

## **Towards a 2022-2026 WFP Theory of Change - Supplementary External Brief -**

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### **Disclaimer**

This supplementary external brief was developed as part of our involvement in providing independent external support and guidance to WFP's development of a Theory of Change (ToC) to inform its next Strategic Plan.

### **Introduction**

The World Food Programme (WFP) is developing its 2022-2026 Strategic Plan. As part of this process, we were asked to assist teams of WFP officials to develop a problem diagnostic (PD) and Theory of Change (ToC). We do such work with governments and large organizations across the world. The PD and ToC are just tools, but they can foster reflection on the problems an organization faces and how the organization might consider addressing these problems. This brief summarizes thoughts emerging from the work.

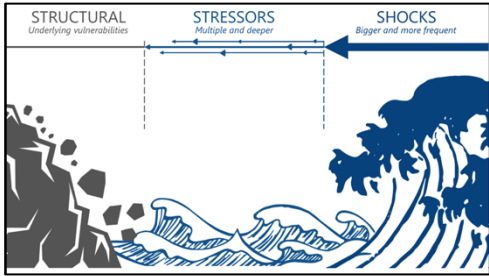
### **What is the Problem Facing The World Food Programme?**

The 2017 Strategic Plan focuses WFP on helping partner countries achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 2 (on achieving zero hunger) and 17 (on partnering to support implementation of other SDGs). The problem facing WFP in 2021 is that almost all of these partner countries have seen stagnant or declining results in respect of these goals (especially SDG 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3, with no data on SDG 2.4 or SDG 17). As a result, performance on the SDGs is falling behind and "The world is not moving towards but away from Zero Hunger".

Evidence suggests two major reasons for this problem:

- First, the drivers of hunger—like poverty and inequality—have worsened in most countries. As Figure 1 illustrates, this is because of more regular and complex shocks (economic, conflict, climate affected, etc.), the growing accumulation of stressors (related to these shocks), and the persistence of structural weaknesses in many countries (that limit resilience in the face of shocks and stressors). Covid-19 has exacerbated such pressures and caused the hunger challenge to grow at an even more rapid pace.
- Second, policy responses that studies show help combat hunger—some listed in Table 1—are not provided as effectively, consistently or broadly as needed in most countries. These deficient policy responses are caused by systemic weaknesses including funding limits and inflexibility, fragmented partnerships, silos and capacity constraints, limited national political will and governance capacity, and the disempowerment of key groups (especially women and youth). These weaknesses impede countries' responses to hunger and also constrain WFP's effectiveness to provide policy responses or build policy response capacities in partner countries.

**Figure 1. The Macro Drivers of Hunger Are Worsening**



Source: World Food Programme Problem Diagnostic Team

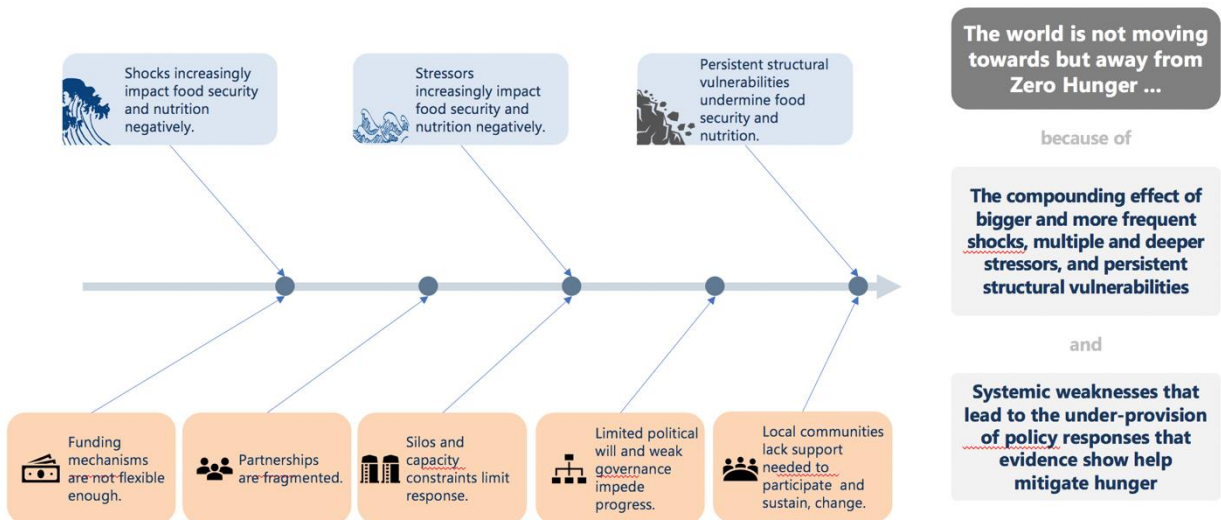
**Table 1. Policy Responses That Help Combat Hunger**

