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Management response to the annual evaluation report for 2020

Introduction

This document presents management's response to the fifth annual evaluation report produced by the Office of Evaluation (OEV) in line with the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021).¹

Management notes OEV's continued commitment to an effective and efficient evaluation function, considering the key role that the evaluation function plays in supporting organizational learning, accountability, transparency and overall performance and results.

Management also notes the progress made by OEV against the outcomes identified in the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) and in line with WFP's strategic direction and trends in its operating environment, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Management values the content of the annual evaluation report and acknowledges the importance of presenting the outlook for the evaluation function and highlighting areas for attention in the coming years.

This response refers to the key evaluation-related efforts and achievements that supported evidence-based decision making in 2020 and strengthened the WFP knowledge base and accountability in the following three areas, which reflect the structure of the report:

- I. WFP evaluations for evidence-based decision making, considering the strategic direction of WFP and trends in the broader operating context.
- II. The overall performance of the WFP evaluation function.
- III. The further development of the evaluation function and areas highlighted for attention in the coming years.

¹ WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1.

Focal point:

Mr A.-R. Qureshi
Deputy Director and Officer-in-Charge
Corporate Planning and Performance Division
tel.: 066513-2960

Ms J. Nyberg
Deputy Director
Corporate Planning and Performance Division
tel.: 066513-3162

I. WFP evaluations for evidence-based decision making

1. Management appreciates that WFP adheres to the United Nations definition of evaluation, which states that evaluation serves the dual and mutually reinforcing purpose of accountability and learning.
2. To support the phased adoption of the coverage norms set out in the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021), evaluation planning and resourcing are embedded in the WFP strategic plan for 2017–2021,² the WFP policy on country strategic plans (CSPs),³ its financial framework⁴ and its revised corporate results framework for 2017–2021.⁵

Centralized evaluations

3. The programme of centralized evaluations is conducted by OEV. It is designed to be as relevant as possible to WFP's dynamic programming, and management values that decisions regarding what, when and how to evaluate are based on considerations of strategic relevance, demand, timeliness for decision making, risks, knowledge gaps, feasibility and evaluability.
4. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected WFP programmes and evaluations worldwide, OEV carefully planned and managed all centralized evaluations in 2020 thus ensuring that corporate accountability and learning needs were still met – minimizing the burden on WFP operations and partnerships wherever possible. Twenty-four evaluations were completed or ongoing and one joint evaluation on collaboration between the Rome-based agencies was initiated. Management also notes that work on 38 confirmed evaluations will continue or start in 2021, as well as one joint evaluation.
5. Management notes the strategic relevance of the evaluation of the WFP Gender Policy (2015–2020),⁶ which was presented to the Executive Board at its 2020 annual session and will inform the development of an updated policy. Evidence from analyses of gender equality-related activities should also inform the mid-term reviews of CSPs, CSP evaluations and, ultimately, new CSPs.
6. Preparation for the evaluation of the WFP South–South and triangular cooperation policy⁷ began in late 2019 but the method and timeline were extended due to the pandemic, and the report will be presented to the Board in November 2021. Management recognizes the importance of this evaluation in the expansion of WFP's engagement with developing countries, which seeks to facilitate progress and support country-led efforts in food security and nutrition.
7. Management also notes that OEV will initiate the evaluation of the policy on WFP's role in peacebuilding in transition settings (2013)⁸ in 2021. The evaluation was postponed due to resourcing issues but is now particularly timely given that WFP was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020.

² WFP/EB.2/2016/4-A/1/Rev.2.

³ WFP/EB.2/2016/4-C/1/Rev.1.

⁴ WFP/EB.2/2015/5-C/1.

⁵ WFP/EB.2/2018/5-B/Rev.1.

⁶ WFP/EB.A/2015/5-A.

⁷ WFP/EB.A/2015/5-D.

⁸ WFP/EB.2/2013/4-A/Rev.1.

