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Summary report of the synthesis on evaluations of WFP's engagement in middle-income countries (2019–2024)

Executive summary

This synthesis report on evaluations of WFP's engagement in middle-income countries was commissioned by the Office of Evaluation and conducted between June 2024 and February 2025. It involved the review of 73 centralized and decentralized evaluations conducted in 25 middle-income countries between 2019 and 2024. It was aimed at understanding WFP's strategic positioning, partnerships and results in middle-income countries, and how they have evolved over time – including with regard to sustainability and handover to national governments.

To feed into the preparation for its next strategic plan, covering 2026–2030, the specific needs and characteristics of middle-income countries, which represent 70 percent of the countries where WFP operates, constitute a major strategic consideration for WFP. Despite an increase in the number and proportion of people reached in middle-income countries since 2019, funding allocated to them in needs-based plans has remained at 33 percent of total funding.

The synthesis concludes that:

- the category of middle-income countries is too broad to inform programming effectively. However, upper-middle-income countries share characteristics that make them particularly distinct within this broader group;

In line with WFP evaluation policy (2022) (WFP/EB.1/2022/4-C), 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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- WFP could better articulate its rationale, strategies and programme offer in middle-income countries hosting refugees and internally displaced persons, and assisting irregular migrants; in upper-middle-income countries where WFP does not target direct beneficiaries; and in countries transitioning out of crisis; and
- while circumstances in middle-income countries are often conducive to innovation and expansion beyond WFP's standard toolkit, the absence of a clear rationale for engagement in such settings has constrained country offices' strategic positioning.

Evidence also shows that, where conditions permit, WFP's intended strategic shift through engagement in middle-income countries – as articulated in its strategic plan for 2022–2025 – has largely been realized and enabled by:

- WFP's increasingly diversified role, while maintaining consolidated service delivery and emergency response functions;
- WFP's adaptive capacity – its capacity to respond to changing circumstances – to respond to government requests and to pivot towards crisis response; and
- WFP's engagement in increasingly diversified partnerships despite the lack of a coherent and overarching framework for doing so.

WFP made significant contributions in all the areas of expected engagement and results set out in the strategic plan for 2022–2025, in particular with regard to technical assistance, policy advice, evidence generation and system strengthening. However, staffing profiles did not always align with the specific needs and objectives pursued by WFP in many middle-income countries, where relationship-building and political economy skills are required.

Challenges and missed opportunities noted by evaluations were in:

- expanding scale and reach from small-scale, sometimes fragmented initiatives – including in relation to capacity strengthening – which is often made particularly challenging by piecemeal donor funding;
- articulating a clear narrative regarding WFP's value and achievements, especially when supporting government-led actions;
- planning for, and reviewing learning from, the scale-up of pilot initiatives, where relevant; and
- ensuring that the handover to national actors of specific programmes – especially school meal programmes – is sustained by planning for financial sustainability and a structured transfer of responsibilities.

The main factors identified as affecting WFP's achievement of results and strategic shifts in middle-income countries included uncertain financing prospects; gaps in available frameworks and guidance for WFP's strategic orientation; and challenges in using existing corporate indicators to capture and convey WFP's value-added and contributions to national system and capacities.

The synthesis makes four main recommendations that support WFP in clarifying the way forward for the future:

- Set out a clearer rationale for WFP's presence, positioning and resourcing in middle-income countries.
- Clarify and strengthen the development and use of partnership strategies in middle-income countries.

- Strengthen planning for programme handover and transition where relevant, and the pathway to country exit where appropriate.
- Enhance the generation of evidence from pilot activities to inform decisions regarding scale-up.

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the summary report of the synthesis on evaluations of WFP's engagement in middle-income countries (2019–2024) (WFP/EB.A/2025/7-G/3/Rev.1) and management response (WFP/EB.A/2025/7-G/3/Add.1).

* 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

Synthesis features

1. Globally, of every five people in extreme poverty, more than three live in middle-income countries (MICs).¹ Seventy percent of the countries where WFP operates, 63 of 89, are classified by the World Bank as middle-income.
2. This synthesis of WFP's engagement in MICs was conducted by the Office of Evaluation between June 2024 and February 2025. As WFP prepares its next strategic plan, for 2026–2030, the synthesis brings together evidence from 73 centralized² and decentralized³ evaluations in 25 MICs, conducted between 2019 and 2024, to ask:
 - What characterizes WFP's strategic positioning in MICs, and how has this evolved since 2019?
 - How have partnerships in MICs worked, and how have they evolved?
 - What results were generated in MICs between 2019 and 2024?
 - Which factors affected WFP's results in MICs?
 - How does WFP approach sustainability in MICs and with what results?
3. The intended users of this synthesis include WFP's senior management; staff at central headquarters, regional bureaux, and country offices in MICs; the Executive Board; and partners, including government counterparts, cooperating partners and other United Nations entities.

Context

4. The World Bank uses per capita gross national income to assign countries to four groups with regard to income: low; lower-middle; upper-middle; and high.⁴ Currently, 70 percent of the countries (63 in total) where WFP operates are MICs, of which 44 are lower-middle-income and 19 are upper-middle-income.
5. While country income status alone cannot be used to predict the features and conditions in a given country or setting – particularly in the settings in which WFP is engaged – many MICs have common features, including:
 - often relatively strong governance, legal systems and institutional arrangements;
 - defined public policy and other normative frameworks on subjects such as food security and nutrition;
 - established national capacity in key governance and policy areas.⁵

¹ World Bank. 2024. [World Development Report 2024: The Middle-Income Trap](#).

² Centralized evaluations are commissioned and managed by the Office of Evaluation and presented to the Executive Board for consideration.

³ Decentralized evaluations are commissioned and managed by country offices, regional bureaux and headquarters divisions other than the Office of Evaluation. They are not presented to the Board.

⁴ In 2024, 105 countries were classified as middle-income. Of those, 51 are categorized as lower-middle-income and 54 as upper-middle-income. See World Bank. [World Bank Country and Lending Groups](#).

⁵ Khan, M. S. 2022. "Absorptive capacities and economic growth in low- and middle-income economies" in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*. Vol. 62, pp. 156–188.

