



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

Executive Board
Annual session
Rome, 26–30 June 2023

Distribution: General

Agenda item 12

Date: 13 June 2023

WFP/EB.A/2023/12-B

Original: English

Other business

For information

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

Update on the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service

Executive summary

The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service is managed by WFP and provides passenger and cargo air transport services that enable the entire humanitarian and development community to implement timely and effective responses in emergencies and protracted crises.

The service also facilitates medical and security evacuations for humanitarian staff when required, including from remote locations. Without the service, millions of people around the world would be more vulnerable to food insecurity, conflict and climate-related shocks and health emergencies.

The air transport services provided by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service augment existing national capacity and, by doing so, support diverse humanitarian and development actors and the beneficiaries they serve and expedite progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to operational services, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service also coordinates with local authorities and other partners to support relevant capacity strengthening activities and airport infrastructure maintenance and rehabilitation that improves access to isolated communities.

In 2022, the WFP Aviation Service continued to provide timely services to support humanitarian responses in an increasingly complex global environment. The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operated in 22 countries, adapting its activities and air assets to evolving humanitarian needs. Operations were scaled up when required, including in Burkina Faso, Haiti and Madagascar. This was against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the consequent inflation of fuel costs and need to reconfigure the aircraft fleet in various United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operations.

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The WFP-managed United Nations Humanitarian Air Service is an enabler for the wider humanitarian community. Timely donor contributions remain crucial to its ability to sustain air transport operations and meet evolving needs. In 2022 the WFP Aviation Service, in coordination with WFP's finance and partnerships divisions, initiated the establishment of a centralized mechanism for the receipt and management of direct multilateral contributions earmarked for the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operations. Funds from the mechanism may be allocated to country strategic plans through a transparent process approved by WFP executive management. As of May 2023, and following a comprehensive testing period, the mechanism is available to any donors who may wish to support United Nations Humanitarian Air Service operations. Proposed allocations will be presented for review and approval by the Director of the WFP Supply Chain Operations Division.

Also, the aviation policy was reviewed by the Executive Board in 2022 and approved at its 2023 first regular session. The policy defines the scope of WFP's aviation mandate and is a significant milestone for WFP's supply chain function. Central to the policy are the humanitarian principles and WFP's commitment to providing common, specialized and on-demand aviation services for the humanitarian and development community, following a specific set of guiding practices.

Introduction

1. Established at the request of the High-Level Committee on Management in 2003, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) is managed by WFP and provides passenger and cargo air transport services. Those services enable the entire humanitarian and development community to implement effective humanitarian and recovery responses in emergencies and protracted crises. Whenever constraints such as inadequate road networks, significant distances or insecurity impede humanitarian access, UNHAS is critical to ensuring timely and safe access to people and communities affected by food insecurity, conflict, climate-related hazards and health emergencies.
2. The air transport services provided by UNHAS augment existing national capacity and, by doing so, support diverse humanitarian and development actors and the beneficiaries they serve, expediting progress towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These actors include other United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations, donors and diplomatic representatives involved in or facilitating delivery of aid for crisis-affected people and communities. In many situations such entities depend on UNHAS to reach programme implementation sites and to monitor their activities.
3. UNHAS also facilitates medical and security evacuations of humanitarian staff when needed, using both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. This is a vital service as it allows timely interventions in high-risk situations whenever the lives of humanitarian workers are in jeopardy. In such circumstances UNHAS remains the only service able to flexibly deploy and re-route its aircraft for the quick evacuation of humanitarian staff, often from otherwise unreachable locations.
4. UNHAS also coordinates with local authorities and partners to support relevant capacity strengthening activities as well as airport infrastructure maintenance and rehabilitation that improves access to isolated communities.

Overview of 2022 UNHAS operations in an environment of increasing challenges

5. In 2022 an increasingly complex global environment compounded the effects of protracted crises, with significant supply chain disruptions and increased costs for key goods and services. Against this background, the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance has continued to increase, reaching a record high of 339 million people in 2023.¹ Concurrently, humanitarian access has often been constrained in many settings.
6. UNHAS promptly adapted its operations to respond to the increasing needs and ensure services for the humanitarian and development communities, but the global consequences of the conflict in Ukraine had an impact on its budget. This was primarily due to increases in the cost of fuel and the reconfiguration of the UNHAS-contracted fleet following the issuance of a “significant safety concern” notice by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to Russian Federation authorities on 15 September 2022.² The WFP Aviation Service used the fleet reconfiguration exercise as an opportunity to diversify its list of operators and the types of helicopters it uses, which is expected to enable wider global coverage and the more rapid deployment of air assets.
7. Despite these challenges the Aviation Service continued to provide timely services to support humanitarian responses throughout 2022. Higher demand for UNHAS services resulted in the need to rapidly adapt operations. Examples of operations that were scaled up include those in Burkina Faso, where increased country-wide conflict resulted in mass population displacement and impeded road access, requiring enhanced air transport for the implementation of humanitarian operations; Haiti, where climate-related shocks and increasing insecurity required enhanced access to affected communities; and Madagascar, where a scale-up during the cyclone season was necessary to allow for aerial assessments and rapid access to affected areas.
8. In Burkina Faso the helicopter fleet was expanded, and flight schedules were continuously revised to accommodate additional demand for air services and to reach new destinations. By the end of 2022 a total of seven helicopters had been deployed to support the scale-up of both UNHAS operations and the delivery of WFP food assistance. The helicopters included an AS332 Super Puma funded by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO) of the European Commission.
9. Throughout 2022 UNHAS operated in 22 countries: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Kenya, Libya,³ Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
10. In 2022 UNHAS activity gradually returned to the levels that had been obtained before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, with most operational indicators recording higher values than in 2021.
11. In 2022 UNHAS transported more than 395,000 passengers and 7,000 mt of humanitarian cargo, providing staff members from 732 organizations with access to 320 regular and 220 ad hoc destinations in remote and hard-to-reach areas. This was enabled by WFP’s fleet of more than 100 aircraft (including both fixed- and rotary-wing assets). Organizations

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2022. *Global Humanitarian Overview 2023*.