8. Management appreciates the strategic evaluations carried out on topics central to WFP's strategic direction. The strategic evaluation of the funding of WFP's work (2014–2019) was presented at the 2020 annual session of the Board. Examining all sources of funding, the evaluation made eight recommendations, all of which management agreed to, including with regard to the need to clarify funding ambitions, priorities and approaches as part of the development of the new strategic plan.
9. Two strategic evaluations were ongoing in 2020 and will be presented to the Board in mid-2021 and early 2022, respectively. The first examines the contribution of school feeding to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reflecting the increased focus on school meals in the priorities of WFP leadership for 2017–2022. The evaluation will assess the relevance of WFP's current school feeding policy,⁹ and its results will inform the implementation of the new school feeding strategy for 2020–2030 and potentially the development of a new school feeding policy.
10. The second evaluation concerns WFP's use of technology in constrained environments. It is assessing whether WFP has effectively deployed the most appropriate information and communication technology applications to increase its management and programmatic performance in constrained environments. It also looks at whether effective measures are in place to mitigate and manage risks to operations and populations resulting from the use of digital technologies and data.
11. Management notes that OEV has planned a strategic evaluation of nutrition and HIV/AIDS for 2021, combining the evaluations of the two policies. The planned evaluation of organizational change was postponed due to reprioritization in 2020 and will be considered in the OEV programme of work for 2022 onwards in the context of a review of priorities for strategic evaluation in 2021, which will be informed by the new strategic plan.
12. Management values CSP evaluations, which are carried out in the penultimate years of CSPs in order to assess and understand progress towards expected results. These evaluations are the main instrument for institutional accountability and learning related to WFP's interventions at the country level. Five CSP evaluations initiated in 2019 have been completed: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (an interim CSP), Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Bangladesh.
13. Management takes note of the key lessons learned from these first CSP evaluations. While the CSP is an effective platform for improving strategic focus and alignment, the government signature on a CSP document is not enough to ensure sustainable transition towards full national ownership. Moreover, the greater flexibility in funding and relatively long-term partnerships expected from the CSP approach have not yet materialized; this is an ongoing constraint to WFP responsiveness to emerging needs. While the CSP approach may have led to some improvements in the integration of gender equality and protection, more can be done to fully achieve gender-transformative results. Linking resources and results also remains a challenge within the current strategic plan and corporate results framework line of sight and hampers WFP's capacity for cost effectiveness analysis and adaptive management.

⁹ WFP/EB.2/2013/4-C.

14. Through the management responses to these evaluations, which were also presented to the Board, WFP has committed to taking action on matters related to staffing profiles and capacity; partnership strategy; its potential convening and coordinating roles; its approach to capacity strengthening; the strengthening of gender transformative approaches; the management of risk to populations; the use of monitoring systems; and additional investment in its evidence base.
15. Management understands that in accordance with the OEV management plan for 2020-2022, 13 CSP evaluations were due to start in 2020. Of these, seven are progressing as planned (those for Afghanistan, China, the Gambia, Honduras, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lebanon and Zimbabwe). Management appreciates the flexibility of OEV in rescheduling evaluations in response to changing circumstances such as when WFP shortens or extends a CSP to align it with the United Nations country framework cycle.
16. Management also notes that two CSP evaluations (for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea CSP and the interim CSP of the Islamic Republic of Iran) were cancelled due to the pandemic as it was deemed unfeasible to conduct fully remote evaluations under the circumstances. The Morocco CSP evaluation was cancelled because of the minimal funding received for the CSP, which meant that only limited activities were implemented. OEV will start 18 CSP evaluations in 2021.
17. Management values corporate emergency response evaluations, which assess the coverage, coherence and connectedness of WFP responses. In 2020 three emergency responses were assessed as part of CSP evaluations, those for Cameroon (Level 2), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Level 3) and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh (Level 3). Emergency responses in Mozambique (Level 3/Level 2) and Zimbabwe (Level 2) are covered by CSP evaluations that will be completed in 2021.
18. Management looks forward to the evaluation of the WFP Level 3 response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was launched in the second half of 2020 and will provide important reflections on WFP's response across the full set of its strategic goals and results, affecting its operations and internal corporate systems.
19. Management recognizes OEV's continued investment in inter-agency humanitarian evaluations, which contribute to ensuring evaluative coverage of WFP corporate emergencies efficiently through the assessment of collective inter-agency action. Two inter-agency humanitarian evaluations were completed in 2020, with OEV as a member of the management groups for both.
20. The report on the evaluation of the system-wide scale-up of the humanitarian response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique included recommendations on integrating cash-based programming into life-saving and early recovery interventions and reviewing and updating tools such as multisector assessments, information management and gender and age-sensitive inter-agency systems for accountability to affected populations.
21. The first thematic inter-agency humanitarian evaluation on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (GEEWG) provides an independent assessment of the progress on the operationalization of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee GEEWG agenda since 2017 and identifies gaps, best practices and lessons learned that should inform further integration.