6. WFP's current strategic plan, covering 2022–2025, recognizes the particular conditions and characteristics of MICs and frames its planned engagement in those countries to pursue "a growing enabling agenda [...] focused on technical assistance, policy advice, evidence generation and system strengthening." It sets out WFP's intentions in this regard as stated in box 1.

Box 1: WFP strategic statement on middle-income countries

WFP will engage with MICs at the request of governments, supporting them in the sharing of expertise, technology and resources with other developing countries to fight hunger and malnutrition. [...] WFP's activities will be adapted according to need, especially in MICs characterized by unfinished development agendas and with high levels of inequality, social exclusion and post-harvest food losses. [...] WFP will continue to contribute to inclusive and sustainable growth in MICs.

Source: "WFP strategic plan (2022–2025)" (WFP/EB.2/2021/4-A/1/Rev.2), box 9.

7. Although MICs comprise the majority of the countries in which WFP engages, WFP's activities in those countries accounted for only 33 percent of its total needs-based plan budget and 34 percent of the allocated budget from 2019 to 2024. The remaining 67 percent was allocated to activities in lower-middle-income countries. Overall, WFP programmes in low-income countries and those in MICs are resourced at similar levels, with around 57 percent of their needs-based plans funded in 2024.

Methodology

8. The synthesis systematically analysed 39 centralized and 34 decentralized evaluations issued between 2019 and 2024 pertaining to 25 MICs⁶ across all regions (as shown in table 1). Countries were selected for the synthesis if the weighted average of WFP's needs-based plan allocation and actual expenditure for activities targeting national governments, actors, systems and institutions was above the overall average. Moreover, the sample also included MICs where WFP had implemented a rapid scale-up or scale-down of operations. Only evaluations satisfactorily meeting independently assessed quality requirements were considered (see annex II).

TABLE 1: SAMPLED COUNTRIES

Reporting to	Income classification	Country
Central headquarters	Upper-middle	China
Asia and the Pacific	Lower-middle	Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Timor-Leste
	Upper-middle	Indonesia

⁶ Countries have been included in the final sample if classified for a minimum of three (fiscal) years in the World Bank MICs listing between 2019 and 2024 to ensure that the synthesis takes an expansive approach to sampling, while accounting for possible fluctuations in/out of the MICs grouping.

TABLE 1: SAMPLED COUNTRIES		
Reporting to	Income classification	Country
Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe	Lower-middle	Egypt, Tunisia
	Upper-middle	Armenia, Iraq, Türkiye
Western Africa	Lower-middle	Ghana
Southern Africa	Lower-middle	Eswatini, Lesotho, Zambia, Zimbabwe
	Upper-middle	Namibia
Eastern Africa	Lower-middle	Kenya
Latin America and the Caribbean	Upper-middle	Colombia, Dominican Republic, Peru

TABLE 2: EVALUATIONS INCLUDED IN THE SYNTHESIS, BY TYPE							
Centralized evaluations (CEs)				Decentralized evaluations (DEs)			Total
Corporate emergency response	Country strategic plan	Policy	Strategic	Activity	Thematic	Pilot	73 39 CEs 34 DEs
1	21	8	8	27	6	1	

9. The systematic analysis of evaluation evidence was complemented by:
 - an analysis of the programme portfolio and resourcing flows in MICs compared with those for low-income countries;
 - triangulation with WFP global evaluations and other secondary data; and
 - an analysis of evaluation recommendations and management response data.
10. In addition stakeholder consultations were held and feedback was gathered throughout the process to probe and refine emerging themes and the recommendations derived from the analysis.
11. *Limitations:* The evidence is based on retrospective evaluations of a sample of the MICs where WFP operates, which may not reflect the most recent developments in WFP across the full set of those MICs; it should also be noted that the depth of evidence available for each question varies. *Mitigation measures* included extensive data extraction pilots during the synthesis inception phase; a systematic effort to analyse data from both global and country-specific evaluations; the calibration of findings based on the strength of the evidence; and the use of stakeholder feedback to help refine and nuance the findings.

Synthesis conclusions and supporting findings

12. This section presents the seven key conclusions of the synthesis, and the findings that support them.

Conclusion 1: Relevance and limits of country income categorization

The MICs category is too broad to inform programming and masks distinct features and challenges, although upper-middle-income countries have some key distinguishing features. WFP accordingly needs to better articulate its rationale and related strategies and programme offer, particularly in MICs hosting refugees and internally displaced persons and assisting irregular migrants;⁷ upper-middle-income countries where WFP does not target direct beneficiaries;⁸ and countries transitioning out of crisis.⁹

MICs often provide an environment conducive to innovation and expansion beyond WFP's standard toolkit, and the absence of a clearly articulated rationale for WFP's engagement in MICs – beyond a brief reference in the strategic plan for 2022–2025 – constrains the ability of country offices to articulate their programme offer in such countries.

13. MICs represent a critical arena for WFP's current and future engagement. However, they differ considerably from one another.
14. There are significant variations in socioeconomic development and multi-dimensional poverty indicators among MICs, and some lower-middle-income countries fare more poorly in socioeconomic development than some low-income countries, as shown in annex I.¹⁰
15. Evaluation evidence and country-level portfolio analysis highlight key distinguishing features of MICs, including:
 - the transition from low- to middle-income status often reduces donors' interest and leads to unfulfilled expectations of domestic resource mobilization – particularly in upper-MICs transitioning out of crisis, where WFP struggles to secure funding for emergency preparedness;
 - a growing trend in host governments of MICs funding WFP's work in their own countries (figure 1);
 - distinctive programme offerings, including relatively high levels of service provision and platforms and of activities related to school meals, social protection, adaptation to extreme weather events and the management of weather-related risks; and lower rates of nutrition treatment and prevention activities (figure 2);
 - well-documented challenges in mobilizing resources for capacity strengthening activities, a difficulty not limited to MICs but noted especially where WFP's engagement is focused on supporting the delivery of government-led food and nutrition insecurity solutions; and
 - diversified partnerships, particularly in upper-middle-income countries where WFP enters in closer partnerships with national governments and in more diversified partnerships, particularly with academia and the private sector.

