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Summary report on the evaluation of the country strategic plan for Sri Lanka (2018–2022)

Note to the reader

This evaluation covers the Sri Lanka country strategic plan for 2018–2022 based on data collected in November 2021. The findings, conclusions and recommendations were developed before the financial crisis afflicting the country took a sharp turn for the worse in 2022. Given the crisis, the Office of Evaluation expects that its recommendations will be implemented in a flexible manner that takes into account the evolution of the situation and the timeframe for implementation will be adjusted as needed.

Executive summary

The evaluation of the country strategic plan for Sri Lanka was conducted between August 2021 and May 2022 and covered WFP strategy, interventions and systems for the period between January 2018 and December 2021. The evaluation served the dual purpose of accountability and learning and informed the preparation of a new country strategic plan.

Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country. It has several social safety net programmes and has made significant progress in reducing hunger in the last ten years. However, the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic had a negative impact on the food security of the most vulnerable.

Through the country strategic plan WFP supported country capacity in emergency preparedness and response, resilience building and nutrition. This was found to be highly relevant by the

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evaluation given the risk of natural disasters, persistent high levels of undernutrition and the uncertain economic situation exacerbated by the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.

The country strategic plan was aligned with national programmes and policies. WFP collaborated with other United Nations entities on specific projects, but its main partner was the Government.

Where country strategic plan activities were implemented through national social protection programmes WFP targeted the most vulnerable. However, some activities under strategic outcome 4 were designed for relatively established farmers to ensure that the livelihood assets offered could be used successfully.

In the absence of a government request for WFP support for emergency response in the first three years of the country strategic plan, interventions under strategic outcome 1 were not activated. Direct food assistance under strategic outcome 2 was limited, unpredictable and largely donor- and supply-driven. Under strategic outcome 3, WFP delivered strong technical assistance for improving the nutrition of beneficiaries. However, the lack of an overarching strategic approach and limited and unpredictable funding hampered achievements. The most promising results were related to resilience building activities (strategic outcome 4); livelihood activities were generally well received by targeted farmers, the cash-for-work component proved useful during the coronavirus disease 2019 and training on emergency and risk preparedness was effective.

The amount of funding varied greatly from one strategic outcome to another. Resilience building interventions (strategic outcome 4) benefited from sufficient multi-year funding. WFP's nurturing of strong partnerships with the Government and its operational flexibility in responding appropriately to a dynamic situation characterized by sudden, unexpected events such as the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic were also key drivers of results.

Some activities were more likely to be sustainable than others. Key challenges included short-term funding commitments, reliance on under-resourced government staff and systems and high government staff mobility and turnover. A more systemic approach is required for effective and sustainable capacity strengthening.

Thus overall the focus of the country strategic plan on nutrition, resilience building and capacity strengthening was well placed, as is evident from the promising results achieved under strategic outcomes 3 and 4. WFP developed strong relationships with the Government that yielded benefits including efficiency gains. WFP's targeting approach was sound, but its effectiveness was somewhat limited by donor earmarking and government requests to undertake certain activities not originally envisaged in the country strategic plan. The flexibility of the country strategic plan allowed WFP to adapt effectively to the pandemic, but there was a need to balance adaptability and the continued coherence of the country strategic plan. While there were good strides forward in mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment, more attention was needed to achieve the goals set out in the country strategic plan.

The evaluation makes the following five recommendations, of which two are strategic and three are operational: develop the next country strategic plan for Sri Lanka by building on WFP's core mandate and its comparative advantages that align with government priority needs; maximize the long-term impact of WFP programming and enhance coherence among strategic outcomes and activities as well as their gender and nutrition sensitivity; strengthen strategic and operational partnerships with the Government at the national and subnational levels in alignment with other United Nations entities; continue with country capacity strengthening initiatives, focusing on government-prioritized sectoral gaps; and review targeting to ensure alignment with the latest evidence and country strategic plan goals and make the country strategic plan commitment to the most vulnerable more explicit.

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the summary report on the evaluation of the country strategic plan for Sri Lanka (2018–2022) (WFP/EB.2/2022/6-J) and management response (WFP/EB.2/2022/6-J/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.

Introduction

Evaluation features

1. The Sri Lanka country strategic plan (CSP) evaluation was timed to provide evidence and lessons to inform the development of the next CSP for Sri Lanka.
2. The evaluation covers all activities implemented under the CSP from January 2018 to December 2021. It assesses WFP's strategic positioning and the extent to which WFP made the shifts expected under the CSP; WFP's effectiveness in contributing to strategic outcomes; the efficiency with which the CSP was implemented; the appropriateness of operational modalities to respond to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; and factors explaining WFP's performance.
3. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach using qualitative data from key informants that was supplemented with quantitative secondary data and several case studies. Data collection was conducted between November and December 2021, with the evaluation team travelling to the country. The team interviewed 223 individuals including WFP staff from headquarters, the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific and the country office; representatives of the Government, donors, other United Nations entities and non-governmental organization cooperating partners; and beneficiaries. Gender and social inclusion were fully integrated into the evaluation's methodological approach. Ethical standards were applied to ensure the dignity and confidentiality of those involved in the evaluation. The evaluation team did not encounter major constraints that compromised the overall validity of the evaluation.