22. Management also notes that WFP is a member of the management group for the inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the response to the Yemen crisis. Although preparations for the evaluation started in early 2020, they were postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis and resumed in early 2021. The inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the COVID-19 response is also expected to start in 2021.
23. Management appreciates OEV's synthesis of evidence and lessons from policy evaluations, which was presented to the Board in 2020 and built on the OEV document "Top 10 Lessons for Policy Quality in WFP", providing learning evidence for the WFP policy cycle task force, which is now working to implement the six synthesis recommendations. Management also takes note of the synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations, which began in 2020 and is scheduled to be presented to the Board in mid-2021.
24. OEV continues to participate in joint evaluations and partnerships, including by identifying areas of collaboration such as joint decentralized evaluations, impact evaluations and capacity development. Management looks forward to receiving the report from the ongoing joint evaluation of Rome-based agency collaboration.

Decentralized evaluations

25. Management appreciates that OEV works closely with other WFP offices to enhance synergies in the planning and implementation of various types of evidence-generating activities, including decentralized evaluations, which are demand-led and often commissioned and managed by country offices.
26. Management understands that the delivery of the decentralized evaluation workplan was significantly hampered in 2020 by the pandemic. Eighteen decentralized evaluations were initiated in 2020 compared with the 32 originally planned in early 2016, which were readjusted to 29 planned decentralized evaluations in December 2019. As a result, the number of evaluations expected to start in 2021 has risen to 39, although this is a tentative figure given current circumstances.
27. Since 2016, 85 decentralized evaluations have been completed; 61 of these were concluded by the end of 2019. Management notes that the number of country offices that have conducted at least one decentralized evaluation varies from region to region, and that progress in meeting the coverage norms slowed in 2020 due to greater efforts to explore synergies with CSP evaluations as countries have sought to minimize duplication.
28. Management appreciates the engagement of headquarters divisions and regional bureaux in generating evidence through decentralized evaluations and the efforts of regional bureaux in leading work to improve operational performance through knowledge management and the use of evaluation findings.

Impact evaluations

29. Management values that OEV develops thematic impact evaluation "windows" in partnership with WFP programmatic leads in order to generate demand for evidence in priority areas, as these windows increase the likelihood that findings from one country can be applied to other contexts and they generate evidence by addressing common questions.

30. WFP launched two windows in 2019 in partnership with the World Bank's Development Impact Evaluation unit: one focused on cash-based transfers and gender and the other on climate change and resilience. Impact evaluations in eight countries were conducted in 2020 through these windows, while six more impact evaluations are at the feasibility assessment and design stages. Management welcomes the preparations that began in 2020 for a third window on school-based programming, which will be launched in early 2021.

II. Performance of the WFP evaluation function

31. Management acknowledges that the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic presented multiple challenges to implementing the OEV workplan and regional evaluation plans in 2020; this necessitated new approaches and adjustments to enable OEV to sustain the level of coverage, including by moving to remote data collection where feasible. The overall trend in major developments in the WFP evaluation function is positive.
32. Management appreciates that OEV further streamlined and codified the approach to CSP evaluations in 2020, aiming to enhance the efficiency and flexibility needed to deliver on an ambitious and volatile programme of work while ensuring consistency and quality across evaluations. In anticipation of the significant increase in the number of CSP evaluations starting in the last quarter of 2020, it is also positive that OEV strengthened its team of research and data analysts to ensure timely analysis and optimal use of WFP data systems.
33. On the resourcing of the evaluation function, especially in view of the increasing number of centralized and decentralized evaluations, management recognizes the value of sustainable financing options and diverse funding sources, including an increase in and consolidation of the programme support and administrative budgets as approved in the WFP management plan (2021–2023) and utilization of a dedicated multi-donor trust fund for impact evaluation activities. The contingency evaluation fund has also continued to provide timely support to country offices facing funding shortfalls, facilitating three decentralized evaluations in 2020.
34. Management further notes that the overall financial resources for the evaluation function have tripled since 2016, in line with the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) target of dedicating 0.8 percent of WFP's total contribution income to the evaluation function by 2021, although that target is unlikely to be reached this year.
35. Management recognizes that the organization relies on a growing cadre of evaluation professionals in OEV and the regional bureaux to deliver its expanding programme of work. Since the adoption of the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021), the overall number of employees in OEV has increased from 32 in 2016 to 51 in 2020. However, the main change has been an improvement in the ratio of fixed-term staff to total incumbent positions, rising from 38 percent in 2016 to 76 percent in 2020, which has provided greater stability in the OEV workforce. In the regional bureaux, consolidation of staffing continued in 2020 with the recruitment of five new evaluation colleagues.
36. Management takes note of the mid-term reviews conducted in 2020 following two years of implementation of the regional evaluation strategies. The reviews showed substantial progress in most outcomes in all regions and resulted in several common recommendations.

