



World Food Programme
Programme Alimentaire Mondial
Programa Mundial de Alimentos
برنامج الأغذية العالمي

Executive Board

First regular session

Rome, 28 February–2 March 2022

Distribution: General

Agenda item 6

Date: 17 January 2022

WFP/EB.1/2022/6-B

Original: English

Evaluation reports

For consideration

Executive Board documents are available on WFP's website (<https://executiveboard.wfp.org>).

Summary report on the evaluation of the WFP response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Executive summary

Introduction

The independent evaluation of the WFP response to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic during the period from February 2020 to June 2021 examined the adaptive capacity of WFP under pandemic conditions. The evaluation adopted a “retrospective developmental” design.

Findings

Overall, the evaluation found that WFP's response to the pandemic during the timeframe was agile and adaptive but came with a high human cost. Although unprepared for a global pandemic, WFP adapted swiftly to face new demands. Corporate strategic frameworks were quickly developed, although differing conditions from region to region placed a strain on decision making. Fundraising was novel and responsive to needs. A managed balance was achieved between the “no regrets” ethos of humanitarian delivery and external accountability. Human resource and staff well-being systems were adapted but employees at all levels endured very considerable strain. Knowledge management was unsystematic, and managing information flows between headquarters and country offices placed a considerable burden on the regional bureaux.

Despite a steep learning curve, the WFP common services response was agile, capable and time-efficient. Some early-stage tensions arose in partnerships with other United Nations entities but were overcome by willingness and commitment on all sides. WFP aligned itself with government responses, responding flexibly to new requests, while cooperating partners reported greater openness and flexibility. Advocacy expanded, both at the global and country levels, for example on the movement of humanitarian workers.

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

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Country strategic plans were adapted but the process for revising them and country portfolio budgets was cumbersome. Key revisions included increased emergency focus; adaptation of targeting, including in urban areas; greater use of cash transfers; scale-up of social protection activities; expansion of capacity strengthening and advisory support; and provision of supply chain and logistics services. WFP swiftly implemented biosecurity measures for activities. Timeliness was mixed, although the in-kind supply chain was largely sustained. WFP did not scale up or reprioritize its corporate commitment to gender equality. However, efforts were made to maintain communication with affected populations.

Results

The response served a record number of 115.6 million beneficiaries in 2020, or 93 percent of those targeted, and had served 90 million by October 2021. WFP assistance prevented any significant deterioration in beneficiaries' food security and nutrition status. Common services provision successfully underpinned the international humanitarian response. Internally, existing systems and capacities mostly expanded or pivoted to meet needs.

Conclusions

The evaluation concludes that although corporately unprepared for a global pandemic, WFP stayed to deliver and adapted to meet needs. Its common services response and increased advocacy have changed the WFP global profile, to that of a "systems enabler" for humanitarian response. However, these achievements had a high human cost. WFP owes an immense debt to its workforce, which shouldered the burdens of staying to deliver under often intense strain and, in 29 cases, sadly lost their lives to coronavirus disease.

Items to consider

The evaluation report offers six suggestions to help stimulate reflection. These are to reposition WFP as a key actor in COVID-19 recovery; to build on its role as a systems enabler during the pandemic; to scale up advocacy at all levels; to create a shared overview and anticipate management arrangements during global events; to ensure resilient but adaptive systems; and to adopt a corporate ethos of staff care.

Draft decision*

The Board takes note of the summary report on the evaluation of the WFP response to the COVID-19 pandemic (WFP/EB.1/2022/6-B) and encourages management to give careful thought to the items for consideration set out in the report, taking into account the views expressed by Board members during their discussion of the matter. The Board notes that management's response to the evaluation will be presented in two stages, with a broad, strategic narrative response presented at the Board's 2022 first regular session and a complete response, in the usual format, presented at the Board's 2022 annual session.

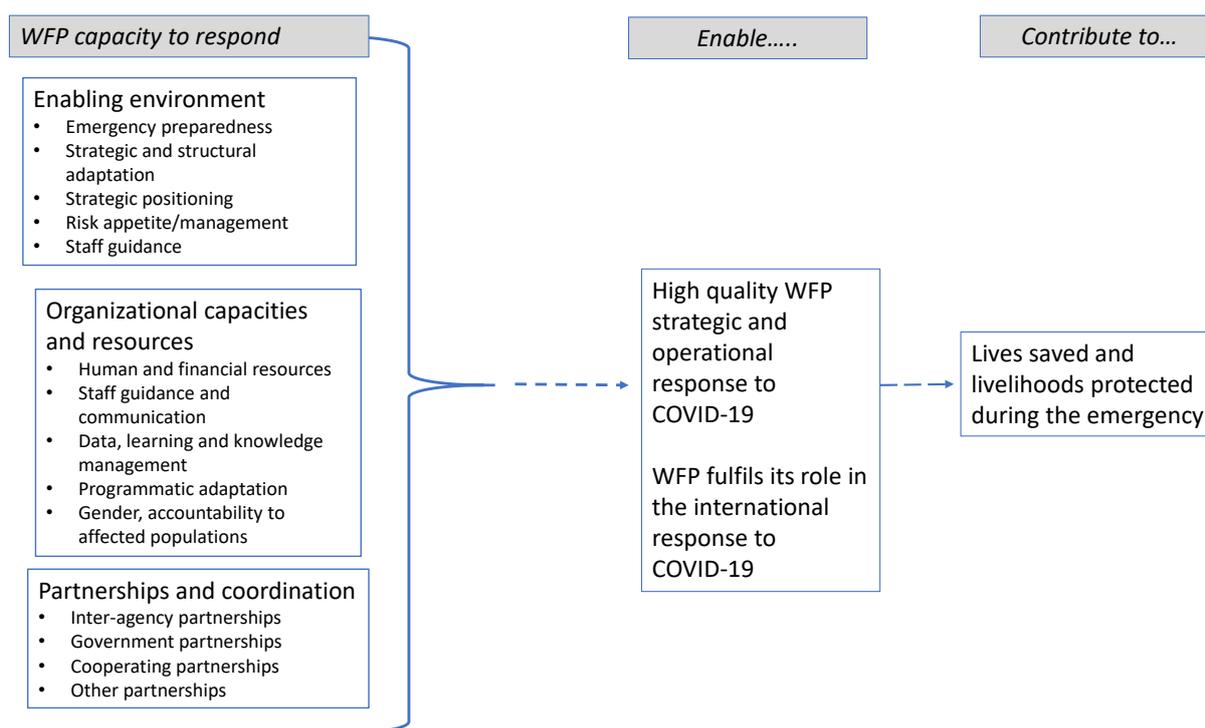
* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