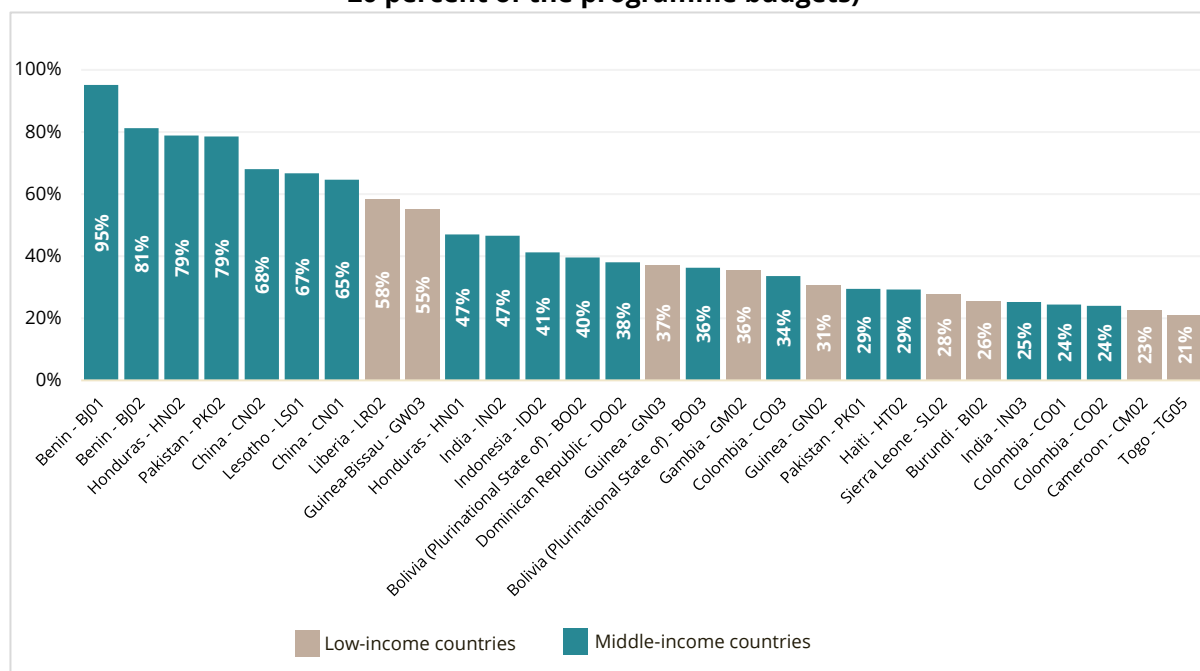
⁷ Examples of MICs in this grouping include Colombia, Kenya and Peru.

⁸ Examples include Indonesia.

⁹ Examples include Iraq and Nepal.

¹⁰ See World Bank. 2024. *World Development Report 2024: The Middle-Income Trap*, cit. box 1.1 pp. 37-39. Also, the middle-income grouping includes 12 countries ranked as having a "very high" Human Development Index rank, 44 countries ranked as "high", 42 as "medium" and 9 as "low". United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Index*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2023. *Policy Brief No. 155: Accelerating middle-income countries' progress towards sustainable development*.

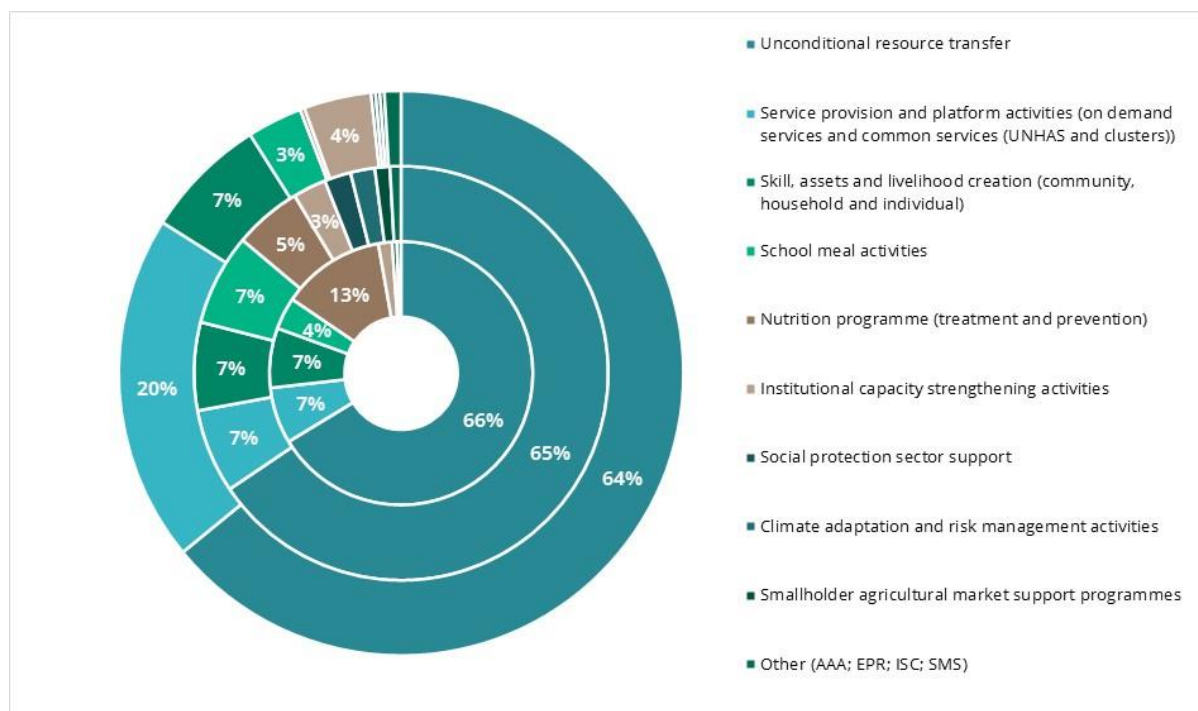
Figure 1: Host government contributions to the WFP programmes, in their countries (by generation of country strategic plan (CSP); showing only those contributions exceeding 20 percent of the programme budgets)



Source: Weekly contribution and forecast report, Office of Evaluation compiled data (data as at 20 February 2025). The generation of CSP is indicated by the code following the country name.