Context

4. Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country with a population of 23 million people. It ranked 72 of 189 countries on the 2020 Human Development Index¹ and 90 of 162 countries on the 2020 Gender Inequality Index.² Eighty-one percent of the population resides in rural areas, and agriculture remains the backbone of the economy: almost 50 percent of rural people are small-scale farmers.³
5. In the 2021 Global Hunger Index, Sri Lanka registered a moderate level of hunger, ranking 65 of 116 countries.⁴ In the last ten years, Sri Lanka has made significant progress in reducing hunger due to improved economic conditions, and by the end of 2016 the number of people in poverty had been cut by more than half.⁵ However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased poverty and greater risk of food insecurity across the population.⁶
6. Sri Lanka's rank on the Gender Gap Index (102 of 153 countries) is worsening, specifically with regard to economic and political indicators.⁷ However, literacy rate for males and females age 15–24 is equally high at 99 percent.⁸ The WFP 2019 Fill the Nutrient Gap study highlighted that both undernutrition (wasting and stunting) and overnutrition (overweight and obesity) are issues of concern. Sri Lanka is highly vulnerable to climate change and ranks

¹ United Nations Development Programme. 2020. *Human Development Report 2020. The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene*.

² *Ibid.*

³ International Fund for Agricultural Development. [Sri Lanka country page](#).

⁴ [Global Hunger Index scores by 2021 GHI rank](#).

⁵ World Bank. 2020. *Poverty & Equity Brief. South Asia. Sri Lanka*.

⁶ World Bank. 2021. *Sri Lanka Development Update 2021: Economic and Poverty Impact of COVID-19*.

⁷ World Economic Forum. 2019. *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*.

⁸ United Nations Children's Fund. 2021. *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*. Statistical tables: Education.

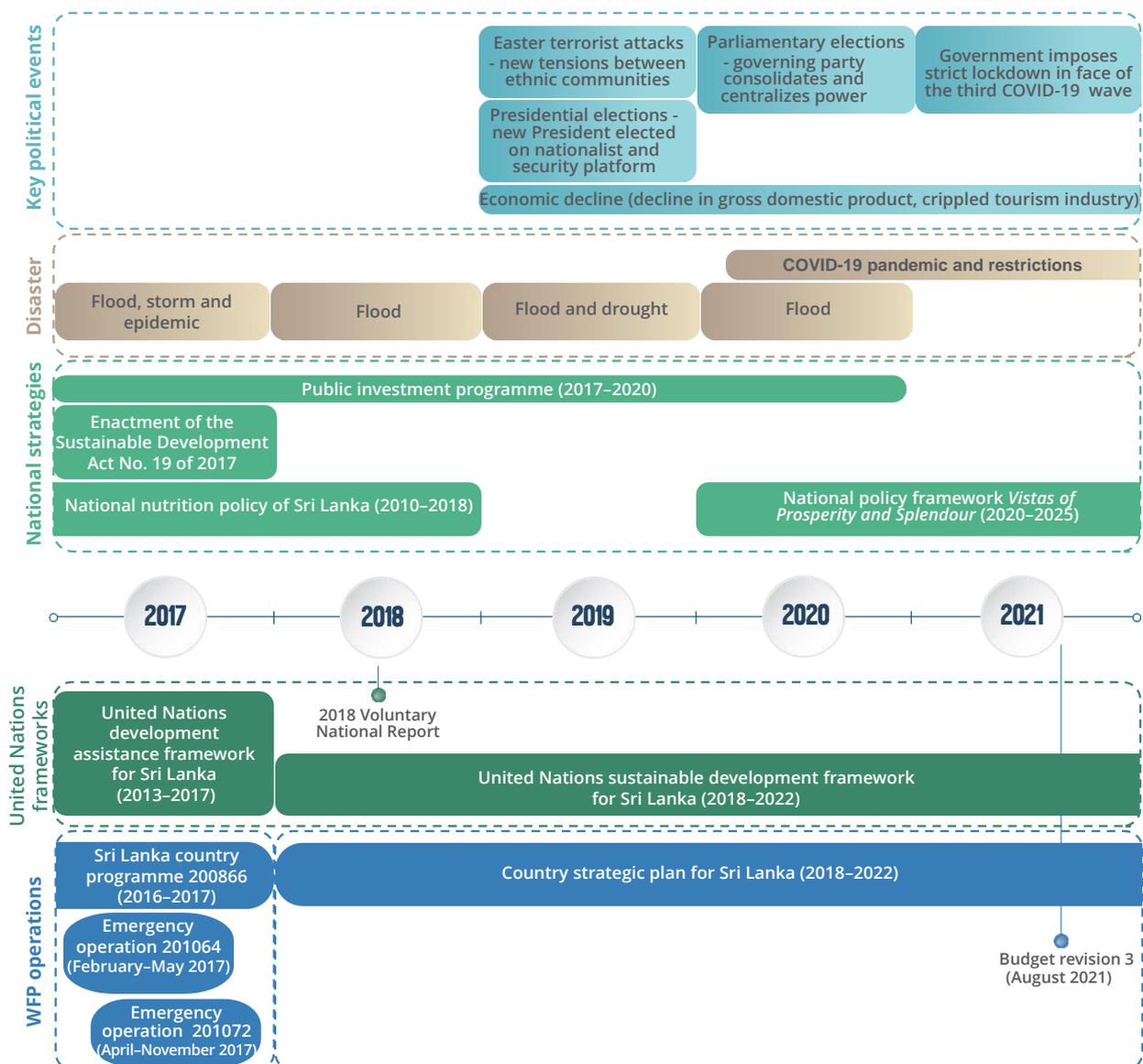
30 of 180 countries in the Global Climate Risk Index of countries most affected by extreme weather events.