Introduction

Evaluation features

1. The WFP Office of Evaluation commissioned an independent evaluation of the WFP response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to meet organizational learning and accountability needs. The evaluation covered the period from February 2020 to June 2021. It followed a previous (2020) evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies covering the period from 2011 to 2018.¹
2. The evaluation asked three questions, which all aimed to explore the adaptive capacity of WFP under pandemic conditions:
 - i) How well did the enabling environment and organizational assets of WFP adapt to respond to the demands of the COVID-19 crisis?
 - ii) How well did WFP fulfil its role as a partner in the collective humanitarian response?
 - iii) What was achieved, and what was learned?
3. The evaluation was conducted under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, including WFP in emergency mode; travel and movement restrictions; and the need to avoid unduly burdening country offices. Accordingly, it adopted a "retrospective developmental" design, which focuses on providing evidence to support adaptation in dynamic environments. This involved the application of three principles:
 - i) prioritizing organizational learning needs;
 - ii) ensuring consultation and evidence sharing with stakeholders throughout; and
 - iii) integrating with the surrounding evidence building environment.
4. The evaluation applied an analytical framework that organized the WFP response around three areas: the enabling environment (the systems and structures put in place to enable the response); WFP assets and capacity to deliver the response; and partnerships. The framework also integrated the results of the response.

¹ "Summary report on the strategic evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies (2011–2018)" (WFP/EB.1/2020/5-A).

Figure 1: Analytical framework

Source: Evaluation team, August 2020.

5. The evaluation produced ten thematic evidence summaries on various aspects of the response (and all aspects of WFP systems and capacities) (table 1). Consultations on the evidence summaries were held from March to July 2021.

1. Workforce management	6. Programme adaptation
2. Strategic adaptation and management	7. Cross-cutting issues
3. Evidence, data and knowledge management	8. Oversight and risk management systems
4. Financing	9. Emergency preparedness
5. Guidance and communication	10. Partnerships

6. Interviews were conducted with 340 stakeholders from inside and outside WFP covering 74 of 84 WFP country offices and all six regional bureaux. Corporate results were assessed from a sample of 34 countries, and over 800 documents were reviewed.
7. Despite a comprehensive evidence base, limitations included the inability to observe the COVID-19 response in situ due to travel restrictions and limited scope to inquire into individual country-level and programme area work given the need to avoid burdening country offices. Validation with stakeholders, including through a series of regional workshops in November 2021, was prioritized as a means of mitigating these limitations.

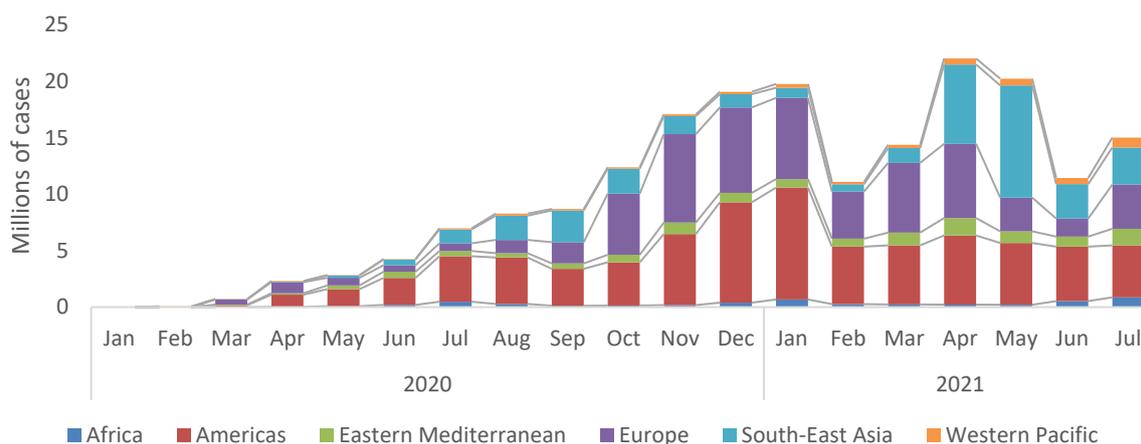
Context

8. The COVID-19 pandemic created a “perfect storm” for humanitarian actors. Organizations faced major disruptions with borders closed, supply chains impeded and access to affected populations constrained. The World Health Organization (WHO) initially declared the

outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern (30 January 2020) and subsequently a global pandemic (11 March 2020).

9. COVID-19 affected different regions and countries at different times. Beginning in East Asia, it rapidly spread to Europe and the Americas, following international travel patterns at the time (figure 2). Cases were relatively few in East Asia in the early stages, while Europe, in particular Italy, and the Americas were badly affected. In 2021 rates rose in Africa, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific, and the pandemic continues into 2022.

Figure 2: A pandemic in waves

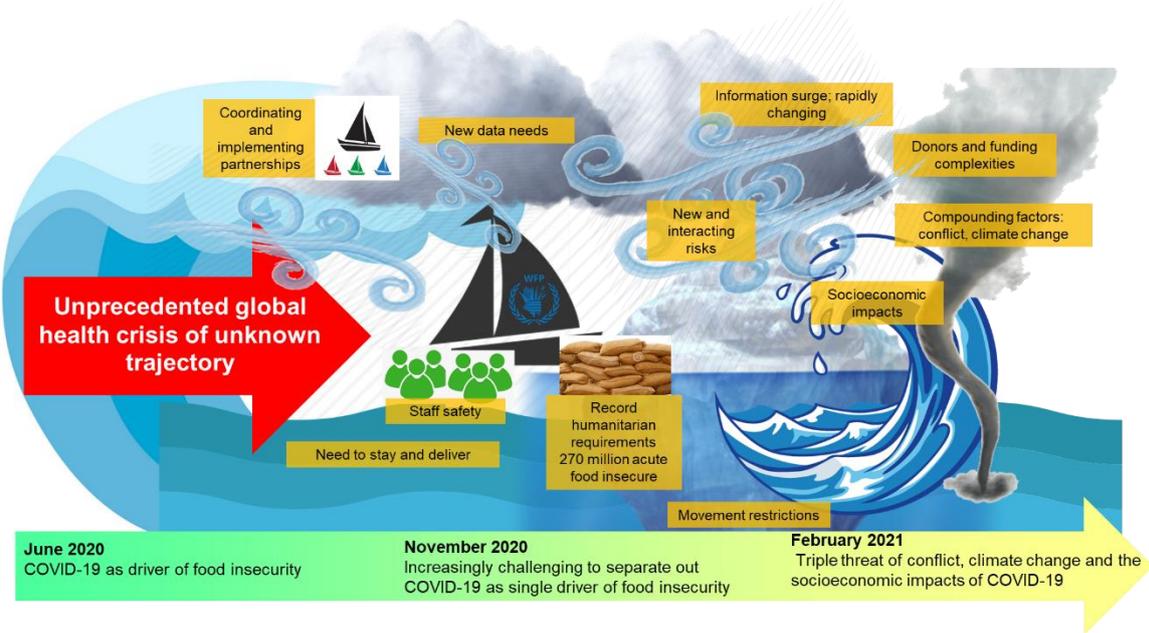


Source: WHO Coronavirus Dashboard, August 2021.