16. WFP's resourcing and engagement in MICs share several similarities with its experience in low-income countries:
 - WFP programmes in low-income countries and MICs are resourced at similar levels, receiving about 57 percent of their needs-based plan budgets in 2024. They also face similar earmarking challenges with about 73 percent of the funds received being earmarked at the activity level in both categories.
 - Private donors' support for WFP programmes in MICs is comparable to that for programmes in low-income countries.
 - A comparable proportion of programme budgets in both MICs and low-income countries is allocated to unconditional resource transfers, asset creation and livelihoods and institutional capacity strengthening activities.
17. Moreover, two thirds of the budgets in MICs are allocated to unconditional resource transfers, a proportion that is similar to that in low-income countries and is targeted largely to meet the needs of displaced persons (figure 2). This reflects:
 - the ongoing volatility of global food insecurity, regardless of country income status; and
 - the use of unconditional resource transfers in WFP's food assistance for displaced people, the direct assistance distributed through WFP-led programmes, and WFP's support for distributions undertaken by or on behalf of governments as part of national social protection systems.

Figure 2: Needs-based plan cumulative budget allocation by activity category, comparing low-, lower-middle- and upper-middle-income countries (2019–2024)



Source: IRM analytics, EV_CPB_Resources_Overview (data as at 14 January 2025).

Abbreviations: AAA = anticipatory action; EPR = emergency preparedness and response; ISC = indirect support cost; LICs = low-income countries; LMICs = lower-middle-income countries; SMS = smallholder market support; UMICs = upper-middle-income countries; UNHAS = United Nations Humanitarian Air Service.

Conclusion 2: Evidence shows that, where conditions permit, the intended strategic shift in WFP's engagement in MICs, articulated in the strategic plan for 2022–2025, has largely been realized. WFP has undertaken *increasingly diversified roles* in MICs, while maintaining a well-consolidated role in service delivery and emergency response.

A distinctive area of strength that enabled WFP to broadly realize the shift lies in its *adaptive capacity* to seize opportunities for engagement in response to governments' requests, to effectively adapt its programme offer to changes in circumstances, and to pivot towards crisis response when shocks occur.

18. Evaluations describe how WFP has envisioned and broadly realized three main strategic shifts in its work in MICs, alongside maintaining its main crisis response role in support of government-led interventions. Specifically, in MICs WFP has worked towards:
 - shifting – albeit usually non-linearly – from direct delivery of assistance to capacity strengthening for national institutions and support for food security and nutrition-related policy and legislative frameworks;
 - diversifying and expanding its programme offer in less traditional areas, such as adaptation to the impacts of extreme weather events, value chain development and innovation, including by piloting new interventions; and
 - supporting the inclusion of displaced and other vulnerable people in national social protection systems.

19. Such shifts are part of WFP's wider trajectory of institutional change¹¹ and are therefore not limited to its work in MICs.¹² However, the particular features of many MICs have provided entry points for, and shaped the form of, WFP's strategic shifts in those countries. For example, more clearly established public policy and other normative frameworks in areas such as social protection, combined with comparatively mature institutional arrangements, systems and processes, have enabled WFP to expand its programme offer in this and other areas.
20. In terms of the specific roles played by WFP in MICs, evaluations note that WFP successfully positioned itself as:
- a provider of specialized expertise and analytics to support policy formulation and advocacy;
 - a provider of on-demand services for governments, particularly as part of national social protection systems and to fill gaps in government-led programmes;
 - a pilot tester and catalyst of innovation; and
 - a knowledge broker and partnership convenor.
21. At the same time, evaluations highlight how WFP effectively and swiftly adapted its role to respond to a wide range of shocks and contextual changes (table 3), often working through national systems, where possible, to fill gaps or provide on-demand services as needed.

TABLE 3: DRIVERS OF ADAPTATION AND EXAMPLES OF RELATED ACTIONS TAKEN		
Type of shock or change experienced	Type of response adopted	Selected examples of actions taken
External shock, e.g. the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, extreme weather-related events	Programmatic adaptations to respond to urgent needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shifts in transfer modality, such as from school meals to take-home rations (Cambodia) or from food to cash-based assistance (Egypt, Pakistan) or from cash to mobile money (Colombia, Peru) ➤ Programme expansion, such as the reintroduction of in-kind food assistance and cash for assets in the Philippines following typhoon Rai ➤ Horizontal expansion of social protection systems to cover vulnerable people in urban areas (Iraq, Kenya, Lesotho, Türkiye, Zimbabwe)
Country-specific legislative and regulatory changes	Adjustments in programme focus and/or modalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In Kenya WFP adapted its approach to support the Government in refugee integration, focusing on improving access to education and livelihoods ➤ In Zimbabwe WFP reversed its commitment to increasing cash-based transfers and adjusted transfer modalities in 2020 in response to new government regulations

¹¹ These shifts were first articulated in "WFP strategic plan (2008–2011)" (EB.A/2008/5-A/1/Rev.1) and continued thereafter in successive strategic plans.

¹² This is reflected in, for example, the relatively similar proportions of resources allocated to institutional capacity strengthening in MICs and low-income countries (see conclusion 1).

TABLE 3: DRIVERS OF ADAPTATION AND EXAMPLES OF RELATED ACTIONS TAKEN		
Type of shock or change experienced	Type of response adopted	Selected examples of actions taken
Specific government requests arising from new national needs	Horizontal and vertical programmatic adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In Colombia WFP adapted its programming to provide large-scale food assistance and cash-based transfers at the Government's request, including to address the needs of groups such as migrants in transit, not initially covered as priorities in the CSP ➤ In Iraq, to fill a gap in an important mechanism for addressing food insecurity and ensuring the sustainable return of refugees WFP supported, and then worked towards the handover of, rural development activities in the period following conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

Conclusion 3: Overall the evidence synthesized shows that WFP made significant contributions to results in the MICs where it was engaged. Evaluations reported contributions made in all the areas of engagement and results as envisaged in the strategic plan for 2022–2025, with an expanding programme offer focused on *technical assistance, policy advice, evidence generation and systems strengthening*.

Challenges and missed opportunities were noted when expanding the scale and reach from individual initiatives; in ensuring a strategic approach to capacity strengthening; and in adopting a coherent rather than a fragmented approach, particularly when donor funding was piecemeal. WFP's narrative on its value and achievements in MICs – especially when supporting government-led actions – was not always clearly articulated.