37. Management looks forward to the presentation of the final report from the peer review of WFP's evaluation function, which was conducted by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC) in 2020 in order to provide an independent and professional assessment of the WFP evaluation function and review its added value.
38. Over the course of 2020, OEV completed the development of two strategies: the Evaluation Capacity Development Strategy (2020–2024) and the Evaluation Communication and Knowledge Management Strategy (2021–2026). Both are welcomed by management as they will help to strengthen WFP's evaluation cadre and ensure that evaluation results are accessible and fully utilized throughout WFP for both learning and accountability purposes.
39. Management notes that in 2020, despite COVID-19, OEV delivered on its workplan approved in 2019¹⁰ completing all centralized evaluations as planned with the exception of the strategic evaluation on the contribution of school feeding to the SDGs, for which the timeline was extended.
40. Management acknowledges the conclusions of the annual evaluation report with regard to evaluation coverage in 2020 and the evolution of minimum coverage norms since 2016 that has helped ensure that decentralized evaluations are planned and conducted on the basis of evidence needs, with a clear purpose and in a manner that complements other evaluations carried out within the framework of the CSP cycle. By early 2021, 40 percent of WFP's 80 country offices had completed at least one decentralized evaluation in their current cycles.
41. Management notes that an independent quality assessor concluded that 97 percent (30/31) of evaluations assessed in 2020 were highly satisfactory or satisfactory, an improvement of 19 percentage points over 2019. As to gender integration, it is noted that 80 percent of the 31 evaluations were deemed to meet requirements and 20 percent "approached" requirements.
42. Noting the contribution of evaluation findings to CSP formulation, management acknowledges the continued increase in 2020 in the use of evaluation evidence in programme design and long-term adjustments. Management also appreciates the efforts of OEV and regional evaluation units to increase the accessibility of evaluation results, as well as their engagement and joint learning and capacity strengthening activities with the wider evaluation, development and humanitarian communities.
43. As to evidence uptake, management values OEV's engagement in the development and review process of six draft CSP and interim CSP documents in 2020. Management also notes the report's conclusions that 56 percent of evaluation recommendations due in 2020 had been implemented by WFP by December 2020. We elaborate on this in the Implementation Status of Evaluation Recommendations report, which is also being submitted to the Board. Management notes that OEV is conducting a qualitative review in 2021 of the follow-up to recommendations from thematic evaluations of a strategic or global nature.

¹⁰ WFP/EB.2/2019/5-A/1.

III. Evaluation and how it is evolving in WFP

44. Management acknowledges that OEV has made significant progress in 2020 towards each of the four outcomes set out in the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021), despite the adjustments required due to COVID-19.
45. Management welcomes the OECD-DAC peer review's assessment of the independence, credibility and utility of WFP's evaluation function as "substantially positive" and in line with UNEG norms and standards for evaluation. The peer review panel commended WFP, stating that the centralized evaluation function was mature and well-grounded and that the creation of regional evaluation units in 2017 and 2018 to support regional bureaux and country offices had made a huge difference to the decentralized evaluation function, which is still being established.
46. Management notes that the panel flagged six areas for further enhancement with the aim of the continued strengthening of the independence, credibility and utility of WFP's evaluation function as well as further embedding a culture of accountability and learning in the organization.
47. Management further notes that these recommendations will serve as a backdrop to OEV's priorities in 2021 and will inform the preparation of an updated WFP evaluation policy, which OEV expects to present for approval by the Board in late 2021. Management agrees with the key priorities outlined by OEV in the annual evaluation report for 2020, namely, to ensure continued independent, credible and useful evaluations; strengthen evaluation coverage; increase evaluation management capacity to adequate levels throughout WFP; and strengthen partnerships in international forums.

Conclusion

48. Management notes continued progress towards fulfilling the vision of the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) of creating a culture of evaluative thinking and behaviour in support of WFP's contribution to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
49. To fully leverage both the ambition of and learning from the WFP evaluation function, sufficient capacity and resources need to be embedded throughout the organization, including in the performance and monitoring functions. The ongoing review of the implementation of recommendations from thematic evaluations of a strategic and global nature, the first in a series of periodic reviews of how WFP follows up on evaluation recommendations, will enhance the visibility and use of recommendations and identify how barriers to evaluation uptake can be further reduced. Furthermore, OEV's efforts to enhance learning from evaluation and generate evaluation evidence will help WFP to utilize evidence more effectively to guide its strategic direction, in line with its response to the peer review of its evaluation function. WFP will explore how evidence from evaluation can be better combined with research, monitoring and other evaluative activity to strengthen its use of evidence generated and thus improve learning and knowledge management.

Acronyms

CSP	country strategic plan
GEEWG	gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls
OECD-DAC	Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEV	Office of Evaluation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group