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Report on the field visit of the WFP Executive Board

Acknowledgements

The Executive Board members whose representatives participated in the field visit to Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone would like to express their appreciation and gratitude to the WFP Secretariat and to thank the WFP country teams for their efficient planning and coordination in providing a holistic, first-hand overview of the humanitarian, socio-economic and political situation in each country.

Members would also like to thank the Governments of Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone for hosting the visit and to thank the WFP staff in the four countries for their hard work and dedication.

Introduction

1. From 18 to 28 November 2017, a team of representatives of Executive Board Member States visited the three West African countries that were affected by the Ebola virus disease outbreak in 2015/2016: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The aims of the visit were to observe the recovery efforts undertaken by the governments of those countries and WFP following the outbreak; to observe policies, procedures and structures put in place to prevent and respond to future outbreaks; to learn from the implementation of WFP policies, strategies and programmes in the field; to assess the steps taken towards the national zero hunger strategic reviews and the preparation of country strategic plans (CSPs) in accordance with the WFP Strategic Plan (2017–2021); to acquire a sense of the challenges faced by the beneficiaries and those responsible for carrying out the activities; and to observe WFP as a member of the United Nations country teams and a partner to other stakeholders.

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2. The visit provided an excellent and unique opportunity to assess and learn more about WFP's activities and results at the regional and country levels in the three countries. The thematic focus of the visit was food security and resilience building in a challenging environment in the Ebola virus disease affected countries, but it also afforded the team the opportunity to be briefed on the situation in Mali and its impact on the region as well as the important logistical role of the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) in the region.
3. This report outlines the team's findings, highlighting opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of the Integrated Road Map and suggesting ways in which WFP's work in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone could provide lessons for other regional and global operations.

Context

4. In 2014–2015 Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone were affected by the Ebola virus disease outbreak. WHO estimates that there were over 28,000 cases of the disease, and around 11,000 deaths were reported. WFP declared a Level 3 emergency response in August of 2014 and provided food assistance to affected populations during their isolation period, along with logistical support to United Nations and other partners responding to the crisis.¹
5. Despite some progress, poverty and maternal mortality in all three countries remains high. In addition, stunting rates hover around 40 percent in some areas. The 2017 Global Hunger Index categorizes the situation in Liberia and Sierra Leone as "alarming" and that in Guinea as "serious".² Moreover, the outbreak revealed that there is a need to increase coordination between key government actors and development partners and to expand national government budgets for health, agriculture and disaster response, among other things.

Ebola virus disease

6. In all three countries, the team observed the concrete actions taken either to prevent or to respond immediately to any new outbreak of the virus. These countries have undertaken important measures to strengthen national disaster management structures and capacities.
7. The team met with several relevant government partners, including personnel from ministries of health and disaster management authorities and humanitarian development, peacekeeping and donor partners, to learn their views on the effectiveness of the response by WFP and the broader international community and to identify the main lessons learned that should inform plans for preventing and responding to future outbreaks.
8. In general, the partners expressed appreciation for WFP's role in providing food assistance to beneficiaries and common services and infrastructure to the broader international humanitarian community to facilitate the movement of partners and their supplies. UNHAS, managed by WFP, was particularly commended as key to the response.
9. In considering lessons relevant to responses to future outbreaks, Government partners said that there was a need to strengthen coordination, knowledge related to the Ebola virus, plans and policies, capacity in epidemiological surveillance systems, including the monitoring of Ebola survivors, data management and laboratory diagnosis; there was also a need to increase public health budgets and to enhance decentralized health system presence and community engagement.

¹ [OEV/2017/004](#).

² <http://www.globalhungerindex.org>.

10. Cultural norms, in a context of deep familial and communal bonds, were noted as challenges in containing and preventing outbreaks, as households and communities needed to change their behaviour in ways that ran contrary to their traditional beliefs and customs. WFP's provision of food rations at the household level was key in ensuring that infected individuals were isolated from others as a means of preventing further spread of the virus.
11. While other partners concurred with the aforementioned analysis and the recognized progress, they warned of continued vulnerabilities in the overall health and disaster response systems of the three countries. They also advocated the reintroduction of UNHAS as a means of improving the ability of the humanitarian and development community to help those that are the most difficult to reach.
12. The team also met with Ebola survivors in Guinea and Liberia. These survivors expressed gratitude for WFP's food and livelihoods assistance during the crisis. Many narrated heart-breaking tales of the death of loved ones – including primary household wage earners – discrimination and stigmatization by community members and difficulties in meeting their families' basic needs. Many were women with little or no education that had received training in soap making and other crafts but lacked the capital needed to apply their skills to income-generating activities. Others formerly involved in agricultural activities complained that the Ebola virus disease left them with long-term weakness. Collectively, the survivors asked for help in rebuilding their livelihoods.
13. In addition to the aforementioned meetings, the Board team visited mobile and fixed storage facilities that supported the response. The team also visited Ebola treatment centres.

Points for reflection

14. The response to the Ebola virus disease clearly illustrates the need for strong coordination mechanisms both at the international and national levels. Moreover, it clearly demonstrates the need to strengthen institutional capacities, particularly in national and local health systems, as well as emergency preparedness and response. While there has been progress, continued efforts – closely linked to development – in sectors including infrastructure, education, agriculture and the private sector are required. In this connection, support from the United Nations system and international development partners along with strong ownership and engagement by national governments in the countries concerned are paramount. In their transition from crisis to post-crisis recovery, raising awareness and financial resources for long-term development activities remains a challenge. Consequently, resource mobilization strategies should be developed together with national governments, not only engaging traditional donors but also exploring South-South Cooperation and partnerships with the private sector. It is also important for WFP and other humanitarian actors to carefully define their exit strategies. In this regard, the team acknowledged the advantages of the country strategic plan approach approved by the WFP Executive Board in November 2016.