TABLE 1: SOCIOECONOMIC INDICATORS			
	Indicator	Value	Year
	Population total (million) (1)	23	2020
	Human Development Index (rank) (2)	72 (out of 189)	2020
	Global Hunger Index (score and rank) (3)	16 (65 out of 116)	2021
	Height-for-age (stunting – moderate and severe), prevalence for < 5 (%) (4)	17.3	2016
	Weight-for-height (wasting – moderate and severe), <5 (%) (4)	15.1	2016
	Gender Inequality Index (rank) (2)	90 (out of 162)	2020

Sources: (1) World Bank. 2020. [Data: Sri Lanka](#); (2) United Nations Development Programme. 2020. [Human Development Report 2020. The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene. Briefing note for countries on the 2020 Human Development Report](#); (3) Global Hunger Index 2021: Sri Lanka; (4) Development Initiatives. 2021. [2021 Global Nutrition Report. Country Nutrition Profiles: Sri Lanka](#).

WFP country strategic plan

- The current CSP includes the explicit goal of shifting from direct delivery of assistance to beneficiaries to a technical assistance and advocacy role aimed at addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity and malnutrition and supporting long-term recovery and resilience while maintaining emergency response capacity. WFP's support consists of country capacity strengthening (CCS), including South-South and triangular cooperation, in-kind food assistance and cash-based transfers (CBTs). Figure 1 illustrates the major developments in the country context and the strategic focus and lines of activity of WFP and the United Nations development assistance framework.

Figure 1: Country context and WFP operational overview of Sri Lanka (2017–2021)

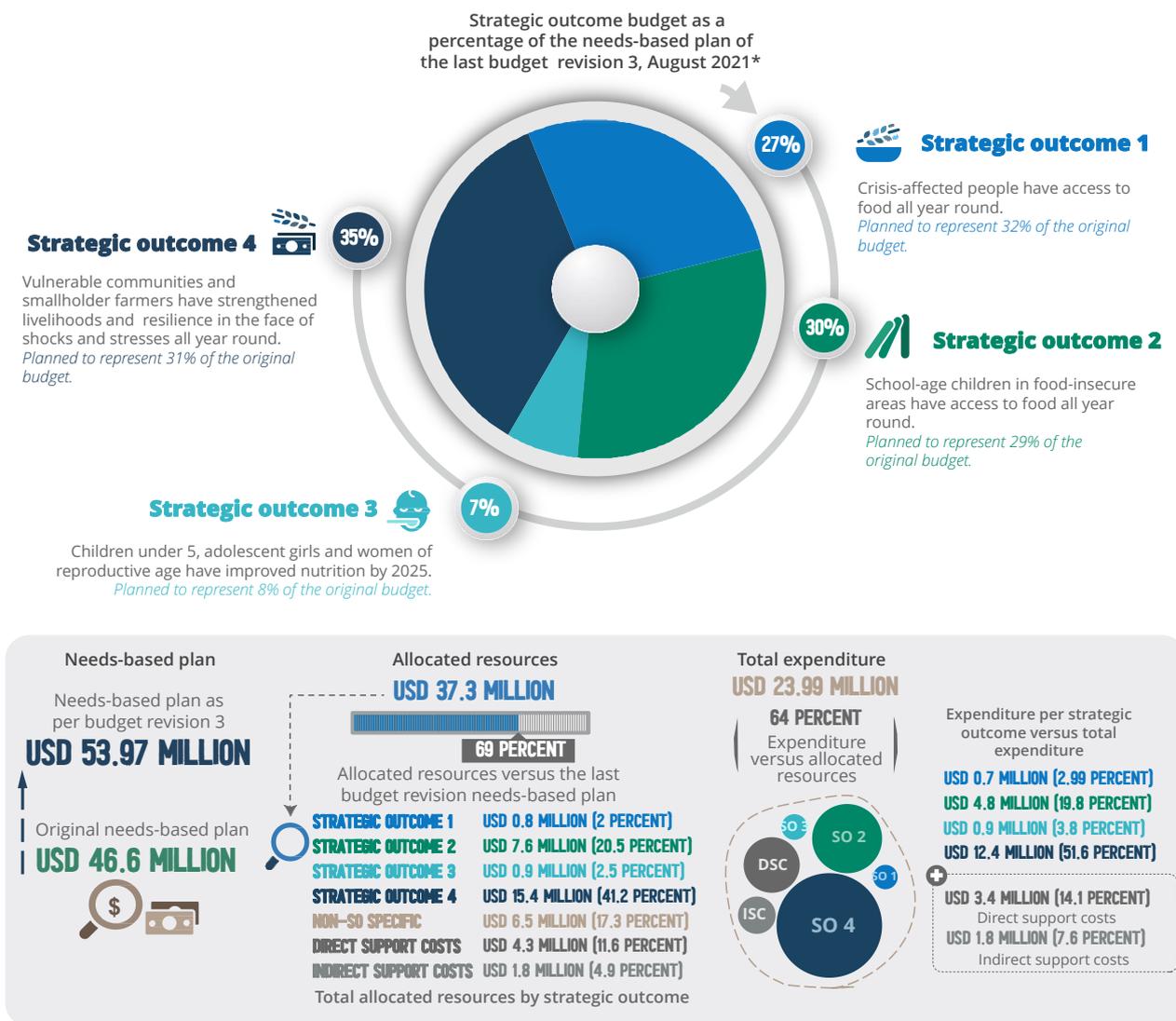
Note: The country strategic plan for Sri Lanka (2018–2022) was preceded by the Sri Lanka country programme 200866 (2016–2017); the emergency operation 201064 - Specific preparedness activities in Sri Lanka due to severe drought impact (February–May 2017); and the emergency operation 201072 - Emergency assistance to the most vulnerable drought-affected households (April–November 2017).