22. Key contributions recorded by evaluations in the 25 MICs covered by this synthesis include:

- improved reach of social protection systems during shocks and emergencies, alongside enhanced stability of, or improvement in, food security measures for affected people and communities;
- improved policy and strategic frameworks for food security and nutrition, and strengthened institutions to help implement them;
- enhanced national systems for food security and nutrition, including monitoring, supply chain and social protection systems, and early warning and disaster preparedness;
- inputs to the development of new, or the improvement of existing, policy and normative frameworks, leading to improved food security and nutrition gains;
- inputs for strengthening key systems, such as national supply chains and frameworks for school meal programmes, disaster management and preparedness, in support of government-led action in these areas;
- gap-filling engagement and expansion into less traditional areas such as climate risk management, climate adaptation and smallholder agricultural market support;
- improved economic opportunities for women, such as through participation in local food procurement and supply chains, particularly in connection with school meal programmes; and
- enhanced prospects for socioeconomic integration and social cohesion among communities through the use of conflict sensitivity assessments and the promotion of refugees' self-reliance and integration into host communities.

23. The main challenges encountered arose in the context of:
- the move “upstream” from small-scale, fragmented initiatives, particularly in the context of piecemeal donor funding;
 - underestimation of the scale, depth, quality and duration of the programmes, and the WFP capacity, required for sustained national capacity strengthening and for ensuring a fully strategic and systems-oriented approach;
 - matching of the CSP's vision and ambition with adequate resources; and
 - the need for a compelling narrative about results and achievements in settings where WFP's ability to reach direct beneficiaries is limited and often decreasing.

Conclusion 4: A trend is noted towards the *diversification of WFP's partnerships in MICs*, but they lack a coherent and overarching framework.

24. Evaluations indicate that WFP's role in MICs has evolved over time, reflecting changing national circumstances and operational needs. However, evidence shows that WFP's approach to partnerships in MICs is not consistently informed by a coherent and *comprehensive partnership framework* for the country level that supports the envisioned shifts in strategic positioning that WFP aims to pursue in MICs (see box 1).
25. In its engagement with national governments in MICs, WFP typically blends three main roles as: a strategic partner in policy and advocacy work; a technical partner in providing expertise and capacity support to national actors; and an operational partner supporting implementation within national social protection systems.
26. Evaluations report that WFP's partnerships in MICs have diversified over time:
- In upper-middle-income countries WFP engages more frequently with national governments and a broader range of partners, such as academia and the private sector.
 - In lower-middle-income countries, as in low-income countries, WFP partners more often with international non-governmental organizations.
27. While evaluations found that governments valued WFP's roles, capacity and expertise highly – as reflected in their direct financial commitments (figure 1) – work in areas such as policy support, technical advice and capacity strengthening requires sustained approaches alongside sound analysis, technical support and relationship-building. Evaluations noted common challenges such as the need for clearer roles and responsibilities, well-defined entry points within national systems, and stronger engagement at the decentralized level, particularly in federal governance systems.
28. With regard to WFP's engagement with partners beyond host governments, evidence highlights that WFP's relationships with other United Nations entities revolves primarily around strategic coordination, although challenges remain in aligning technical assistance and policy support efforts. Engagement with the private sector, although still mostly transactional, is shifting towards more strategic partnerships in upper-middle-income countries,¹³ where WFP has been more effective in leveraging private sector collaboration to address food and nutrition challenges.

¹³ Examples are found in India, Namibia and Peru.

Conclusion 5: *Pilot initiatives* form a major part of WFP's portfolio in MICs, but planning for scale-up, where relevant, has *often lacked a systematic approach*, and learning and review processes were not always sufficient.

29. Evaluations noted different uses and purposes of the pilot activities undertaken in MICs – from demonstrating WFP's potential added value, such as in the use of data and analytics capability to support national social protection systems, to showcasing and documenting innovative solutions, such as for local procurement or agriculture value chains.
30. Evaluations identified some valuable work undertaken, but planning for scale-up, where relevant, and for learning has often been insufficient, compounding the risk of fragmentation. Evidence generation efforts have been individually important but have often failed to trigger change. Similarly, planning for sustainability has been inconsistent, with the trajectory from innovation to sustainable change often not clearly mapped out or operationally planned for.

Conclusion 6: WFP effectively realized the full *handover of programmes to national actors* in MICs, especially school meal programmes. However, evaluations reported gaps in planning for financial sustainability, for the structured transfer of responsibilities, and for preparing for a transition from WFP-led activities to activities led by governments, supported by WFP and geared to the achievement of sustainable results.

31. Evaluations noted significant progress in some MICs ¹⁴ in the development and implementation of strategies for handover and transition – mainly for school meal programmes. However, shortcomings were also noted, with gaps including a need for realistic timelines, clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, a risk-informed approach, and engagement with various governance systems, including at the decentralized level, in preparation for handover.
32. Evaluations noted that where handover was either non-optimal or infeasible, WFP's role might evolve to a different form of partnership, with greater emphasis on strategic or technical advice.

Conclusion 7: The main factors identified as affecting WFP's achievement of results and strategic shifts in MICs included uncertain financing prospects; gaps in the available framework and guidance for WFP's engagement in MICs; and challenges in using existing corporate indicators to capture and convey WFP's added value and contributions to national systems and capacity.

Employees have not always had the relevant skills, capacity and contract durations to align with the specific needs and objectives of WFP in MIC settings, where relationship-building and skills in political economy are required.

33. Many factors affecting WFP's achievement of results in MICs are also common in countries in other income categories; these factors include resourcing – human and financial – measurement of the results of capacity-strengthening activities, ¹⁵ and overoptimistic

¹⁴ Evidence on this point comes from Cambodia, Ghana and Kenya.

¹⁵ WFP. 2021. *Evaluation Synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations*.

assessments of national capacity.¹⁶ However, elements emerging as more specific to MICs than other countries include:

- reduced donor interest when countries move from low- to middle-income status,¹⁷ and often unrealized expectations with regard to domestic resource mobilization amid uncertainty about the potential for innovative financing opportunities;
- the absence of an overarching corporate vision and rationale for engagement in MICs, and dissonance between WFP's view of itself as being focused primarily on humanitarian emergency response and the strategic repositioning of country offices embarked on a shift from the direct delivery of programmes to a capacity support and gap-filling model;
- external perceptions of WFP as a specialist humanitarian-response agency, which has sometimes constrained willingness to engage with WFP as a partner of choice beyond humanitarian crisis response;¹⁸
- the adequate capture of, and reporting on, WFP's contributions to, for example, the strengthening of national systems and capacity; and
- the risk of fragmentation and lack of internal coherence in CSP implementation in MICs, often arising from a combination of responsiveness to requests from governments or donors, small-scale interventions and pilot or testing components.