| Sectors of intervention | Sensitive to nutrition (dealing with underlying causes)   | Specific for nutrition (dealing with specific symptoms)   |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Agriculture             | Promotion and support of smallholder horticulture production; investments in research and extension supporting productivity gains in foods rich in nutrients; promoting food market development to increase smallholder farmer incomes and price accessibility to diets rich in nutrients | Enhanced agriculture extension with messaging on optimal diet choices; facilitating access to rural finances for farmers, food processors and traders (particularly focusing on women's involvement); interventions supporting optimal levels of consumption of foods rich in nutrients (eg, poultry promotion/vaccination, egg marketing, fruit/vegetable cold chain marketing)                |
| Health                  | Establishment of high quality, high coverage health services, including nutrition counselling and reproductive health; effective reduction of the burden of infectious diseases; promotion of evidence based dietary guidelines to the population   | Promotion and facilitation of exclusive breast feeding and early child development; targeted food supplementation of underweight mothers; cash transfers for populations at risk; micronutrient supplementation; management of diseases (access to impregnated bed nets, reduction of household air pollution through improved stoves and fuel); maternal deworming (which may improve anaemia) |
| Education               | Universal enrolment and retention of girls in schools; use of schools to provide instruction on nutrition and health; promotion of awareness of a healthy diet through school gardening; enhanced curricular initiatives on diet, and physical activity                                   | Healthy meals/snacks provided in schools (and other institutions), using locally procured foods, as appropriate; deworming and vaccination at school; after-school outreach education programmes for adolescent girls, focusing on antenatal nutrition and health   |
| Water and sanitation    | National and local programmes that eliminate open defecation; universal provision of clean water; promotion of good sanitation and hygiene practices  | Promotion of hygiene and sanitation best practices in households; use of improved water sources; facilitating access to improved toilets  |
| Market development      | Micronutrient fortification of widely accessible foods, including salt iodisation; quality and food safety regulation   | Development of rural feeder roads and other infrastructure (facilitating sale of produce and access to a diversity of fresh produce at markets)   |
| Resilience building     | Implementing effective social safety nets that smooth income flows and food consumption among vulnerable groups   | Preparedness for rapid establishment of targeted management/treatment of acute malnutrition; targeted use of specialised nutritious food products to individuals at risk in emergencies   |

Source: Webb, et al., 2018. Hunger and malnutrition in the 21st century.

Figure 2 summarizes the problem facing the WFP as it prepares for the 2022-2026 period. Using the structure of an Ishikawa (or Fishbone) Diagram, it shows that the world—and WFP's community of partner countries—is moving away from the goal of zero hunger (not towards such) because of growing pressure from shocks, stressors and structural weaknesses (that exacerbate drivers of hunger) and systemic weaknesses (that lead to the under provision of policy responses to hunger).

**Figure 2. Why is the World Moving Away From Achieving Zero Hunger?**



Source: World Food Programme Problem Diagnostic Team

## II. Towards a Theory of Change

Theories of Change (ToCs) are used widely in mission-driven organizations to articulate how actions lead through to goals. WFP already uses ToCs to do this across the organization in various technical areas and at various levels, and has a well-developed set of guidelines for how to approach them. However, this year is the first time that there has been an attempt to develop an organization-wide ToC. This is always a challenging task in any organization. But in an organization as large, mature and complex as WFP it is a very challenging undertaking. As advisors and facilitators of the WFP's efforts to develop a draft of such a ToC, building on the Problem Diagnosis discussed above, we congratulate the work and product of the WFP in accomplishing this.

Before discussing the draft ToC itself, there are some important observations to make about ToCs in general:

**Variation:** ToCs vary significantly - they can be project-focused, programmatic, organizational or otherwise. They can be highly granular and detailed, or very high level and strategic. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and no single template.