10. Key features of the pandemic included unprecedented humanitarian needs, with 270 million people directly at risk of acute hunger;² the pandemic's covariate nature, with both the virus itself and restrictions imposed by governments creating major social and economic effects; and deepened inequality, with women and girls, refugees, the displaced and those living in conflict or with disabilities experiencing the greatest negative effects. By mid-2020, the likely medium-term effects of the pandemic were becoming apparent.
11. The pandemic created complexity for global and national response systems and uncertainty as governments and populations struggled to respond to an unknown pathology with no defined trajectory (figure 3).

² United Nations. 2020. *Global humanitarian response plan COVID-19: United Nations Coordinated Appeal, April–December 2020*.

Figure 3: Complexity and uncertainty



12. National governments assumed primary responsibility for managing the pandemic on their territories. Responses were highly varied around the world, depending on the timing and nature of the pandemic’s unfolding, political and economic factors and national experience with pandemic management.
13. Internationally, on 25 March 2020, the United Nations launched a USD 2 billion global humanitarian response plan (GHRP), targeting nearly 250 million people. Funding appeals were subsequently updated to USD 6.71 billion (May 2020); USD 10.26 billion (July 2020); and USD 9.5 billion (November 2020). The United Nations framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 was launched on 27 April 2020.³

The WFP response

14. WFP declared its Level 3 emergency response on 27 March 2020. The response had two elements: the WFP-specific response (table 2) and engagement in the GHRP (paragraph 15).

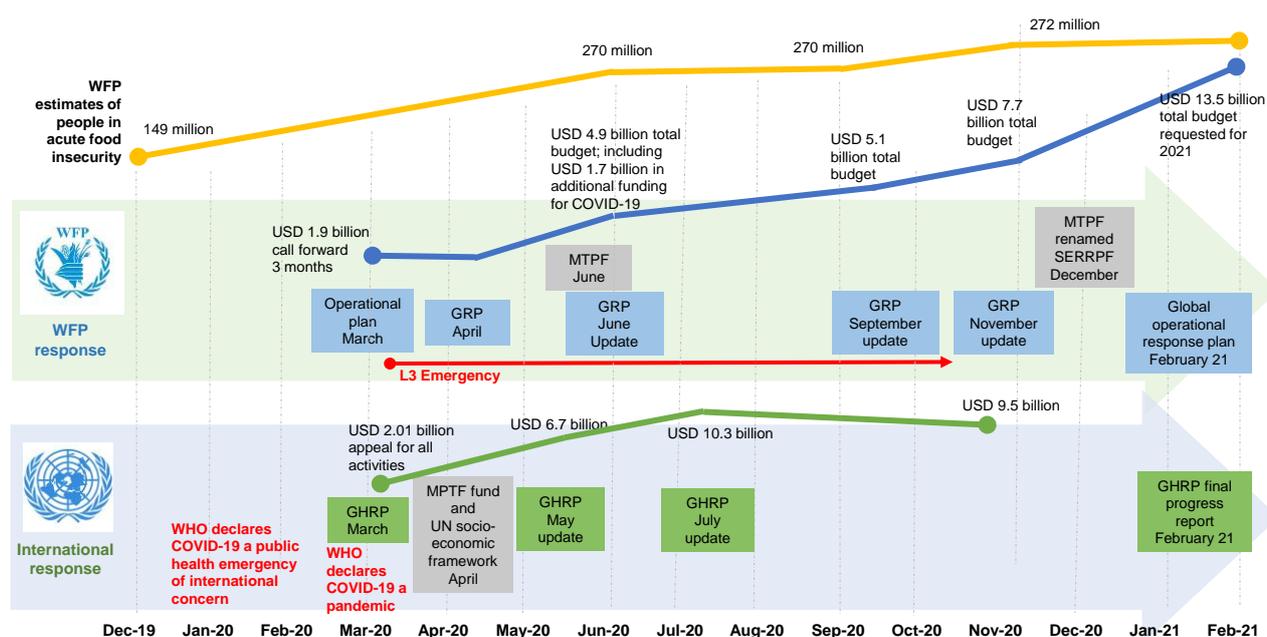
TABLE 2: THE WFP RESPONSE	
Date	Action
13 March 2020	WFP operational plan , including the strategic pre-positioning of three months of food supplies for priority operations
27 March 2020	Level 3 emergency declared
29 March 2020	Financial “call forward” for USD 1.9 billion of committed and anticipated contributions to enable an initial response
11 April 2020	Draft global implementation plan to sustain, prioritize and scale up WFP operations
24 April 2020	WFP global COVID-19 response plan (GRP)
1 June 2020	Medium-term programme framework
29 June 2020	GRP June update request: USD 4.9 billion requested to support WFP’s portfolio across 83 countries

³ United Nations. 2020. *A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19: April 2020*.

Date	Action
30 September 2020	GRP September update: request revised upward to USD 5.1 billion
31 October 2020	Level 3 response deactivated
18 November 2020	GRP November update: USD 7.7 billion total budget
15 December 2020	Medium-term programme framework recast as a socioeconomic response and recovery programme framework
18 February 2021	WFP global operational response plan 2021: COVID-19 integrated into global operational planning rather than continued as a stand-alone emergency

15. **GHRP:** Within the international response, WFP supplied common supply chain and logistics services, support for medical evacuation and real-time remote vulnerability monitoring. An initial request of USD 350 million rose to USD 965 million in May 2020 but was subsequently revised down to USD 316 million in October of that year. The May 2020 update included a USD 1.4 billion appeal for food security work, of which approximately 50 percent was requested for WFP. Figure 4 maps the WFP response in relation to that of the United Nations.

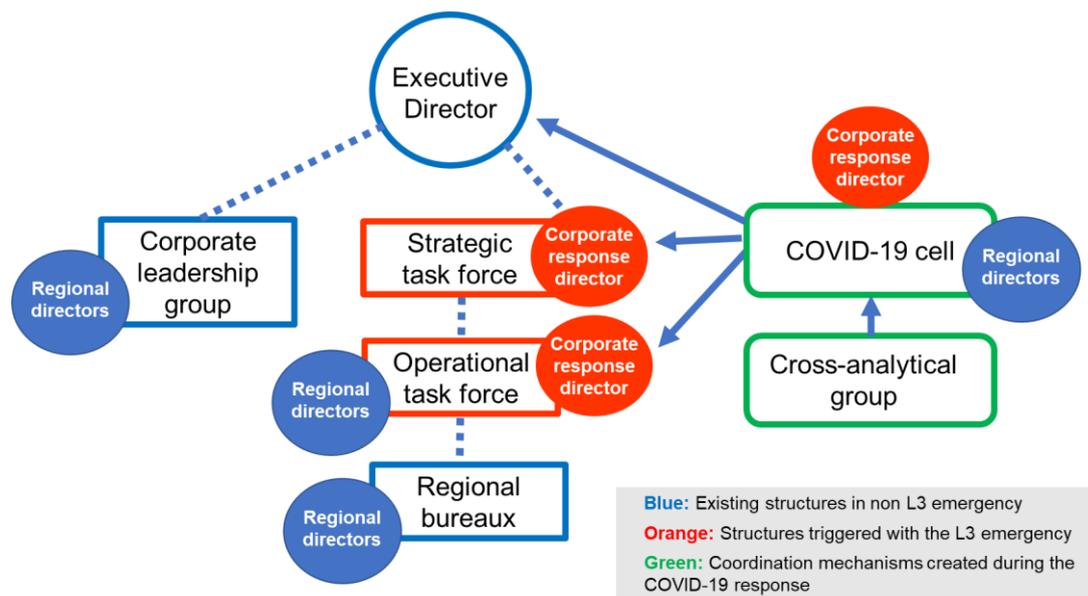
Figure 4: United Nations and WFP response to COVID-19