34. With an increasing degree of complexity in the global environment, needs in MICs can be expected to grow. The synthesis finds that in many places WFP has succeeded in making itself a partner of choice in MICs but lacks a clear narrative regarding its strengths in these countries. The synthesis makes four recommendations to support WFP in identifying a way forward for the future.

¹⁶ See for example WFP annual evaluation report for 2024 (*forthcoming*).

¹⁷ WFP. 2021. *Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-Based Agencies*.

¹⁸ Examples include Pakistan.

#	Recommendation	Responsibility	Other contributing entities	Priority	Deadline
1	Set out a clearer rationale for WFP's presence, positioning and resourcing in middle-income countries and, in particular, in upper-middle-income countries.	Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer			
	<p>WFP should articulate a clear rationale for its engagement in MICs, recognizing in particular the conditions of upper-middle-income countries, with a view to ensuring focused and effective engagement.</p> <p>Specifically, this should include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within the framework of the CSP as the instrument guiding WFP's country-level work,¹⁹ and building on WFP's demonstrated strengths in MICs, clearly articulate the strategic rationale for WFP's engagement in MICs, including upper-middle-income countries in particular, with an emphasis on technical support and national systems-strengthening. • Assess and articulate the rationale for WFP maintaining its presence and response capacity in MICs so that it can pivot swiftly to crisis response if needed. Ensure that relevant systems and capacity to deal with contingencies are in place, such as "dormant" or contingent CSP objectives, and staff with appropriate skills. • State a clear intention to seek funding from diverse sources, including global funding mechanisms, host governments and private sector partners. 	Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer	Assistant Executive Director, Programme Operations Department Assistant Executive Director, Partnerships and Innovation Department Multilateral and Programme Country Partnerships Division Human Resources Division	High	September 2025, in conjunction with the development of the new strategic plan

¹⁹ This is in line with the Executive Director's Decision Memo. 2024. "One Global Team supporting empowered country offices - Country Office-Focused Organizational Alignment". OED 1360 Rev.1 of 25 October 2024.

#	Recommendation	Responsibility	Other contributing entities	Priority	Deadline
2	Clarify and strengthen the development and use of partnership strategies in MICs.	Multilateral and Programme Country Partnerships Division			
	<p>Revise existing or prepare new guidance for country offices on strengthening the development and use of strategic and operational partnership strategies for WFP's engagement in MICs. This guidance should include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the specific areas in which, and partners with whom, WFP will engage while remaining flexible so that it can respond to new opportunities as they emerge. Clearly position WFP vis-à-vis other entities, taking into account WFP's areas of demonstrated strength and comparative advantage. Clarify the requisite staffing profile, including the seniority and continuity of employees, for engaging in and sustaining strategic partnerships at the country level. Provide for the monitoring and, as needed, reassessment of partnership engagement. 	Multilateral and Programme Country Partnerships Division	Human Resources Division	High	December 2026
3	Strengthen planning for programme handover and transition, where relevant and the path to WFP's exit from the country, where appropriate.	Programme Policy and Guidance Division			
	<p>Set clear guidance for programme handover and transition, and/or country exit, as appropriate, including by providing relevant guidance to country offices. This guidance should cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> agreement with national counterparts of realistic timeframes for handover, transition and exit, with clear agreed pathways and milestones; assessment and consideration of national capacity at the central and local levels; consideration of risk throughout the process, with clear allocation of roles and responsibilities for WFP and its counterparts; analysis of any administrative, data-related and legal requirements at the central and local levels; and articulation of the role envisaged for WFP before, during and after handover, transition and exit, as appropriate. 	Programme Policy and Guidance Division	Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer	High	December 2026

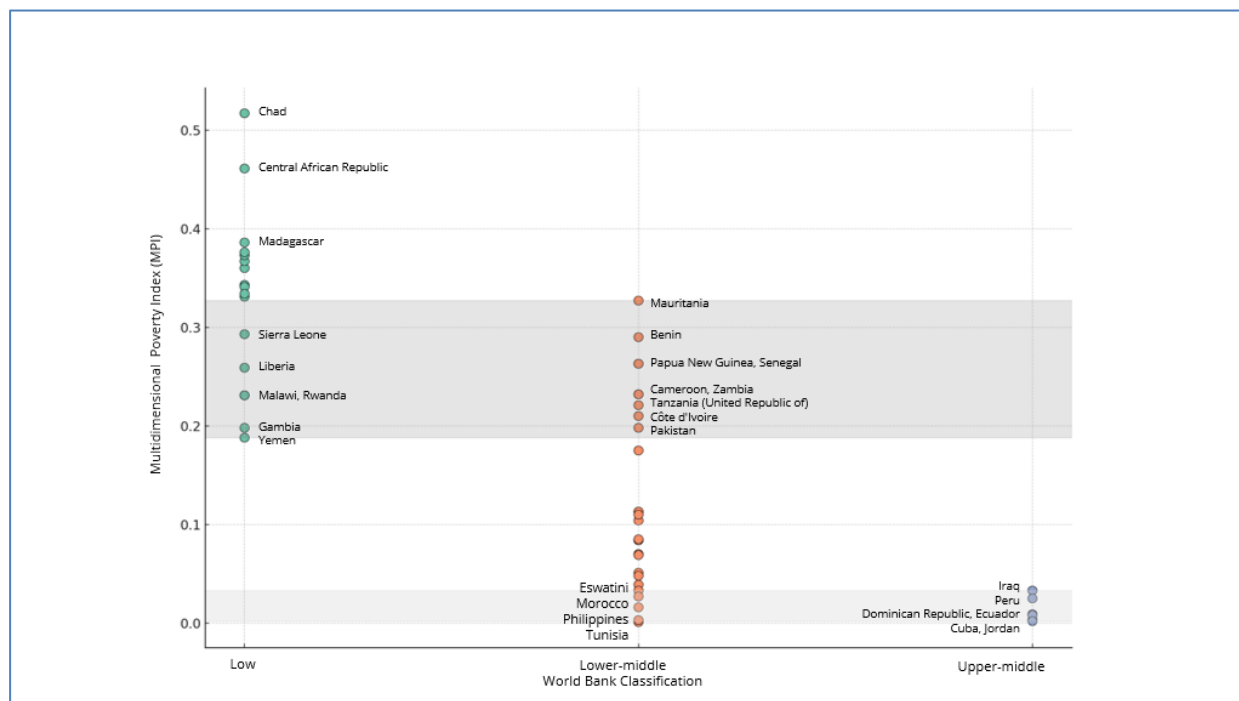
#	Recommendation	Responsibility	Other contributing entities	Priority	Deadline
4	Enhance the generation of evidence from pilot activities to inform decisions regarding potential scale-up.	Programme Policy and Guidance Division			
	<p>Provide clear guidance on the assessment of results from pilot initiatives, which should include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the specific features and mechanisms at play that affect scalability and sustainability, and clarify that strategies for addressing these will need to be built into the design of initiatives. • Clarify in advance the potential for, and pathways to, scale-up, where relevant. • Prepare strategies and implementation plans for scale-up, as appropriate. • Clarify monitoring, review, assessment and evaluation expectations. 	Programme Policy and Guidance Division	Analysis, Planning and Performance Division Office of Evaluation Other concerned headquarters divisions	Medium	December 2026