**Purpose:** A ToC is often accompanied by a 'logical framework' or logframe which takes the causal pathways posited by the ToC and represents them in a hierarchical chart with indicators to measure outputs and outcomes at every level. But logframes (of which the CRF is an example) are a more mechanical cousin of the ToC, less able to depict subtle or more complex relationships between different factors. Whereas a logframe exists purely to facilitate monitoring and evaluation, a ToC is a more versatile tool which can:

1. Tell a strategic story to external stakeholders about where an organization is going
2. Foster understanding and coherence internally about 'what we do'
3. Fill in the 'missing middle' linking an organization's activities and its goals
4. Provide a powerful vehicle for useful conversations – internal and external (see below)

Facilitating measurement and the development of a logframe are key benefits of a ToC, but their value goes well beyond this. They are also a powerful tool to communicate and convene, and surface important strategic questions.

**Evidence:** ToCs contain causal relationships – 'output A leads to Outcome B which in turn contributes to Outcome C' and so on. These causal relationships may be based on assumptions, experience or on empirical evidence. The more they are evidence-based the better. Having said that, for a ToC to be *useful* it is not required that every causal relationship be accompanied by comprehensive empirical evidence. In fact it is very rare that uncontested evidence exist for every causal relationship in a ToC – especially one at organizational level. A ToC is a *theory* of change. It contains hypotheses which need to be tested and evolved over time. It should not be a static tool – rather a tool which facilitates learning and thinking and questioning, and guides the development of better evidence.

**Process:** With a ToC the development process is as important as the product itself. Like the Strategic Plan process itself, the ToC development process provides an opportunity to engage a wide range of internal stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue about the purpose and orientation of the organization. This is what we have observed happening within WFP, and it is enormously valuable. While we have provided some strategic challenge and methodological guidance, the hard work of hammering out consensus amongst far flung and diverse internal stakeholders has belonged to WFP.

### ***Challenges to developing a ToC***

Developing a ToC at an organization level poses challenges in five key areas:

1. Capturing the full scale of the organization
2. Practical use
3. Measurement
4. Complexity
5. Relationship to strategy

#### *1. Capturing the whole picture*

WFP is vast and complex. It is highly decentralized and context-based, varying its work and interventions significantly from one country or context to another with activities which overlap in different situations. It is a moving target, evolving all the time. WFP also uses a tangle of taxonomical tools, for e.g.:

- The 2x2 of Saving Lives vs Changing Lives, and Delivering vs Enabling
- The 3-way nexus of Humanitarian, Development and Peace
- The three focus areas of Crisis, Resilience, Root Causes
- The four dimensions of food security Access, Availability, Utilization and Stability
- The four modalities of Food, Cash-based transfers, Capacity Strengthening and Service Delivery
- Different levels of working: Individual, Household, Community, Institutions, Systems

Doing justice to this enormous scale and complexity is extremely difficult in a single 2-dimensional diagram – faithfully representing WFP’s footprint, strengths and (where it exists) evidence of what works.

#### *2. Practical use*

In developing a ToC it is important to consider how it will be used within the organisation. Is it solely to provide the basis for a new Strategic Plan and CRF? Will it exist mainly as a reference point for the development of more sectoral ToCs? Is it mainly to provide a basis for strategic dialogue, or will it play a role in operational decision making or the allocation of resources? These are important questions for the team to consider as they further develop this draft.

### 3. Measurement

The ToC will link to the new Corporate Results Framework – WFP's 'logframe'. In developing the new CRF, WFP needs to consider practical challenges which were experienced in using the previous CRF – in terms of strategic decision making and the allocation of resources.

### 3. Complexity

In an organization as large and complex as WFP, there are multiple ways to structure a ToC. Any way of structuring it will inevitably do some injustice to some part of the organization or set of activities. It is important to remember here that a ToC is not an academic exercise. While a ToC often forms the basis of a logframe which exists to facilitate measurement, a ToC itself is actually primarily a communications tool, and a two-dimensional one at that.

It is impossible for any ToC to perfectly integrate all of these (and others) in one simple diagram. It cannot capture the full richness of interactions, contextual complexity, causal feedback loops, cross-cutting relationships or interdependencies without becoming a confusing spaghetti of lines and arrows. As much as possible these elements have been explicitly or implicitly built into the ToC, but the sovereign goal must be to tell a relatively simple and comprehensible story about the organization's work.