Abbreviations: SERRPF = socioeconomic response and recovery programme framework; MPTF = Multi-Partner Trust Fund.
Source: Evaluation team.

16. **Management structures.** Strategic and operational task forces were constituted under the Level 3 declaration, which included regional bureaux participation. An Operations Centre COVID-19 cell was also established to conduct scanning and real-time monitoring of the pandemic. Figure 5 shows these and other management structures involved in the COVID-19 response.

Figure 5: Management structures



Source: Evaluation team.

Evaluation findings

Institutional readiness

17. WFP entered the COVID-19 pandemic with a long track record of expertise and professionalism in emergency response, including its response to the Ebola pandemic of 2014–2015. Evaluations praised its agility, flexibility and ability to swiftly scale up,⁴ although the 2020 evaluation of the WFP capacity to respond to emergencies identified needed reforms. In response, some institutional reforms were undertaken but had not yet been completed by early 2020. These included:

- **Global emergency response framework and emergency preparedness systems still being built**, including improved global surge mechanisms, a new emergency protocol and the launch of an updated emergency preparedness and response package.
- **Limitations on human capacity for emergency response** due to heavy reliance (60 percent) on short-term contracts; overstretched individual capacities and the lack of an organization-wide strategy to build necessary capabilities.
- **Advance financing mechanisms still being developed or adapted** such as the Immediate Response Account.
- **Maturing risk systems**, with a new Enterprise Risk Management Division established in 2017, a new policy published in 2018 and risk management culture and capacities continuing to be built.
- **Partnerships being enhanced** in the light of United Nations development system reform, the use of long-term agreements for cooperating partners and an emphasis on private sector partnerships, for example with international financial institutions.

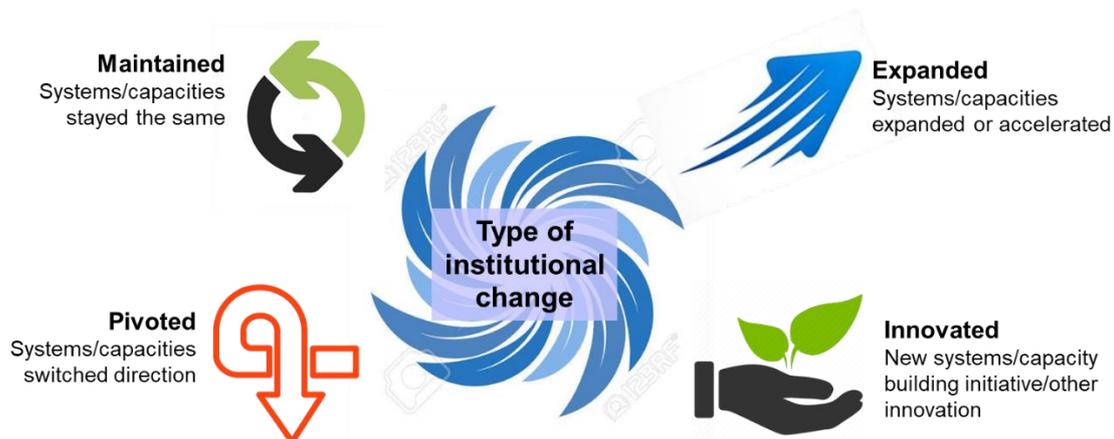
⁴ For example, evaluations of the responses to the Ebola virus disease crisis (2014–2015) (WFP/EB.1/2017/6-B); the crisis in northeast Nigeria (2019) (WFP/EB.2/2019/6-A) and the Syrian regional emergency (2018) (WFP/EB.2/2018/7-B).

18. **Knowledge management systems** remained weak, however, with mechanisms mostly experiential, informal and unsystematic. Gaps persisted in **gender equality and accountability to affected populations**. There was limited consensus on the appropriate balance between WFP's roles in emergency response and in development activity.

How did WFP adapt its systems and capacities for the response?

19. The evaluation analysed WFP organizational capacities and systems with regard to whether and how they had adapted during the pandemic (figure 6).

Figure 6: Analysis of WFP systems and capacities



Source: Evaluation team.

20. Overall the evaluation found that, although WFP – like most international bodies – entered 2020 unprepared for a pandemic on a global scale, it adapted swiftly to face demands.
21. **Emergency declaration:** The WFP Level 3 emergency declaration of 27 March 2020 was not expeditious. It was issued two weeks after the WHO declaration of a global pandemic, while COVID-19 was gaining significant momentum in Europe and the Americas. Its timing was broadly in line with the declarations of some United Nations entities, such as the United Nations Children's Fund, but later than those of others.⁵ Once in place, however, it helped to galvanize external attention and financing and internally enabled surge deployment and adaptive financial management.
22. **Management systems and strategic frameworks:** The global nature of the emergency, and its varied unfolding from region to region, placed a significant strain on decision making. Responsibilities and accountabilities of the strategic and operational task forces were not always clear, and the sub-optimal organizational location of the corporate response director impeded timely decision making.
23. Nonetheless, corporate strategic frameworks were quickly developed. The GRP issued one month after the Level 3 declaration, followed by the medium-term programme framework (later the socioeconomic response and recovery programme) on 1 June 2020. However, there was limited interconnection between these plans and variable ownership and understanding of them across the organization.

⁵ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees declared a global level-2 emergency on 25 March 2020; the United Nations Children's Fund declared a Level 3 emergency on 20 April 2020; WHO and the International Organization for Migration issued their strategic preparedness and response plans for COVID-19 in February 2020; and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee system-wide scale-up protocols adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic were endorsed on 17 April 2020.