Nutrition and school feeding

15. The Board team visited the Dream centre, a screening and treatment outpatient centre in Conakry, Guinea, founded and run by the Italian organization *Comunità di Sant'Egidio* to assist people living with HIV/AIDS. WFP provides food assistance to undernourished HIV affected populations, particularly pregnant and lactating women and children.
16. The Dream centre medical team and beneficiaries shared their general thoughts and challenges with the Board team, following which the Board team visited Dream's facilities.
17. In Sierra Leone, the Board team visited the WFP supported Periphery Health Unit in Foredugu, where WFP ran a targeted supplementary feeding programme to treat moderate acute malnutrition.

18. The Board team was briefed on aspects of the programme such as beneficiary selection, anthropometric measurements and distribution and reporting. Malnutrition levels have showed a consistent downward trend since WFP started the programme but are still high compared to regional and global averages. The cooperating partners requested expansion of the programme to accommodate more beneficiaries and three new periphery health units.

Points for reflection

19. The field visit was an excellent opportunity to appraise WFP activities in support of improved food security. The conditions for agriculture and food production are favourable, but widespread poverty and poor infrastructure lead to considerable food insecurity. Through the aforementioned nutrition programmes WFP helps to address food insecurity and malnutrition while also contributing to strengthening the capacities of local communities through food for work activities.
20. While the Board team did not visit any school meals projects, WFP and partners consistently stressed the importance of this intervention in improving school enrolment and retention, particularly for girls, nutrition and local production.
21. The sustainability of these programmes is uncertain given funding constraints. It is therefore important to establish clear priorities and flexible planning that allows for adjustments depending on resource availability. It is also important to increase national government ownership and devise clear handover strategies.

Resilience building and livelihoods

22. In Sierra Leone the Board visited the Inland Valley Swamp rehabilitation project in Bombali district, where WFP runs a food assistance for assets project to improve rice production and access to markets. In Liberia the Board visited Bombi County, where WFP – through the Sean Devereux Children’s Education and Agriculture Program – provides training and agricultural equipment.
23. Similarly, the Board team met community leaders and smallholder farmers who were harvesting rice and planning to diversify their crops with a view to improving yields. The project visits showcased increased income generation and the empowerment of women in households and communities.

Points for reflection

24. Resilience building and the improvement of livelihoods are key to long-term development. This development requires concerted effort by national governments, international organizations and donor countries. Resilience building and livelihood improvement efforts are also areas where cooperation among the Rome-based agencies and the broader international development community could significantly contribute to the development of local markets and improvement of access to microfinancing. Likewise, it is important to consider how building resilience and improving livelihoods can contribute to reducing the need for humanitarian assistance in the future.

Meetings with government officials and members of the United Nations country teams

25. In all three countries the Board team engaged with numerous high-level authorities from the ministries responsible for foreign affairs, agriculture, livestock, health, disaster management, interior affairs and women’s affairs. They also met with members of the United Nations country teams.

26. Government officials warmly received the Board team and expressed their appreciation for the work by WFP and other development organizations and partners. In Liberia, the Board team had the honour of meeting with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected female head of state in Africa. In general, government officials gave comprehensive reviews of activities planned and implemented. They also requested continued political and financial support for humanitarian and development activities in the region.
27. The United Nations country team members briefed the Board team on the current political situations, covering such matters as constitutional amendments in Guinea and coming elections in Liberia and Sierra Leone. They also described their cooperation with WFP, highlighting, inter alia, logistical support, including land and air transportation and storage facilities; comprehensive food security and vulnerability analyses and zero hunger reviews; data management in disaster response; and improvement of access to financing, markets and skills for women in agriculture.
28. A clear example of inter-agency collaboration is the joint United Nations project Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (RWEE) in Liberia. Aimed at alleviating poverty through employment and market opportunities for women, the project key results include capacity building for improved agricultural practices and nutrition; business development support for income generation; and increased access to financial services. Moreover, it supported the revision of the national gender policy.
29. In Liberia, the Board team met with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Mr Farid Zarif. During this meeting, the Special Representative reported on progress achieved in Liberia particularly efforts to decentralize government services. Another important feat was the establishment of a single United Nations complex that would provide approximately USD1 million in savings. He expressed concern, however, that the departure of UNMIL in March 2018 might leave a vacuum. He also reported on the creation of a USD 130 million trust fund to provide strategic vision for Liberia's transition from post-conflict to development.

Points for reflection

30. There was general understanding and awareness that there is need for both Rome-based agencies and other inter-agency collaboration. The division of labour between WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) appeared to function well based on their respective mandates, and the role of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) was recognized. In Liberia, the various United Nations agencies will move into the same premises to facilitate coordination and increase efficiencies.
31. Continued fragility coupled with decreasing financial resources is a source of concern. While the establishment of the trust fund is a step in the right direction, the sustainability of WFP programmes - as well as those of the other United Nations country team member agencies - is uncertain.
32. Gender balance in terms of United Nations agencies' staff in the region is a persistent challenge; however, the Executive Board delegation received reassurance that this issue is being addressed.