Source: Elaborated by the Office of Evaluation based on the full evaluation report.

- The original CSP needs-based plan was USD 46.6 million (figure 2). The CSP was revised three times during the period 2018–2021. In August 2021, the third revision increased the requirements for strategic outcomes 2 and 4 through December 2022 in response to the COVID-19 crisis, bringing the revised needs-based plan to USD 53.97 million.⁹ The CSP was 69 percent funded as of January 2022. Donor earmarking of contributions has been done predominantly at the activity level (60 percent) and the country level (37 percent).

⁹ A fourth revision of the country strategic plan effected in mid-2022 sought to address increased humanitarian needs due to the ongoing financial crisis, raising the total budget to USD 117.3 million. The changes wrought by this revision are not reflected in this evaluation because they occurred after the evaluation was finalized.

Figure 2: Sri Lanka CSP (2018–2022) resource overview



* Strategic outcome budget percentages against the needs-based plan of the last budget revision 3 and the original budget were calculated at the total operational costs level, excluding direct support costs and indirect support costs.

Abbreviations: SO = strategic outcome; DSC = direct support costs; ISC = indirect support costs.

- In terms of beneficiaries reached, WFP reached the highest percentage of actual versus planned beneficiaries in 2019, at 222.2 percent (table 2); the average percentage for other years (2018, 2020 and 2021) was 74 percent. WFP maintained an almost balanced ratio of 50 percent male and female beneficiaries in both planned and actual numbers.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF PLANNED AND ACTUAL FOOD AND CASH BENEFICIARIES BY YEAR AND GENDER							
Year		Female	%	Male	%	Total	%
2018	Planned	94 160	79.1	93 840	79	188 000	79.1
	Actual	74 473		74 159		148 632	
2019	Planned	78 320	219.2	77 680	225.2	156 000	222.2
	Actual	171 689		174 944		346 633	
2020	Planned	57 452	71.6	56 548	71.2	114 000	71.4
	Actual	41 113		40 261		81 374	
2021	Planned	151 791	59.7	153 347	60.7	305 138	60.2
	Actual	90 619		93 064		183 683	

Source: Country office tool for managing effectively reports CM-R001b and CM-R020.

Evaluation findings

To what extent are WFP's strategic position, role and specific contributions based on country priorities, people's needs and WFP's strengths?

Relevance and alignment

- The CSP was designed based on an in-depth country analysis and is well aligned with the overarching government policy frameworks, including with priorities set out in the Government's Vision 2025 document. The CSP was deliberately aligned with sector-specific strategies and plans related to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 and with cross-cutting linkages to SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 13 and 17.¹⁰ The CSP plans for a move from in-kind and cash-based food assistance to technical support for the national school meals programme (NSMP) were in line with national policies to increase school retention. Given the economic situation, the risk of natural disasters and COVID-19, the increase in CCS support for improving shock-responsive safety net systems was highly relevant.
- The focus on improving the nutrition of women, adolescent girls and children under 5 and taking nutrition into account in the design and implementation of all strategic outcomes remained highly relevant; however, if the focus of activities under strategic outcome 3 had been narrowed to pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls and children under 2 they would have been more effective in addressing the deteriorating nutrition situation.

Addressing the needs of the most vulnerable

- Where CSP activities were implemented through national social protection programmes WFP targeted the most vulnerable. This included vulnerable women ex-combatants dependent on precarious farming livelihoods (under strategic outcome 4), vulnerable women reached through Thripasha¹¹ distribution in maternal health clinics (strategic outcome 3) and vulnerable pregnant and lactating women in poor and food-insecure districts as part of the COVID-19 response implemented through the Samurdhi social protection system (strategic outcome 4). For some activities, WFP targeted the poorest

¹⁰ Independent review commissioned by WFP. 2017. *National Strategic Review of Food Security and Nutrition: Towards Zero Hunger*.

¹¹ Thripasha is a locally produced specialized nutritious food provided as a take-home dry food supplement to all pregnant and lactating women and malnourished children under 5.

divisions in the most vulnerable districts based on food security assessments, analysis of government poverty data and areas most affected by climate change.

13. However, some CSP initiatives did not directly target the most vulnerable. For instance, the R5n¹² programme (strategic outcome 4) was designed for established farmers to ensure that the livelihood assets offered through the programme could be used successfully. Similarly, the South-South and triangular cooperation initiative (strategic outcome 4) was aimed at farmers who could become exemplars for the use of appropriate new technology. The CCS initiatives tended to focus on strategy and policy-oriented work at the national level and as such were not expected to directly target the most vulnerable.