24. **Data and knowledge management:** WFP pivoted to use the best available but imperfect datasets to generate global food insecurity estimates as well as its own needs-based figures. Some confusion arose regarding food insecurity figures generated by WFP and those produced by partners; donors would have appreciated a single clear set of figures. However, WFP increased and adapted its production of food insecurity data and analysis to serve both the WFP and wider international responses as a global public good.
25. Some real-time learning was conducted through internal systems, but experience from past emergency responses, such as from the 2014–2015 Ebola pandemic in West Africa, was not systematically applied due to weak knowledge management systems. Instead, knowledge transfer was largely ad hoc and person to person, based on staff's prior professional experience.
26. **Financing:** The WFP fundraising approach – which prioritized first a “call forward” of existing resource commitments – was novel and overall successful, with over 80 percent of requested funds secured in 2020. However, delayed donor contributions, little increase in flexible funding and a heavy emphasis on emergency funding created challenges. Only USD 261.5 million was raised for common services against the nearly USD 1 billion initial request through the GHRP, an amount considered overambitious by many stakeholders. WFP created new internal financial instruments to help manage funding inflows and adapted existing internal mechanisms to help balance gaps in funding coverage and sequencing. However, weaknesses in existing instruments were magnified by the large sums of money received.
27. **Risk management:** Balancing the no regrets ethos of humanitarian delivery with accountability to partner governments, donors and other funders proved challenging, and some tensions arose. Overall, however, WFP achieved a managed balance, with risk concerns prioritized from an early stage and dedicated risk-related exercises conducted. Staff observed procedures, and risk tolerance did not increase overall. Adaptations in both internal audit and evaluation systems reduced immediate demands on staff while ensuring continued oversight.
28. **Workforce management:** A major global surge response was launched to support staffing at the country level. Despite initial challenges, over 500 deployments took place. Human resource and staff well-being systems were adapted on a real-time basis, with greater flexibility and devolution of decision making appreciated by country-based staff. To support physical and mental well-being, additional medical staff were recruited, new procedures implemented and staff counselling services expanded.
29. However, as of December 2021, 29 WFP employees had sadly lost their lives to COVID-19.⁶ Moreover, at all levels and in many locations, WFP staff endured very considerable strain. Female staff in particular often faced pressures of combining domestic and professional roles. Those locked down in hazardous or remote environments incurred very high levels of stress, as did staff experiencing harsh lockdowns in some countries. Remote working faced many practical difficulties, as well as a prevailing culture of “presenteeism” and some managers unaccustomed to supervising work from a distance. However, adaptations were made, and some aspects of remote working continued into 2021.
30. **Internal cohesion:** Enhanced cross-functional coordination supported internal cohesion, and WFP streamlined its management communications and deployed a “gatekeeper” function to focus headquarters demands on country offices. It also located regional bureaux as interlocutors between headquarters and the field. Stakeholders appreciated the consistent WFP positioning in external dialogue. However, diverse vantage points and differing pandemic experiences globally prevented the development of a shared internal

⁶ As reported to WFP's Medical Service and Staff Wellness Division as of 15 December 2021.

understanding. Regional bureaux faced significant demands in managing communication flows between headquarters and country offices and translating corporate guidance for use at the country and regional levels.

How did WFP adapt its partnerships and strategic positioning?

31. **Common services:** Despite a steep learning curve, the scaling up of WFP common services provision, including cargo and passenger transport, medical and medical evacuation facilities, earned it significant international appreciation and respect. The timeliness and agility of service provision was highly valued by all partners.
32. Challenges included the establishment of humanitarian staging hubs, which required protracted negotiations with host governments and United Nations partners, and the logistical and practical implications of setting up medical treatment centres for humanitarian workers, with five planned but only those in Addis Ababa and Accra eventually utilized as intended. The co-leadership of medical evacuation services with the United Nations Department of Operational Support required system-wide agreement on entitlements as well as negotiation of roles and responsibilities, including with regard to the use of air assets.
33. **United Nations partnerships:** Some early-stage tensions arose in some of WFP's relations with other United Nations entities, particularly when the emergency "instinct" of those entities was less mature than that of WFP. However, willingness and commitment on all sides allowed these issues to be mostly ironed out, laying the foundations for future collaboration. At the country level, there was broad praise for WFP's risk appetite and no regrets approach and its focus on response.
34. **Government partnerships:** National requests to WFP were shaped by the depth and scale of the pandemic and its effect in each country, national response capacity; pre-existing strategic or operational cooperation between each government and the United Nations or WFP; and government perceptions of WFP agility, ability to respond quickly and at scale and technical competence. Overall, WFP aligned its efforts with government responses, although this sometimes took it well beyond its comfort zone, for example into urban targeting or working with unfamiliar ministries or national focal points.
35. **Cooperating partnerships:** Cooperating partners reported increased openness, flexibility and willingness to listen from WFP during the pandemic response. Private sector partnerships expanded, including to support the transport of COVID-19-related cargo and humanitarian personnel, although some challenges were encountered with regard to WFP legal and due diligence requirements.
36. **Advocacy:** WFP also expanded its global advocacy in 2020 and 2021, becoming a more visible presence in international forums for the pandemic response, including the United Nations Security Council, the Group of Seven, the Group of Twenty, permanent missions to the United Nations, the Secretary-General's office and United Nations system communications briefings. At the country level, the leveraging of WFP relationships with governments for advocacy on humanitarian access and movement for humanitarian workers was appreciated by partners.

How did WFP adapt programming to meet needs?

37. Overall, WFP responded with agility and flexibility to meet new programmatic needs.
38. WFP swiftly implemented biosecurity measures, including the use of masks and personal protective equipment, installation of handwashing facilities, body temperature checks and social distancing measures at activity sites. School feeding programmes were adapted to distribute take-home rations where schools were closed.

39. Country strategic plans were revised to meet new conditions as the pandemic unfolded. Sixty-six were revised in 2020, with their combined budgets increased by USD 4.3 billion through COVID-19–related additional resources. Country offices, however, struggled with the budget revision process, which can involve up to 120 separate steps⁷ and takes on average between four and five months, including approval.
40. Major country strategic plan changes included an increased emergency focus, particularly for those WFP country offices delivering largely technical advice and capacity strengthening; adapting targeting to meet new needs, including in urban areas; increased use of cash-based transfers and, linked to this, expanded engagement in social protection measures; scaling up social protection-related activities; expanding capacity strengthening and advisory support; and providing supply chain and logistics services to governments.
41. A wide range of external factors influenced the shift to more emergency-focused programming, including school closures and the consequent transfer of some beneficiaries to social assistance programmes; the moving of some beneficiaries of asset creation and livelihoods programmes to unrestricted transfer programmes; increased government requests for engagement in social protection-linked cash transfers; and donor earmarking.
42. Table 3 provides examples of programme adaptation.

