restrictions on the use of cash, which limits their ability to hire Rohingya refugees for work within the camps and the development of a market economy. Government officials stated that the goal was to have all transactions in the camps done via vouchers instead of cash. As an alternative to cash, WFP is working to expand the current e-voucher system through blockchain and is exploring the possibility of introducing a token-based payment system. Also, more must be done to enhance the economic life of the community.
12. While progress towards resolving the overarching parameters driving the refugee crisis has stalled, the Rohingya’s lives cannot be put on hold. To a generation coming of age, camp life and its lack of opportunities for personal and economic development. are now the new normal. Educating a rapidly growing pool of children and creating legitimate and dignified livelihood opportunities for young women and men is becoming increasingly urgent. Creating opportunities for young adults to become stakeholders in a broader range of economic and social structures is key to ensuring that they do not fall prey to destructive behaviour or engage in illegitimate livelihoods, which could have negative implications for security and socioeconomic development across the camp and in neighbouring areas. There is increasing urgency regarding decisions that must be taken to make it possible for young Rohingyas to be economically connected to the larger economic area in which they live.

**Recommendation**

13. WFP should be supported in its search for alternatives to cash, with regard to which Government authorities signalled their openness. Nevertheless, WFP and United Nations partners rely on cash to carry out work within the camps, which also constitutes an important element in efforts to reduce idleness within the camp population. An effort should be made to maintain that limited cash element.
14. The sustainability of progress in the camp is completely reliant on donor support. Given the dim prospects for a resolution of the political problem underlying the Rohingya situation in the near future, WFP and the international donor community should be prepared to provide humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh until conditions are conducive to a safe, voluntary and dignified return to Myanmar. Efforts to strengthen protection (including safeguarding against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment) and advance gender and disability inclusion across programming, including through capacity building for local partners, should be continued.
15. Further opportunities to transfer decision making power to affected populations, including the most vulnerable, should be sought, and efforts should be made to highlight how programmes have been adapted.

**Host communities, livelihoods and resilience building activities**

16. Two years into the crisis the need to increase the resilience of the Rohingya and surrounding communities was evident. WFP has demonstrated ability and leadership in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh in effectively navigating challenges. In order to help refugees, it is also necessary to help the host communities to break down existing barriers and the tension between the host communities and the camp population. This message was reiterated by government counterparts and confirmed by the host communities.
17. Under its livelihood programme alone, WFP works with 20,000 ultra-poor families by helping women to set up individual and group microbusinesses. The delegates observed that while the influx of refugees had certainly created challenges for the host communities, they were accompanied by opportunities and indirect benefits.

**Recommendation**

18. With regard to livelihood activities of the host communities it is important to strengthen their market access. Given that a number of United Nations and NGO partners support livelihood programmes, better analysis of value chains and coordination is needed to promote the impact and sustainability of income-generating activities. In this regard, there is an opportunity to strengthen partnerships with other United Nations institutions, especially with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to promote market access.
19. Further opportunities to work with host communities to source more agricultural products locally, especially through the expansion of the e-voucher system, should be sought. There is a good example of this currently under way in Teknaf, where WFP is working with a salt producer to see if they can provide iodized salt for distribution in the camps.
20. Better communication of the opportunities for and indirect benefits to the host communities resulting from the refugee influx could contribute to improving relations between host communities and refugees. In addition, WFP and United Nations agencies should be encouraged to work together to raise awareness and visibility across the Government regarding the collective support of and benefits to host communities.

## **School feeding**

21. Visits to a Bangladeshi school and a Rohingya learning centre allowed Board representatives to witness first-hand school feeding programmes in action and were very invigorating. The smiles and the excitement of the Rohingya children under challenging conditions helps to keep up hope not only in their future but also in the common future of mankind.
22. The school feeding programme is one part of a broader integrated health and nutrition programme supported by other partners, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Benefits of the school feeding programme go beyond improved nutritional status of students to include school attendance and retention, parental awareness raising with regard to nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene, and helping to develop local economies through local procurement.
23. School feeding is also among the two interventions with the strongest evidence of impact on equity and inclusion in education. Education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and building the capacity of the younger generation, regardless of their future situation. Formal education in the camps is limited, with regard to both curriculum and certification.