ANNEX I

Multidimensional poverty index by income classification

- Figure 3 plots multidimensional poverty indicators against country income status in the settings where WFP was engaged in 2024. The figure highlights a considerable overlap between the low-income and lower-middle-income categories, with some countries exhibiting similar scores on the multidimensional poverty index, despite belonging to different income classifications.

Figure 3: Multidimensional poverty Index by income classification



Note: The countries for each income category that are not named in the figure are as follows:

- *Low-income*: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique.
- *Lower-middle-income*: Algeria, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Comoros, Eswatini, Ghana, Honduras, India, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, State of Palestine, Tunisia, Zimbabwe.
- *Upper-middle-income*: All countries are listed in the figure.

Source: United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative. 2024. [Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2024 – Poverty Amid Conflict](#).

ANNEX II**List of evaluations included in the synthesis (covering 25 MICs)**

1. The 73 evaluations reviewed for the synthesis are shown in the table below.

Region	Country	Evaluations included in the synthesis (final sample)
HQ	China	WFP. 2021. Evaluation of China WFP Country Strategic Plan 2017–2021
RBB	Bhutan	WFP. 2022. Evaluation of Bhutan WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023 WFP. 2022. Evaluation of WFP's support to smallholder farmers and its expanded portfolio across the agriculture value chain in Bhutan: January 2019 to June 2021
	Cambodia	WFP. 2020. Endline Evaluation of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern Dole Grant Food for Education Programme for WFP Cambodia: FY 2017–2019 WFP. 2023. Endline Activity Evaluation of USDA McGovern Dole Grant (FFE-442-2019-013-00) for WFP School Feeding in Cambodia, 2019–2023 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Cambodia WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023 WFP. 2024. Endline Evaluation of USDA Local and Regional Food Aid Procurement Grant (LRP-442-2019-011-00) for WFP School Feeding in Cambodia: 1 November 2019 to 30 September 2024
	India	WFP. 2019. Endline Evaluation of the Target Public Distribution Reforms Project in Bhubaneswar (Odisha): 2014–2019 WFP. 2020. Assessment of Fortification of Mid-Day Meal Programme in Dhenkanal, Odisha: 2016–2018 WFP. 2022. Evaluation of India WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023
	Indonesia	WFP. 2020. Evaluation of Indonesia WFP Country Strategic Plan 2017–2020
	Kyrgyzstan	WFP. 2022. Evaluation of the Kyrgyz Republic WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2022
	Nepal	WFP. 2019. USDA McGovern Dole Food for Education Program in Nepal 2014–2017, end-line evaluation report combined with baseline (2017–2020) WFP. 2019. End-term evaluation of Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) in Dhading, Gorkha and Nuwakot districts of Nepal WFP. 2022. Endline evaluation of USDA McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Programme in Nepal FY17 WFP. 2023. Adapting to Climate Induced Threats to Food Production and Food Security in the Karnali Region of Nepal (2018–2022) WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Nepal WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023
	Pakistan	WFP. 2022. Evaluation of Humanitarian Response Facilities Network in Pakistan from January 2014 to September 2020 WFP. 2022. Evaluation of Pakistan WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2022
	Philippines	WFP. 2022. Thematic Evaluation of WFP Philippines' Country Capacity Strengthening Activities July 2018–June 2022 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of the Philippines WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2023
	Timor-Leste	WFP. 2020. Evaluation of Timor-Leste WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2020

Region	Country	Evaluations included in the synthesis (final sample)
RBC	Armenia	WFP. Forthcoming. Evaluation of Armenia WFP Country Strategic Plan, 2019–2025
	Egypt	WFP. 2022. Evaluation of the First 1000 Days Programme in Egypt 2017 to 2021 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Egypt WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2023
	Iraq	WFP. 2023. Evaluation of WFP livelihood support, asset creation and climate adaptation activities in Iraq from January 2020 to December 2021 WFP. 2024. Evaluation of Iraq WFP Transitional Interim and Country Strategic Plans, 2018–2024
	Tunisia	WFP. 2019. Evaluation of WFP's activities to strengthen capacity for the improvement of the school meals programme from 2016 to 2018 in Tunisia
	Türkiye	WFP. 2022. Final Evaluation Report of WFP Turkey Decentralized Evaluation WFP. <i>Forthcoming</i> . Evaluation of Türkiye country strategic plan for 2023–2025
RBD	Ghana	WFP. 2021. Final Evaluation of Enhanced Nutrition and Value Chains (ENVAC) project 2016–2021 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Ghana WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023
RBJ	Eswatini	WFP. 2019. Evaluation of National School Feeding Programme in Eswatini 2010–2018 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of linking Eswatini Smallholder Farmers to the Home-grown School Feeding Market (HGSF) in Eswatini from 2019 to 2021
	Lesotho	WFP. 2022. Evaluation of Asset Creation and Public Works Activities in Lesotho 2015–2019 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Lesotho WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2024 WFP. 2023. Thematic Evaluation of WFP's Country Capacity Strengthening Activities in Lesotho 2019 to 2023
	Namibia	WFP. 2020. Evaluation of Namibia National School Feeding Programme 2012–2018 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Namibia WFP Country Strategic Plan 2017–2023
	Zambia	WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Zambia WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023
	Zimbabwe	WFP. 2021. Evaluation of Zimbabwe WFP Country Strategic Plan 2017–2021 WFP. 2022. Evaluation of R4 Rural Resilience Initiative in Masvingo and Rushinga Districts in Zimbabwe January 2018–June 2021
RBN	Kenya	WFP. 2020. Final evaluation of the USDA-supported Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) project in Kenya FY 2017–2020 WFP. 2023. Kenya USDA McGovern -Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Programme – Final Evaluation: 2016 to 2022 WFP. 2023. Final evaluation of the Joint UN SDG Funded Programme for Social Protection in Kenya 2020–2022 WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Kenya WFP Country Strategic Plan 2018–2023
	Regional	WFP. 2021. WFP Contribution to Market Development and Food Systems in Southern Africa: A thematic Evaluation (2018 to 2021) WFP. 2022. Thematic Evaluation of Supply Chain outcomes in the Food System in Eastern Africa from 2016 to 2021