TABLE 3: PROGRAMME ADAPTATION	
General food assistance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the number of distribution sites and the use of cluster locations; • Loading electronic cards in batches to avoid crowding; installing additional ATMs; • Switching to household and individual level distributions; • Increasing transfer values and reducing frequency; • Suspending biometric verification; and • Providing at-home distributions to the most vulnerable. 	<p>In Somalia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the prepared meals activity was halted and its beneficiaries were given cash-based transfers in lieu of the meals.</p> <p>In Lebanon, WFP undertook batch-loading of electronic cards to avoid ATM crowding.</p> <p>In the Central African Republic, at-home distributions were provided to the most vulnerable beneficiaries.</p> <p>In the State of Palestine, WFP developed a card-free system that could be activated in shops through the use of a seven-digit code sent to beneficiaries' mobile phones.</p>
School feeding	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of take-home food rations where authorized by governments;* • Use of cash-based transfers; and • Technical assistance to government programmes, e.g. safe return to schools. 	<p>In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Sri Lanka, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen the school feeding programme was modified to provide take-home rations.</p> <p>In Honduras, WFP worked with the Government to provide take-home rations for 1.25 million children.</p>

⁷ "Summary report on the strategic evaluation of WFP's capacity to respond to emergencies (2011–2018)" (WFP/EB.1/2020/5-A); internal review of Level 3 emergency response (2021).

TABLE 3: PROGRAMME ADAPTATION	
Asset creation and livelihoods/resilience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from communal to household level asset creation such as home gardens. 	<p>In the Syrian Arab Republic and the Niger, WFP supported the conversion of communal asset creation to the household level.</p> <p>In Zimbabwe, WFP supported home gardens.</p>
Nutrition	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from delivery through health centres to community-based interventions; and Use of nutrition programming at the community level to disseminate messaging on COVID-19 prevention 	<p>In Myanmar, there was a shift from health facilities to community service delivery.</p> <p>In Guinea-Bissau, WFP disseminated health messaging through the radio on the country's national nutrition day.</p>

Source: Annual performance reports.

* This applied in all countries examined other than Mozambique, where the Government did not permit the use of take-home rations.

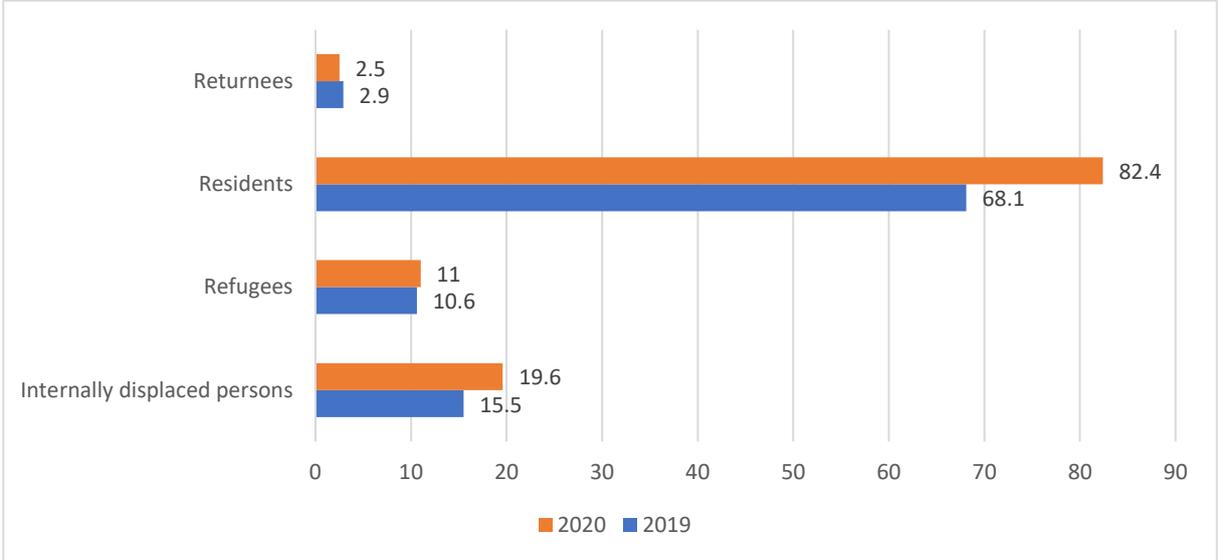
43. Beneficiary targeting was adapted to needs, including through the identification of new beneficiaries and the transfer of existing beneficiaries to new forms of assistance, such as from school feeding to social protection schemes. A particular area of expansion was in urban targeting, in which WFP had little recent experience.

Box 1: Urban targeting

- In **Kenya**, at the request of the Government, WFP launched an urban response in Nairobi's informal settlements and Mombasa to assist 478,000 people adversely affected by the pandemic with cash and nutrition support.
- In **Zimbabwe**, adaptation to COVID-19 included the scale-up of urban assistance by more than fivefold, to reach 550,000 people through April 2021.
- In **Afghanistan**, WFP assisted families with a two-month supply of cash-based assistance focusing on urban areas, reaching 1.2 million vulnerable people.
- In **South Sudan**, WFP scaled up shock-responsive urban safety net programming, supporting 185,000 urban residents with cash and food assistance.

44. Refugees, internally displaced persons and resident beneficiaries – who usually reside in urban areas – were reached in greater numbers than in 2019 (figure 7).

Figure 7: Refugees, internally displaced persons and resident beneficiaries served in 2020



Source: WFP 2019 and 2020 annual performance reports.

- 45. However, there was no significant shift in the number of women and girls assisted, which rose only 3.9 percent from 2019, despite the increased effects of the pandemic on gender inequality.
- 46. **Cash-based transfer programmes** expanded significantly, with a 37 percent increase in the use of cash in 2020, to USD 2.1 billion, and USD 1.7 billion distributed in the first nine months of 2021. WFP supported governments in 65 countries in scaling up and adapting existing social protection measures in response to COVID-19, including to develop policy frameworks and refine targeting.

Box 2: Expanding technical support for social protection

- In **Ecuador**, WFP complemented the Government’s social protection programme through two types of cash-based transfers to help meet the basic food needs of vulnerable households during the pandemic.
- WFP helped develop national frameworks for shock-responsive social protection and expanding policy frameworks in **Cambodia, the Niger, Nigeria and Somalia**.
- WFP provided technical assistance in **Jordan** to the Government’s national aid fund to digitize its cash assistance programme.
- WFP contributed to the design of a unified social registry in **Chad** to facilitate safety nets and serve as a platform for activating emergency responses.
- WFP helped develop a coordinated strategy for social protection engagement between the United Nations system and national authorities in **the Syrian Arab Republic**.

- 47. **Country capacity strengthening** support expanded, including in respect of supply chains, logistics, food security monitoring and analysis and programme design (box 3):

Box 3: Expanding capacity strengthening support

- In **Myanmar**, WFP provided technical support to help the Government design its planned cash-based response to COVID-19.
- In **Sri Lanka**, WFP entered into a partnership with a local university and a university based in the United States of America to develop methodologies for accurate targeting in urban areas.
- In **Burkina Faso**, WFP provided training to support the Government in vulnerability assessment and targeting and in the management of procurement and distribution systems.
- In **Iraq**, with school feeding activities paused, WFP focused on capacity strengthening activities, e.g. training on digital skills, communication and data collection for education personnel.
- In **the Gambia**, WFP seconded technical support personnel to the national disaster management agency to assist with the COVID-19 response.