### **Relationship to Strategic Plan**

The most important question lies in a ToC's relationship to strategy. Some commentators and practitioners have argued that a ToC frustrates strategic behaviour because a ToC is by its nature fixed and rigid. But others, such as Patricia Patrizi, have argued persuasively that a ToC is not at odds with strategic behaviour as long as it is understood as 'part of a learning and sense-making process'.<sup>1</sup> This relates to the point made above about the importance of treating a ToC as a live document which evolves over time.

This ToC development process has been initiated as a step in the larger process to develop the new Strategic Plan for WFP. It lies upstream of the drafting of the Strategic Plan, but what is their optimal relationship? One approach to the ToC would be to make it merely descriptive of what the WFP does today. As we have noted above, despite not having an explicit organization level ToC in the past, WFP has had an 'implicit theory of change'. The exercise could simply make that implicit ToC explicit – providing a visual representation of business as usual.

However, a TOC which merely describes what WFP currently does would be a missed opportunity. The greater value is to create a TOC which also addresses where the organization needs to develop and 'stretch' in the next strategic cycle. In other words, to aim to be *prescriptive* rather than merely descriptive. Of course, WFP is a mature organization, and a written ToC cannot reinvent it. And a ToC is not in itself a strategy. So at best a ToC can aim to balance description and prescription, capturing the current picture but seeking to stretch the organization in some key respects in terms of its thinking, how it conceives itself and in its ambitions. In our view, the team developing the ToC have struck that balance.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Patrizi & M. Quinn Patton (2010). "New Directions for Evaluation". *Evaluating Strategy*.

### **Key strategic elements**

As part of the current Strategic Review process, WFP commissioned work from the UK Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to conduct some strategic thinking and a stakeholder analysis. This was presented to the Board in February. The ODI analysis made some pertinent observations about WFP which chime with many of the observations made in the first part of this briefing paper. In looking at the wide range of areas that WFP works in, ODI observed:

- *Each of these areas is highly complex, rapidly changing, and with many different stakeholders.*
- *The move to cash is a major driver of change.*
- ***At least in non-conflict situations, the priority is to recognize Government ownership and leadership, to use or integrate into Government systems wherever possible and to help build long-term sustainability into programmes (our emphasis)***
- *In emergency situations, different rules may apply with WFP required to abide by humanitarian principles, for example in maintaining neutrality as between parties in conflict. It remains, however, an inter-governmental organization.<sup>2</sup>*

Turning to the question of WFP's comparative advantage, they said:

- *Globally, WFP is a major player in food assistance, supply chains, ETC and analytics.*
- *But otherwise, WFP is a niche player in any individual area, and is seen as such.*
- ***Given its resource envelope, expertise and generally short-term or temporary time horizon, WFP is rarely the lead agency in-country on the totality of thematic topics which require long-term investment and systems development.***
- *WFP can be a valuable partner, to Governments and other donor agencies and a catalyst. It leverages its country office network as an interlocutor with Governments. It deploys both food and non-food resources, as well as technical expertise and logistics support.*
- ***If WFP wishes to strengthen its positioning in areas where WFP is not a major player, it will need organisational change, to increase technical capacity, and in many cases to adjust its approach.***
- *It will also need more flexible, more predictable, and in some cases just more abundant resources.<sup>3</sup>*

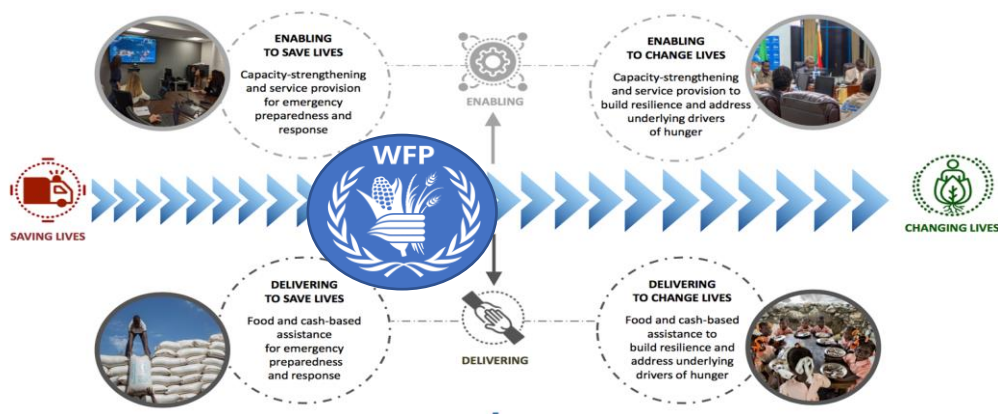
Given the above, ODI mused that WFP's unique selling point may be that it sits at the intersection of the axes represented in the quadrant below, able to move with unique agility and versatility between different ways of working in different contexts – a 'jack of many trades' but master of some: the business of *food assistance, supply chains, ETC and analytics*.