Adaptations to changing contexts

14. The CSP had a purposefully broad scope that allowed WFP to successfully maintain its relevance over time by being flexible and responsive in adapting its interventions to rapidly changing circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, funds that were not spent on one activity (R5n) were reallocated to national safety net programmes. Vulnerability assessments are one of WFP's well-recognized areas of expertise that are needed in the evolving situation in Sri Lanka and directly contribute to its ability to adapt to changes in circumstance.
15. The envisaged strategic shift from direct food and cash-based assistance to CCS continued to remain relevant over the course of the CSP. However, the responsiveness of the country office to ad hoc government requests affected its ability to focus on long-term CCS activities.

Strategic partnerships

16. The Government of Sri Lanka is WFP's long-standing principal strategic partner, and this key partnership underpins the CSP design and implementation. While WFP interacts with various ministries at the national and district levels, WFP mainly worked with the Government's Project Management Unit. This was found to be an efficient approach because it facilitated the coordination of CSP implementation across a large number of government agencies.
17. Coordination regarding operational issues worked well but long-term planning related to more strategic matters was more challenging. Although the CSP was intended to shift WFP further towards CCS, the strength of WFP's partnership with the Government is largely built on the perception that WFP adds value mostly through the direct transfer of food and cash.
18. Key actors indicated that while collaboration among United Nations entities had been limited in the past the heads of those entities were actively trying to change that through the 2023–2027 United Nations sustainable development cooperation framework (UNSDCF). WFP is recognized as one of the lead members of the United Nations country team, and its work on food security, nutrition, disaster management and vulnerability analysis is highly relevant to the UNSDCF. WFP engagement in various results groups contributed to improved coherence and alignment.
19. WFP's leadership, coordination and partnerships in connection with the networks in the Scaling Up Nutrition People's Forum platform were successful in fostering collaboration with multiple partners. Engagement with civil society was limited, however, and this deepened WFP's dependence on a complex and shifting network of overstretched and under-resourced government institutions. Links between WFP and other community-based organizations are needed to sustain the gains achieved through the nutrition-related

¹² Building resilience against recurrent natural shocks through diversification of livelihoods for vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka.

behavioural change and resilience building activities currently implemented with WFP's direct support.

What are the extent and quality of WFP's specific contribution to country strategic plan outcomes in Sri Lanka?

20. Overall, the evaluation found that strategic outcomes 3 and 4 had the greatest potential to contribute to the CSP's overarching goal of ending hunger and reducing malnutrition. By addressing underlying causes and supporting long-term recovery and resilience, these strategic outcomes were the key strategies in the CSP's shift from emergency response to capacity strengthening through technical and policy support. The CSP's commitment to making all strategic outcomes "nutrition-sensitive" (a cross-cutting theme) was a challenge for activities under some strategic outcomes at the field level.

Strategic outcome 1: Crisis-affected people have access to food all year round

21. Strategic outcome 1 was designed to provide food assistance through direct food and CBTs to vulnerable households affected in the event of new shocks. However, as the Government did not request any such support, activities under strategic outcome 1 were not fully activated during the period 2018–2021. As part of the pandemic response, however, WFP provided take-home rations to students for two weeks at the request of the Government and a donor. One drawback to this approach was the likelihood that rations were shared by the entire family, which meant that the potential nutritional impact on the most vulnerable (pregnant and lactating women and very young children) was probably limited.

Strategic outcome 2: School-age children in food-insecure areas have access to food all year round

22. Direct food assistance under strategic outcome 2 was limited, unpredictable and largely donor- and supply-driven. In line with an agreement with the Government, the country office handed over the provision of full food baskets to schoolchildren in the Northern Province to the NSMP in early 2018 but continued to provide limited quantities of canned fish until mid-2019. During the lengthy school closures linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, WFP responded to government requests to support the provision of take-home rations through an indirect cash grant to the Ministry of Education in 2020–2021. There was no evidence to indicate whether the in-kind food rations distributed under strategic outcome 2 contributed to educational or nutritional outcomes. More nutrition-sensitive targeting options for in-kind contributions could have been considered.
23. WFP's technical assistance, learning exchanges and formation of a technical advisory group resulted in the Government's approval for the piloting of the home-grown school feeding (HGFS) model and eventually led to a nutrition-sensitive NSMP. The HGFS pilot was useful in providing nutritious meals to schoolchildren but the economic downturn and sharp increases in food prices made it unremunerative for some of the women caterers.

Strategic outcome 3: Children under 5, adolescent girls and women of reproductive age have improved nutrition by 2025

24. Under this strategic outcome, WFP successfully advocated that the Government improve the quality of Thripasha by adhering to global standards; consequently, children under 5 and pregnant and lactating women are likely to benefit.
25. WFP's advocacy and research on fortified rice was successful in strengthening government capacity to establish regulations and guidelines. However, lack of government funding for the programme and its focus on primary schoolchildren rather than groups with higher prevalence of iron-deficiency anaemia (pregnant and lactating women, women of

reproductive age, adolescent girls and children under 5) could impair the achievement of this strategic outcome.

26. WFP successfully provided technical assistance to strengthen government capacity through training and policy support. However, reliance on short-term pilots meant that resulting changes in policy and programme implementation often stalled due to a lack of multi-year funding and the consistent follow-up necessary for sustained change.