48. WFP also led or co-led with governments the coordination of the **logistics and supply chain** aspects of the United Nations response, including by engaging in the supply chain interagency coordination cell. It provided technical support and advice on supply chains; storage and handling for humanitarian and health cargo; procurement of goods and services; and tangible logistics assets and services. For example, in Honduras, the Government requested WFP support for the entire supply chain, including cash-based transfer delivery channels and procurement and distribution of commodities.⁸
49. **Timeliness** was mixed, with delays or temporary suspensions caused by biosecurity requirements; adaptation to government restrictions; and supply chain constraints. New activities also required time to develop systems, prepare new partnerships, e.g. with financial service providers, and engage with relevant stakeholders.
50. The **in-kind supply chain** was largely sustained through forward purchasing and increased local purchases; pre-positioning of food resources; and reinforcement of key corridors with specialized overland transport and technical assistance. Regional availability of inventory was variable and pipeline breaks occurred in many countries, but supply chain costs were kept largely stable overall.
51. WFP did not scale up its corporate human or financial resources to address **gender equality**, nor re-prioritize for greater attention to the issue. Some country offices made adaptations as needs changed, but responses varied according to management interest and commitment, the seniority of the gender adviser or focal point in the country and the resources available.
52. Despite physical access constraints, WFP adapted to keep the flow of **communication** with affected populations open, including through third-party monitoring, toll-free hotlines and call centres. Efforts were also made to maintain community feedback mechanisms, although with greater reliance on remote communication and technology than before.

Results

Food security and nutrition

53. The response served a record 115.6 million beneficiaries in 2020, exceeding those reached in 2019 by almost 20 percent (97.1 million). In all, 93 percent of targeted beneficiaries were reached, with a range of 84–100 percent across all six regions (table 4). Ninety million people were served in the first half of 2021.

⁸ “Summary report on the evaluation of the country strategic plan for Honduras (2018–2021)” (WFP/EB.1/2022/6-D).

Region	WFP regional bureau	Planned (millions)	Actual (millions)	% annual performance
Asia and the Pacific	Asia and the Pacific	20	17.5	88
Middle East and Northern Africa	Middle East and Northern Africa	28	28.1	100
Western Africa	Western Africa	20	18.2	91
Southern Africa	Southern Africa	23	19.3	84
Eastern Africa	Eastern Africa	27	26.5	98
Latin America and the Caribbean	Latin America and the Caribbean	6	6.0	100
Total		124	115.6	93

Source: WFP annual performance report for 2020.

54. Apart from funding constraints, the main COVID-19-related reasons for underachievement were the suspension of activities due to national conditions and supply chain disruptions. The amount of cash and commodities distributed remained virtually the same during 2020 as in 2019.
55. Overall, WFP assistance prevented any significant deterioration in the food security and nutrition status of its beneficiaries – although it did not improve. Against the significant headwinds of the pandemic, however, this is a positive gain (table 5).

Strategic result	Outcome indicators with sufficient evidence to report (ten countries or more in both 2019 and 2020)	Improved from 2019–2020	Remained the same as 2019–2020	Declined from 2019–2020
1	1.1 Maintained/enhanced individual and household access to adequate food	2	16	2
2	2.1 Improved consumption of high-quality, nutrient-dense foods among targeted individuals		7	1
3	3.1 Increased smallholder production and sales	1	1	
4	4.1 Improved household adaptation and resilience to climate and other shocks		2	
5	5.1 Enhanced capacities of public and private sector institutions and systems, including local responders, to identify, target and assist food-insecure and nutritionally vulnerable populations		1	
8	8.1 Enhanced common coordination platforms		1	
Total		3	28	3

Source: 2020 WFP annual country reports.

Enabling the international response

56. WFP common services activities successfully underpinned the global humanitarian response. This has repositioned WFP globally, increasing its visibility and generating considerable reputational capital.

TABLE 6: CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN			
GHRP strategic priority	Results area	Result achieved by the global response	WFP contribution
1	Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality	By December 2020, 55 GHRP countries had received nearly 114 million medical masks.	Cargo services, with 135,000 m ³ of cargo transported from April 2020 to March 2021; establishment of an emergency service marketplace
2	Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods.	Nearly 57 million people in 60 GHRP countries were reached with essential health care services.	Cargo services; passenger services, transporting humanitarian workers (almost 30,000 passengers transported between April 2020 and March 2021); establishment of emergency service marketplace
		A data facility covering 29 countries was set up to support remote data collection and analysis.	Provision of technical support, data and analytics
3	Protect, assist and advocate refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.	9.4 million refugees, internally displaced persons and 1.24 million people most vulnerable to or affected by COVID-19 in 50 GHRP countries received livelihood support.	Provision of food and livelihoods support through existing agreements with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; advocacy of humanitarian access

Source: Evaluation team, based on GHRP and WFP data.

Systems and capacities

57. Internally, existing systems and capacities mostly expanded or pivoted to meet need. Some innovation also flourished. Systems for managing risk and staff well-being, providing a global surge and generating data and analysis all expanded, as did United Nations, government and private sector partnerships and WFP's advocacy role. Response management, workforce and internal financial arrangements, along with estimations of needs, also adapted to the changed external conditions.

Figure 8: Adaptation of systems and capacities



Source: Evaluation team

58. Changes in approaches to gender and the expansion of social protection work occurred at the country level without increased corporate investment. This arguably limited the potential of WFP for transformative change in these areas.
59. The major WFP organizational capacities of agility and resilience – borne from long experience in emergency response – are reflected in these results.

Conclusions

60. Although corporately unprepared for a global pandemic, and despite “bumps on the road”, WFP mostly adapted to meet the needs created by COVID-19. Internal systems for pandemic management largely expanded or pivoted to respond, although areas of longstanding underinvestment such as knowledge management continued to be constrained. Limited central investment in social protection and gender equality did not prevent adaptation on the ground but did restrict the scope for more transformational change. Standard response systems struggled amid a crisis whose defining feature was its global diversity, with no common view of the pandemic’s unfolding and strains and tensions emerging between headquarters and the regional and country levels.
61. Operationally, WFP stayed to deliver even as many other organizations departed. Programmatic action on the ground continued, with cash support, often as part of national social protection responses, and were scaled up to address new and emerging needs. New populations were served with agility, and WFP expanded into urban areas. Technical advice and support were supplied, along with supply chain and logistics support and new, often atypical, requests were addressed with flexibility and agility.
62. The WFP contribution to the global humanitarian response through its common services earned it appreciation and respect from partners around the world. Its achievements here – along with increased external advocacy – have changed its global profile. More than just a safe pair of hands or a capable service provider, it is seen as a critical and fundamental **systems enabler**, without which the international humanitarian response to the pandemic – and ultimately the hungry poor – would have been severely compromised.
63. However, these achievements had a **high human cost**. WFP owes an immense debt to its workforce, which – at all levels – shouldered the burdens of staying to deliver amid often intense conditions of strain. A service-based ethos; individual identity as humanitarians; a culture of flexibility; the familiarity of running towards an emergency even as others leave; and a resolute commitment to the people WFP serves all played their part. But staff care – over and above wellness – has many dimensions and is an organization-wide concern.
64. The pandemic response has posed a vast array of challenges and opportunities for the humanitarian system. Reaching greater clarity on WFP’s *raison d’être* in a world of systemic crises is therefore timely. The evaluation report offers some suggestions for WFP to help maximize its role as a systems enabler and to stimulate reflection as it moves into its next strategic plan period.