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<sup>2</sup> ODI External Stakeholder Analysis – WFP, Feb 2021

<sup>3</sup> ODI External Stakeholder Analysis – WFP, Feb 2021

**Figure 3. ODI representation of WFP USP**

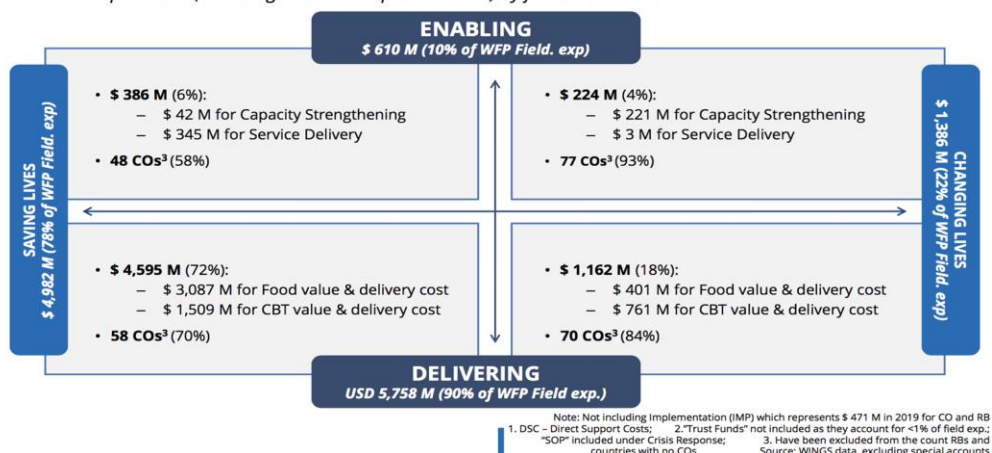


Nevertheless, this idea forces us to revisit the realities of WFP’s funding (95 percent earmarked for emergencies, 80 percent in emergency contexts). Mapping spend against the quadrant above also tells a story:

**Figure 4. WFP funding distribution**

**WFP’s Interventions through two axes**

WFP Field expenditure (excluding DSC<sup>1</sup> and Implementation) by focus area<sup>2</sup> in 2019



Of course, not all types of spending are created equally in terms of impact. Crisis response and food and cash transfers are enormously expensive direct interventions, whereas capacity strengthening and other indirect, ‘enabling’ interventions may leverage huge impact compared to their cost. But as noted above, the story is still unmistakable: delivering to save lives remains the focus, and delivering overall adds up to 90 percent of spend.

We took part in over thirty internal interviews across WFP, speaking to all regional offices and almost all technical units. These were fascinating, rich discussions where we learned a huge amount, and deepened our admiration for the work that WFP does. Some important observations were made about WFP’s orientation and capabilities, which spoke to its implicit theory of change and to the strategic pivots required in the next 5 years if the fight against hunger and malnutrition (let alone its other goals) is to get back on track. These problems and constraints were summarized in the bottom half of the fishbone presented in Figure 2.

Several key strategic themes emerged from the feedback we received across the organization, and alongside the problem diagnosis these themes became elements built into the development process of the ToC to endow it with some strategic and prescriptive weight. While the ToC does not seek to fulfil the purpose of the Strategic Plan – it cannot play that role – these elements nevertheless provide some high-level signposts for the Strategic Plan, suggesting some key pivots and starting to address the question of WFP’s evolving comparative advantage in the next 5 years. The full range of these elements are fully explained in the WFP team’s narrative document. The list below is confined to the very high-level strategic shifts.