Strategic outcome 4: Vulnerable communities and smallholder farmers have strengthened livelihoods and resilience in the face of shocks and stresses all year round

27. The most promising results were related to strategic outcome 4, which had adequate multi-year funding for several key projects. The livelihood activities were generally well received by targeted farmers. Although resilience building activities slowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some activities such as the rehabilitation of minor irrigation systems increased cropping intensity and the quantity and diversity of foods produced. The cash-for-work component provided emergency assistance to vulnerable people affected by the economic downturn exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.
28. The training provided by WFP to improve the national disaster action planning and district response capacity of government staff was effective. However, high turnover among government staff meant that the achievements of this activity were often lost.
29. Social protection is a relatively new focus for WFP in Sri Lanka and has limited visibility and funding. In this context, capacity strengthening for the digitalization of safety net programmes was successful and exceeded planning targets for the total number of government officials trained. WFP also provided CBTs to pregnant and lactating women in six flood and drought prone districts.

Humanitarian principles and protection

30. Attention to protection and accountability to affected populations was evident throughout the CSP. Beneficiaries were able to obtain assistance without protection or safety challenges and in a dignified manner. With the mobility of country office staff restricted during the pandemic, WFP used remote contact, including telephone interviews, to ensure that project monitoring and the dialogue with beneficiaries continued. Disability was given prominence and country office staff had access to disability inclusion training; a disability access audit was also undertaken.
31. WFP initiated the standardization of community feedback mechanisms and used trained operators and field officers. It also revised standard operating procedures to receive and address reports of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse; no cases were reported during the period of this evaluation. A disability inclusion training was conducted for country office staff.

Gender

32. Gender was mainstreamed in the CSP in several ways, including through equal access for men and women to training, focused nutrition training for women and the selection of women as equal decision makers for all projects. The country office hired a full-time gender officer to support the mainstreaming of gender equality and the empowerment of women.
33. Despite this, activities cannot yet be considered gender-transformative as envisaged in the CSP. More work is needed to improve the monitoring of gender issues and to ensure that all activities are gender-responsive. This is particularly the case for the HGSF pilot, which did not consider the negative effect of rising food prices and reduced national NSMP budget on the incomes of women caterers.

Sustainability

34. Some of the activities such as the NSMP (activity 2, strategic outcome 2), Thripasha distribution (activity 5, strategic outcome 3) and emergency preparedness and response (activity 7, strategic outcome 4) are more likely to be sustainable than others. One challenge was that funding commitments were relatively short-term and their renewal often uncertain, which limited strategic long-term planning and undermined sustainability. In addition, WFP partnered almost exclusively with the Government and was therefore highly dependent on its extensive but under-resourced staff and systems.
35. The high mobility and turnover of government staff, combined with WFP's approach of one-off or repeated in-service training sessions for government staff, was not effective for sustained capacity strengthening. A more systemic approach is required, including a shift from continuous in-service training to pre-service capacity strengthening, with activities such as updating pre-service curriculums in institutions that train people for government services or supporting government human resource systems that build in-service competencies.

Humanitarian-development-peace nexus

36. The CSP was intended to facilitate links between humanitarian and development work and peace objectives, although it did not articulate an explicit strategy for doing so. WFP projects in the north and south, including those targeting women ex-combatants and other conflict-affected women, were well positioned to address food insecurity and malnutrition as the root causes of conflict. The cash-for-work component of WFP's flagship resilience building and livelihoods programme (R5n) brought together humanitarian relief while addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity.

To what extent has WFP used its resources efficiently in contributing to country strategic plan outputs and strategic outcomes?

Timeliness

37. The rate at which available resources were utilized varied between 66 percent under strategic outcome 2 and 81 percent under strategic outcome 4. Some implementation delays were faced due to uncertain funding, the need for multiple approvals and slow cashflow through complex government processes. Pandemic restrictions also led to output delays and resulted in WFP requesting a no-cost extension to complete some activities.
38. Reasons internal to WFP also delayed outputs. For instance, activities with ambitious expectations such as behavioural change were supported by only one year of funding (for example, the CHANGE project). Similarly, complex activities involving sectors that required coordination across government departments, such as a climate change adaptation project, experienced delays.
39. In terms of beneficiaries' perceptions of assistance, cash-for-work recipients and pregnant and lactating women who received cash payments generally expressed satisfaction with the payments, including their timeliness.

Coverage and targeting

40. The CSP targeting approach consistently considered vulnerability especially among women and children and stemming from persistent poverty, lack of food availability and the affordability of nutritious diets. CSP's flagship project R5n works in the vulnerable divisions of five of the most vulnerable districts of Sri Lanka. WFP field presence also helped to ensure appropriate targeting and coverage.

41. However, some challenges remain. For instance, although the CSP provided clear expectations regarding the priority targeting of children under 5, adolescent girls and women of reproductive age, several activities instead targeted the general population and school-age children. Similarly, while WFP's objective in the school meals programme was to focus primarily on the plantation sector, the HGSP project that was intended to cover this sector did not do so.

Cost efficiency

42. The Government covered a significant portion of CSP implementation costs through the direct involvement of government officers and the use of government office space, equipment and transport; this enhanced WFP's cost efficiency. Factors that challenged efficiency included complex government structures and frequent turnover among government staff as well as the limited capacity and resources of government departments at the national and subnational levels to meet the agreed planning targets.
43. WFP was responsive in ensuring that activities were completed on time, as seen by a rising trend of human resource recruitment in the country office, whose staffing structure and workforce were strategically tailored to enable increased government partnership and advance national ownership. Staff members were involved in too many simultaneous initiatives, however, and there was a broad perception among the staff themselves that the quality of technical assistance offered sometimes suffered as a result.