Items for consideration

65. The evidence presented in the evaluation indicates a clear strategic positioning for WFP as a systems enabler for the humanitarian architecture of the future – at all levels. Rather than recommendations, six items are presented for WFP to consider as it moves forward to the implementation of its strategic plan for 2022–2025, recognizing that the organization is already engaging with recommendations from the strategic evaluation of its capacity to respond to emergencies.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>1. Reposition WFP as a key actor in COVID-19 recovery. The experience of the pandemic has highlighted the futility of the humanitarian-development divide – particularly in contexts that involve multiple shocks and stressors – and reinforced the importance of the concept of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. WFP has expressed its intention, for example in its strategic plan for 2022–2025, to work on structural vulnerabilities¹ through, for example, resilience activities.</p> <p>The increase in demand for WFP social protection expertise – beyond support for cash transfers as an emergency response – presents a major opportunity to reposition WFP as an integral part of the COVID-19 recovery.</p>	<p>i) The reputational capital garnered by WFP in its COVID-19 response positions it well to support global COVID-19 recovery. Externally, communicating WFP’s role in supporting medium-term responses to the socioeconomic legacy of the pandemic – whether in development or humanitarian contexts – will be key. Examples include helping to build and implement national social protection frameworks, support social cohesion and peacebuilding and develop medium-term responses to climate change. Gender equality is a key dimension of, and opportunity within, recovery.</p> <p>ii) As part of this, it will be useful to clarify internally how a WFP response to structural vulnerabilities can best intersect with WFP’s emergency response role. For example, consideration should be given to how social protection can be used to address medium-term food insecurity and nutrition challenges; whether and where cash transfers are understood and applied as an emergency or medium-term social safety net; and how interventions that contribute to peace can be built into emergency responses.</p>
<p>2. Systems enabler. Building on the reputational capital garnered during its COVID-19 response, WFP may wish to consider extending its role from that of a supporting entity within the humanitarian architecture to that of a systems enabler at both the national and international levels.</p>	<p>i) As a demonstrated systems enabler and humanitarian leader, WFP can expand its services to other actors in the humanitarian system – including governments and other United Nations entities – to help build their emergency expertise and capacity at the national and local levels. This is consistent with both the United Nations development system reform and the humanitarian localization agenda.</p> <p>ii) Defining required capacities in these areas and providing institutional support as required will help confirm WFP’s commitment to becoming a partner of choice in relevant areas.</p> <p>iii) External messaging and communication will need to reflect this positioning and a broader understanding of WFP as a systems enabler in a strategic, as well as operational, sense.</p>

¹ Structural vulnerabilities are weaknesses in the foundations for lifting people out of poverty and enabling them to make choices and take their lives into their own hands. They include, for example, inadequate education, child nutrition, gender equality, social protection coverage and rural infrastructure. “WFP strategic plan (2022–2025)” (WFP/EB.2/2021/4-A/1/Rev.2).

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>3. Increase advocacy. WFP has increased its advocacy work throughout the pandemic and become increasingly visible in high-level forums. This enhanced visibility can be leveraged for good, building on strong partnerships at the country level in particular.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Using the increased visibility earned through its COVID-19 response, expand WFP's advocacy for the food security and nutrition aspects of socioeconomic recovery, emphasizing in particular political audiences at the national, regional and international levels. ii) Increase advocacy skills training for key staff, especially senior management at the country and regional levels. iii) Leveraging the enhanced partnerships built during the pandemic, engage with cooperating partners on advocacy agendas, identifying common concerns and seeking common messages.
<p>4. Create a shared overview and anticipate management arrangements. The lack of a shared overview of the pandemic, and what was needed for an effective response to it, highlighted the challenges of a globally diverse emergency. It also impeded decision making, with mechanisms set up for a more standard regional or country-level response. Anticipating potential local diversity within large-scale or global emergencies and deciding "how to decide" in such situations will help facilitate the design and implementation of effective responses into any future relevant responses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Developing a clear shared understanding of what may be very different local situations within large-scale or global emergencies as a first step should be prioritized in emergency response going forward – including for example in corporate response director terms of reference. ii) Adopting a model of empowered leadership balanced with appropriate delegation of authority will be key to balancing corporate decision making with the flexibility needed to adapt to local conditions.
<p>5. Ensure resilient but adaptive systems. WFP found during the pandemic that many of its systems were able to adapt while others, such as budget revisions for country strategic plans and some internal financial management systems, struggled. Standard systems need to be adaptable when a large-scale emergency strikes, and flexibility must be built in and stress tested.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) The key systems that require adaptation, particularly during an emergency with diverse features across locations, are financial systems, adaptations to strategic plans (global and national); human resources; and management arrangements. ii) Contingency planning and stress testing will help support preparedness in these areas. iii) Enhancing knowledge management systems to ensure that flexibility and adaptation are firmly and consistently grounded in previous experience will help to ensure an evidence-based response.

What item?	Areas to consider in future
<p>6. Adopt an ethos of staff care. Beyond a people policy or staff wellness, how can WFP best support its staff, confirm their identity as part of the WFP family and make them feel a sense of organizational commitment to their well-being? Staff care takes systems – contractual arrangements, progression guarantees and others, many of which are out of WFP’s hands – but also workplace culture and management skills, whose limitations have been highlighted during the pandemic.</p> <p>If WFP’s organizational bloodstream is its systems, processes and technical capacities, then its heart is its people. Their experience of, and contribution to, the many intangible elements that constitute a humanitarian response should be maximized at all levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Building on commitments in the strategic plan for 2022–2025 to improve workplace culture by fostering management skills, both for duty of care (wellness) and managing performance remotely, will help provide the supportive management that WFP employees need. It will also enhance the workplace culture and foster the two-way loyalty between WFP and its employees on which emergency responses depend. ii) Reflect on (and improve if possible) the availability of fixed-term, continuing and permanent contracts, both international and national. iii) Capturing the human experience of emergency response – beyond formal counselling – by allowing people to debrief and reflect on their own immediate personal experience is a key part of both valuing individual employees and harnessing their experience for improved organizational learning.