- **Leveraging versatility:** A key strategic theme emerging from discussions across the organization around the Strategic Plan has been the uniqueness and value of WFP’s versatility – sometimes being ‘the only game in town’, and other times being uniquely versatile to support across a broad spectrum of areas. It is vital that WFP invest in maintaining and deepening its ability to vary its footprint and interventions according to context. And vital to capture the contribution that WFP makes to all the SDGs. The Activity Pathways at the left-hand side illustrate this versatility in a sensible way, as well as the range of cross-cutting elements in the way that WFP works. It is also illustrated in the breadth of contribution at Immediate and Intermediate Outcome levels.
- **Rethinking the protagonist:** The capability, agency and ownership of other actors in tackling shocks, stressors and structures is going to be the decisive factor in defeating hunger and malnutrition. At every level the ToC seeks to make central the importance of the capacity of external actors – above all at the level of Goals as it is nations which will achieve the SDGs not WFP and the development community. This points to the importance of government ownership and leadership, the need to strengthen use or integrate into national systems wherever possible and to help build sustainability into programmes.
- **Beyond Saving vs Changing Lives:** No one in the interviews suggested that WFP should defund humanitarian work in favour of development work. But there was consensus to maintain the humanitarian capability while scaling up enabling, development work that tackles root causes. WFP still talks a lot about the so-called Saving Lives vs Changing Lives dichotomy. This dichotomy involves real trade-offs, but seems less and less meaningful in the context of how WFP increasingly works. Perhaps the more salient strategic question lies along the other axis of the 2x2, between ‘Delivery’ activities and ‘Enabling’ activities, where the greatest funding disparity lies. The difference between Delivering and Enabling is vital if it is conceived as the difference between direct assistance to beneficiaries and building the capability of other actors to help themselves. In other words, ‘capacitating’ others. This relates to a clear theme of discussions that WFP’s resource allocation could be better with capacitating, together with skills and capabilities, and evidence generation of what works. It is not yet equipped or particularly effective as a capaciator or enabler outside of some specific areas. While most of WFP’s funding and expertise is still focused on Delivering, the draft ToC illustrates the criticality of Capacitating work across the board – a stretch which will need investment to fully mainstream.
- **Service provision:** A clear theme of the last few years has been the WFP’s growing capabilities as a critical service provider both in and outside emergency settings. In some senses this could be seen as a subset of Enabling, but in that it is distinct (and sometimes in tension with capacity strengthening) it is helpful to make this important modality clear and explicit in its own right. There is a need to more explicitly and powerfully recognize the importance of WFP’s role and mandate to act as a key service provider to its partners, and as a catalyst to partnerships.



- **Global leadership and peace:** In the wake of the Nobel Prize, WFP has a unique platform to advocate for change at a global level. The final pathway emphasizes WFP's unique international standing and voice and its potential for 'global leadership' – through research, thought leadership, advocacy, and influence. If WFP does not leverage this, it will struggle to move the tectonic plates which underpin food insecurity, unlocking innovation, political will and resources for deeper structural change.

This draft ToC depicts a set of credible causal pathways required to successfully defeat hunger and malnutrition. But it also goes beyond business as usual. It shows the breadth of what WFP does today, but also works in the key strategic elements listed above: it works to represent the breadth of goals which WFP's contributes to – beyond SDGs 2 and 17; it captures the breadth and versatility of WFP, even if aspects of that are a work in progress; it illustrates that enabling ('capacitating') is as important as delivering; it highlights WFP's growing role as a key service provider; it highlights WFP's global leadership role.

When we look at the activities and capabilities needed to achieve WFP's goals, we have observed that they are not in equilibrium in terms of how resources and skills are distributed across the organization. If WFP were to balance its activities, capabilities and resources more evenly across the ToCs activity pathways, it would represent a substantial shift from the status quo—a key strategic choice for WFP. In its current formulation the draft ToC provides real aspiration and stretch for the Strategic Plan. Making this a reality will need significant investment in mainstreaming new skills, capabilities and evidence.

### ***A final word***

A ToC has to do a lot of things at once. It must be coherent and legible; it must accurately capture the current organization and internal actors; it must accommodate all the conceptual models the organization uses; it must adhere to internal guidelines; it must do justice to cross-cutting issues; and it must capture complexity and non-linearity in a simple way. While accomplishing all this, it also needs to signpost a set of major strategic shifts. This is quite a lot for a 1 page, 2-dimensional diagram and it cannot do it all perfectly.