Region	Country	Evaluations included in the synthesis (final sample)
RBP	Colombia	<p>WFP. 2021. <i>Evaluación conjunta de la actividad articulada de Progresando con Solidaridad y el Servicio Nacional de Salud, con apoyo del Programa Mundial de Alimentos, para la prevención de la desnutrición y la anemia en población nutricionalmente vulnerable de la República Dominicana 2014–2020</i></p> <p>WFP. 2022. <i>Evaluación final conjunta de piloto de protección social reactiva a emergencias en Arauca, Colombia Mayo 2020 a Febrero 2021</i></p> <p>WFP. 2022. <i>Evaluación final del Proyecto School Feeding Response Activity 2019-2021 Colombia desde 2018 hasta 2021</i></p> <p>WFP. 2024. <i>Evaluación del Plan estratégico para Colombia 2021–2024</i></p>
	Dominican Republic	WFP. 2023. Evaluation of Dominican Republic WFP Country Strategic Plan 2019–2023
	Peru	<p>WFP. 2022. <i>Evaluación del Efecto Estratégico 1 hacia los objetivos Hambre Cero a través de la abogacía, comunicación y movilización, del Plan Estratégico de País – Perú (2017–2021)</i></p> <p>WFP. 2022. <i>Evaluación de Plan Estratégico País de PMA para el Peru para 2018–2022</i></p>
	Regional	<p>WFP. 2024. Flexible Systems-Effective Responses? Regional Evaluation of WFP's contribution to Shock-Responsive Social Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean (2015–2022)</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Final Evaluation of the binational climate change adaptation project in Colombia and Ecuador (2016–2024)</p>
Global-scope evaluations (policy evaluations and strategic evaluations)		
Global	Global	<p>WFP. 2019. Evaluation of the WFP People Strategy (2014–2017)</p> <p>WFP. 2019. Strategic Evaluation of WFP Support for Enhanced Resilience</p> <p>WFP. 2019. Evaluation of the Update of WFP's Safety Nets Policy</p> <p>WFP. 2019. Evaluation of WFP's Capacity to Respond to Emergencies</p> <p>WFP. 2020. Strategic Evaluation of Funding WFP's Work</p> <p>WFP. 2020. Evaluation of the Gender Policy (2015–2020)</p> <p>WFP. 2020. Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls</p> <p>WFP. 2021. Evaluation of the WFP South-South and Triangular Cooperation Policy</p> <p>WFP. 2021. Global End-term Evaluation of the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda from 2014 to 2020</p> <p>WFP. 2021. Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-Based Agencies</p> <p>WFP. 2021. Strategic evaluation of the contribution of school feeding activities to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals</p> <p>WFP. 2022. Evaluation of the WFP Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic</p> <p>WFP. 2022. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Covid-19 Humanitarian response</p> <p>WFP. 2022. Strategic Evaluation of WFP's work on Nutrition and HIV/AIDS</p> <p>WFP. 2022. Evaluation of the Policy on WFP's Role in Peacebuilding in Transition Settings</p> <p>WFP. 2022. Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Use of Technology in Constrained Environments</p>

Region	Country	Evaluations included in the synthesis (final sample)
		<p>WFP. 2023. Evaluation of WFP's Disaster Risk Reduction and Management and Climate Change Policies</p> <p>WFP. 2023. Evaluation of WFP's Policy on Building Resilience for Food Security and Nutrition</p> <p>WFP. 2023. Evaluation of WFP's Policy on Country Strategic Plans</p> <p>UNAIDS. 2023. An evaluation of the work of the Joint Programme on HIV and Social Protection</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Evaluation of WFP's Environmental Policy</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Evaluation of WFP's Emergency Preparedness Policy</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Mid-term evaluation of the WFP Strategic Plan 2022–2025</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Mid-term Evaluation of WFP's Private Sector Partnerships and Fundraising Strategy 2020–2025</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Strategic Evaluation of WFP's Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</p> <p>WFP.2025. Strategic Evaluation on WFP's support to refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants</p>
Evaluation syntheses, summaries of evaluation evidence, annual evaluation reports		
	Global/regional scope	<p>WFP. 2021. Evaluation synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations.</p> <p>WFP. 2023. Synthesis of evidence and lessons on WFP's cooperating partners from centralized and decentralized evaluations</p> <p>WFP. 2024. Annual evaluation report: 2023 in review</p> <p>WFP. 2025. Summary of Evaluation Evidence on Partnership with Governments in Southern Africa</p> <p>WFP. 2025 (<i>forthcoming</i>). Summary of evidence: country capacity strengthening</p>

Source: Office of Evaluation Management Information System.

Abbreviations: HQ = headquarters; RBB = Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific; RBC = Regional Bureau for the Middle East, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe; RBD = Regional Bureau for Western Africa; RBJ = Regional Bureau for Southern Africa; RBN = Regional Bureau for Eastern Africa.

Acronyms

CSP	country strategic plan
MICs	middle-income countries