Alternative cost-efficient measures

44. WFP explored alternative cost-effective programming modalities consistent with its overall commitment to move from direct transfers to CCS. For example, since the nutrition component was underfunded, WFP identified opportunities for collaboration on nutrition resourcing and advocacy. Similarly, WFP also pursued cost-effective alternatives by forging partnerships with other United Nations entities for some of its activities. WFP advocated cost efficiency with the Government, for instance by promoting HGSP as a potentially more cost-effective alternative for food delivery under the NSMP. Where cost efficiencies were gained, for instance by digitalizing beneficiary registration and CBTs, WFP advocated that the Government replicate or expand these approaches in national programmes.

What factors explain WFP's performance and the extent to which it has made the strategic shift expected by the country strategic plan?

Predictability, adequacy and flexibility of funding

45. About two thirds of the CSP's original needs-based plan budget was funded by January 2022 (figure 2). Strategic outcome 4 was the focus area of greatest interest to WFP donors, and the country office was successful in mobilizing adequate, predictable and flexible resources. On the other hand, the one-off or short-term nature of several initiatives adversely affected their prospects for long-term sustainability. Also, a large part of CSP funding was earmarked at the activity level or below (60 percent). This led to a loss of programmatic flexibility and a focus on donor preferences. Funding preferences also influenced the areas of strategic shift envisaged in the CSP. For instance, the greater interest in resilience activities was consistent with the strategic shift expected from the CSP, but low donor interest in CCS activities related to nutrition and school feeding severely hampered progress in those areas.

Responsiveness in dynamic operational contexts

46. The CSP provided greater flexibility than the previous country programme and supported a dynamic response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The CSP proved adaptable, as was evident in its response to a number of events that occurred during implementation, the most notable being the pandemic. WFP was able to respond to changing circumstances by increasing

support for the vulnerable through CSP revisions and by moving funds across strategic outcomes when permitted by donors.

47. In response to the pandemic funds were increased under strategic outcome 4 to support the home gardening initiative and CBT support for pregnant and lactating women was increased. Similarly, in response to the scarcity of maize caused by a sudden government ban on maize importation, strategic outcome 4 resources were reallocated to the purchase of maize for Thriposha production under strategic outcome 3 in 2020. While being responsive to changing circumstances, WFP continued to focus on CCS and long-term development programming in line with its strategic intent.

Conclusions

48. The CSP was well aligned with national and United Nations priorities and supported strong relationships with the Government. The rationale for shifting from direct humanitarian assistance to capacity strengthening was reinforced by the minimal support for emergency assistance requested by the Government during the period evaluated.
49. WFP's shift to nutrition mainstreaming for all strategic outcomes and to CCS in emergency preparedness and response, resilience building and nutrition continued to be highly relevant given the risk of natural disasters, persistently high levels of undernutrition and the uncertain economic situation. Furthermore, it was appreciated by the Government, particularly for strategic outcomes 3 and 4, but frequent changes in political priorities and staffing were challenging, and more of a systems approach to CCS was needed in some areas.
50. Performance under the strategic outcomes on nutrition and resilience was appreciated by stakeholders, showing the potential for achieving positive outcomes with strategic follow-through and sustained funding. However, WFP needs to narrow the CSP's strategic focus to its areas of comparative advantage such as emergency preparedness and response (for example, through vulnerability assessments, disaster mapping and contingency planning), enhancing the efficiency of social safety nets through digitalization and improving productivity and market opportunities for smallholder farmers.
51. WFP effectively adapted and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. WFP was perceived by the Government and other United Nations entities as proactive, responsive and flexible. However, there is a need to balance the ability to adapt with maintaining overall coherence and alignment with the CSP strategy.
52. Geographical and individual targeting was a challenge under some strategic outcomes, often due to donor earmarking and the need to respond to some government requests that were ad hoc and therefore not included in the design of the CSP. While WFP's approach to targeting was good, donor preferences and government requests meant that it could not always serve some of the most vulnerable (particularly pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls and children under 2) under some strategic outcomes.
53. WFP's performance was on track in cross-cutting aspects such as protection and accountability to affected populations. While there were good strides forward in mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment, more attention was needed to achieve the goals set out in the CSP.
54. The sustainability of achievements under the strategic outcomes remains uncertain, mainly because of the short-term nature of projects, funding uncertainty and a lack of strategic links with other development partners and the civil society.

55. Building on experience, including through the Scaling-Up Nutrition movement, sustained collaboration between WFP and other United Nations partners can help build an evidence base and support momentum for a more holistic, joined up and sustainable approach to nutrition, social protection, school feeding and disaster management and preparedness. Such collaboration under the UNSDCF is critical for the success of national advocacy for strategy and policy improvements.