### **Recommendation**

24. WFP can support UNICEF and Save the Children, the education cluster leads, in their efforts to address barriers to the achievement of education objectives in informal learning centres.

## **Women's empowerment and equality of opportunity**

25. The delegation heard about serious protection risks in the camps, particularly for women and girls, including gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is a priority for the protection sector under a 2019 joint resilience project, and protection and gender mainstreaming are cross-cutting issues. Good progress has been made in addressing key protection risks, including through a liquid petroleum gas project by WFP, IOM and FAO.
26. One important factor in development is women's empowerment. The delegation met representatives of several women's associations where women were being trained in pottery making, tailoring and nutrition.
27. More men should be involved in the livelihoods' generation process, and more opportunities for women as volunteers should be created.

### **Recommendation**

28. While women benefitted most from livelihood projects, men appeared to be more often enlisted as volunteers than women. Bearing cultural expectations in mind, more opportunities for women and greater participation by women should be sought in the volunteer programmes. Conversely, more opportunities should be opened for young men in the livelihood projects.
29. Expansion of the e-voucher system also provides women with greater access to food, decision making and control over resources, as women are the primary cardholders and decisions related to family diet are consistent with their traditional roles. There are also women's economic empowerment opportunities when it comes to local procurement, including in support of the school feeding programme – for example, by women smallholder farmers and women preparing hot meals. Again, better analysis of value chains and coordination is needed to promote the impact and sustainability of income-generating activities.
30. If it does not do so already, WFP could consider having active gender focal points that can support the sector in mainstreaming gender considerations.

## **Inter-agency cooperation and disaster risk preparedness**

31. Board representatives commend the collegial and coordinated way in which WFP has worked with the Government of Bangladesh, United Nations agencies and local partners. In the last two years much has unfolded on the ground. Roads have been paved. Parts of the camp have been landscaped to reduce the danger of flooding. Deforested areas are being restored and many services have been put in place that contribute to the dignity of those living in the camp. This is thanks to highly motivated aid teams and the ability of various agencies to come together to work towards common outcomes. The delegation saw Bangladesh, and Cox's Bazar in particular, as a model of inter-agency cooperation for other emergency operation structures.

### **Recommendation**

32. Inter-agency cooperation in the Kutupalong refugee camp sets an excellent example for how various agencies can contribute to the fundamental remediation of camp infrastructure. If not already under way, a particular effort should be made to discern the major factors behind the success in the Kutupalong camp and consider how they might be replicated in other camps around the world.
33. Despite these excellent efforts, the camp remains highly vulnerable to monsoon flooding. A serious typhoon could destroy large parts of the camp infrastructure and spell disaster for many of its inhabitants. It remained unclear during the visit to what degree camp management was prepared for such an event, what this could entail in terms of resources for immediate response and recovery, and whether camp management even had the resources to respond effectively. If not already in place, comprehensive contingency planning should stake out what actions could become necessary in the wake of a severe meteorological event and how response resources could be procured rapidly and effectively.
34. With regard to the plan to relocate 100,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char Island to reduce the density of refugee camps around Cox's Bazar and to provide more opportunities for livelihoods, it should be emphasized that this should be done on a voluntary basis in a manner that upholds humanitarian principles and the dignity of those affected. WFP and the United Nations country team should seek assurances, including through a planned United Nations technical assessment, regarding the physical integrity of the residential camps and their suitability for the rainy season and typhoons, livelihoods, access to transportation and the possible high cost of transporting humanitarian assistance. The Board delegation sincerely appreciated the commitment of the Bangladeshi Government to consulting and upholding transparency in relation to the Bhashan Char refugee relocation plan. This was conveyed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abul Kalam Abdul Momen, at a meeting with the WFP Executive Director, the WFP Executive Board President and the field visit team in Rome subsequent to the visit.