Recommendations

#	Recommendation (specific steps for implementing the recommendations are outlined in the sub-recommendations following each recommendation)	Level/nature	Responsibility	Other contributing entities	Priority	Action deadline
1	Develop the next country strategic plan for Sri Lanka building on WFP's core mandate and its comparative advantages that align with government priority needs.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters and the Government of Sri Lanka	High	December 2023
	1.1 Continue the transition from humanitarian to development work introduced in the country strategic plan for 2018–2022 and reduce the prominence of crisis response as a strategic outcome in the next country strategic plan, reflecting Sri Lanka's own capacity for emergency response.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau and headquarters	High	November 2022
	1.2 Focus WFP's future crisis response work on supporting Sri Lanka's emergency preparedness and response and response to climate change, including at the subnational level, and seek to strengthen programming links between community resilience building work and Sri Lanka's shock-sensitive social protection system.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau and headquarters	High	November 2022
	1.3 Strengthen WFP's strategic commitment to improving social protection, advocating with government partners a nutrition- and gender-sensitive, transparently targeted and efficiently run social protection system as a key building block for Sri Lanka's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, Government	High	November 2022
	1.4 Develop a more focused gender-informed strategy for nutrition in the next country strategic plan and strive to develop and support community-based integrated packages that link health, nutrition, food security and agriculture.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters Nutrition Division, Gender Office	High	December 2023
2	Maximize the long-term impact of WFP programming and enhance coherence among strategic outcomes and activities as well as their gender and nutrition sensitivity.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau	Medium	December 2027
	2.1 To ensure sustainability, and in keeping with global best practice, work more explicitly with community-based organizations for farmers, independent civil society actors and the private sector at the district level to supplement and support government efforts.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau	Medium	December 2027

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	2.2 Acknowledging that integrated development work takes time, design a third phase of the resilience building project that layers various types of support (including nutrition-related support) and runs for the full period of the next country strategic plan, seeking government and donor support for this as a potentially replicable community-based climate-resilient model.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, Government, donors	Medium	December 2027
	2.3 Ensure that gender and nutrition are taken into account in the design and implementation of all activities to enhance nutrition outcomes.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau	Medium	December 2023
	2.4 Revisit the links between home-grown school feeding design and rice fortification plans aimed at school feeding so that initiatives in the two areas do not conflict.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau	High	March 2023
	2.5 Revisit the design of the home-grown school feeding pilot together with the Government to ensure that targeted women caterers are adequately compensated for their work in the face of economic downturn and reduced national school meals programme budget and that expectations related to farm production are realistic and balanced given the time available.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters School-based Programmes, Government	High	June 2023
3	Strengthen WFP's strategic and operational partnership with the Government at the national and subnational levels in alignment with other United Nations entities.	Operational	Country office	Government, other United Nations entities	High	December 2026
	3.1 <i>Partnership with the Government:</i> Revisit and update WFP's memorandum of understanding with the Government. This process should include engaging with the Project Management Unit and the National Project Steering Committee to plan the transition of WFP programming to the Government over the coming years.	Operational	Country office	Government, other United Nations entities	High	December 2026
	3.2 <i>Partnership within the United Nations:</i> Increase collaboration and alignment with other key United Nations entities such as the United Nations Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to advocate global best practices related to food security, nutrition, social protection and climate-sensitive community-based resilience through a single united voice.	Operational	Country office	Government, other United Nations entities	Medium	December 2024

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	3.3 <i>Partnerships related to funding</i> : Collaborate with United Nations partners for flexible multi-year donor funding that enables WFP and its government partners to target the most vulnerable groups with appropriate transfer modalities, develop funding proposals for nutrition-specific interventions that are based on evidence.	Operational	Country office	Government, other United Nations entities	Medium	December 2023
4	Continue with country capacity strengthening initiatives, focusing on government-prioritized sectoral gaps.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters divisions	Medium	December 2024
	4.1 Review and refocus the country capacity strengthening approach used in the country strategic plan to reduce dependence on repeated training. For example, look for opportunities to support in-service competencies training and human resource systems within government institutions.	Strategic	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters Programme – Humanitarian and Development Division, Nutrition Division	Medium	March 2024
	4.2 Continue country capacity strengthening support for nutrition by expanding the evidence base through monitoring, evaluation and research directly applied to the Sri Lankan context. For example, support government monitoring of the production of the new Thriposha formula and the impact of this on nutrition status.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau and headquarters Programme – Humanitarian and Development Division, Nutrition Division, Research, Assessment and Monitoring Division, Government	Medium	December 2024
	4.3 For the next country strategic plan, continue the envisioned transition from direct food and cash support to the national school meals programme by investing only in technical assistance (for example, for policy, targeting, gender equality and women’s empowerment and monitoring and evaluation) supporting the Government in targeting limited resources in order to deliver a national school meals programme that meets the needs of the most vulnerable.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters School-based Programmes, Government	Medium	December 2023

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5	Review targeting to ensure alignment with the latest evidence and country strategic plan goals and make the country strategic plan commitment to the most vulnerable more explicit.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters divisions, United Nations partners	High	December 2024
	5.1 In partnership with the Government and other key United Nations entities, leverage WFP's strengths in vulnerability analysis and mapping and coordination to support gender-sensitive nutrition and food security surveillance systems and thus improve the availability of up-to-date evidence for vulnerability targeting and evaluation for programmes.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters Research, Assessment and Monitoring Division, Nutrition Division, United Nations partners	High	December 2024
	5.2 Under strategic outcome 3, ensure that nutrition advocacy efforts are targeted at the most vulnerable groups (pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls and children under 2).	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters Nutrition Division, United Nations Children's Fund	High	December 2023
	5.3 Continue with rice fortification advocacy, including planning and completing an impact study and broadening the scope to identify social safety nets outside the national school meals programme that can target people with high levels of nutritional deficiency.	Operational	Country office	Regional bureau, headquarters Nutrition Division, Government	High	December 2023

Acronyms

CBT	cash-based transfer
CCS	country capacity strengthening
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSP	country strategic plan
HGSF	home-grown school feeding
NSMP	national school meals programme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNSDCF	United Nations sustainable development cooperation framework