² International Civil Aviation Organization. 2022. (SSC/AIR-01/05-2022/RUS). See *Infractions of the Convention on International Civil Aviation by the Russian Federation* (A41-WP/430), a working paper for the 41st session of the International Civil Aviation Organization Assembly.

³ As acceptable and sufficient commercial air transport options became available and were cleared by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security for humanitarian travel, the UNHAS Libya operation was officially concluded by the end of June 2022.

served included national and international non-governmental organizations (56 percent), United Nations entities and international organizations (39 percent), representatives from the donor and diplomatic communities (2 percent), and other partners, including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement (3 percent). UNHAS also operated special flights for needs assessments, project monitoring and high-level and ad hoc missions and provided medical evacuations for 565 passengers and security evacuations for 982 passengers (table 1).

Operational indicator	2020	2021	2022
Passengers	248 026	325 112	> 395 000
Cargo (mt)	3 975	5 872	> 7 000
Evacuations (medical and security)	1 373	3 015	1 547
User organizations	800	800	732
Destinations	400	496	540

12. Also in 2022, UNHAS continued to manage ECHO-funded flights under the European Union Humanitarian Aid Flight project (previously known as "ECHO-Flight") for operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya and Mali. The project was also activated in Madagascar for the 2022 cyclone response and (as noted in paragraph 8) in the scale-up of the Burkina Faso response, using a dedicated Super Puma helicopter. A total of 17,770 passengers and 174 mt of cargo were transported on WFP-managed European Union Humanitarian Aid Flight services in the five countries.

UNHAS and the United Nations booking hub

13. In 2022 the WFP Aviation Service continued to promote the United Nations Booking Hub as a comprehensive online booking platform for UNHAS flights. By the end of the year, 12 UNHAS operations were using the hub for booking purposes; its expansion to the remaining UNHAS operations continues and is expected to conclude by the end of 2023.
14. The online booking hub has been enhanced with various features, including self-service functions, aimed at ensuring its flexibility and its alignment with the requirements of airfield operations. The most important developments implemented during 2022 include the introduction of customizable booking forms, the provision of access to the hub for users from registered organizations using UNHAS services who are using publicly available email service providers, the facilitation of booking requests with special requirements (including excess luggage), the management of booking privileges and adjustments of the booking workflow.

The WFP Aviation Service's environmental and sustainability programme

15. In 2022 significant progress was made under the WFP Aviation Service's environmental and sustainability programme. Launched in 2021, the programme aims to operationalize WFP's commitment to reducing the environmental impact of its activities, including its air operations.

16. Achievements in 2022 include:
- the integration of environmental clauses into all fuel and aircraft charter agreements, including clauses contractually obligating all chartered air carriers to implement environmental management systems as of 1 January 2023;
 - the continued development and implementation of environmental key performance indicators that enable the measurement of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from WFP-chartered aircraft;
 - the drafting of an extended list of operational measures to reduce fuel burn and emissions;
 - the inclusion of environmental parameters in the aircraft procurement process;
 - the inclusion of an environmental component in funding proposals and donor reports;
 - the launch of environmental awareness-raising campaigns for passengers aimed at helping to minimize the environmental impact of travel; and
 - the launch of a sustainable aviation fuel market analysis and the participation of the WFP Aviation Service in ICAO's Assistance, Capacity Building and Training for Sustainable Aviation Fuels programme, which aims to increase understanding of the pricing and geographic availability of sustainable aviation fuel and related policy.
17. In addition, a study was conducted to assess opportunities to minimize aircraft fuel use and emissions in accordance with ICAO recommendations.⁴ Following the implementation of ICAO fuel-saving measures by selected air operators, emissions from five WFP-chartered aircraft were analysed over a period of three months. The analysis found a 2 percent reduction in fuel consumption compared with previous months. If these fuel saving margins were maintained for all WFP-chartered aircraft for one year, it would yield a 2 percent annual net saving of purchased fuel. This is equivalent to 3,000 mt of CO₂ emissions avoided and USD 1.1 million in cost savings. The study, initially applied to five aircraft, was expanded to cover 50 percent of WFP's long-term chartered fleet. The initial results showing a 2 percent reduction in fuel consumption by applying ICAO measures were confirmed by the extended study in autumn 2022.
18. The first humanitarian aviation environmental meeting, organized and chaired by WFP, was held in March 2022 in Cairo. More than 60 high-level delegates from civil aviation authorities, international organizations, aircraft manufacturers, air transport operators and fuel providers attended. Technical and panel discussions explored the opportunities for and challenges to innovative action to improve the environmental sustainability of humanitarian aviation.⁵
19. Work to identify the most appropriate offsetting methodologies for compensating for emissions at the passenger and corporate levels is under way.

⁴ International Civil Aviation Organization. 2014. *Operational Opportunities to Reduce Fuel Burn and Emissions*.

⁵ As of June 2023, a second humanitarian aviation environmental meeting is being planned, to be tentatively scheduled in autumn 2023.

WFP Aviation Service: operational key performance indicators

20. As shown in tables 1 and 2, most aviation-related key performance indicators registered improvement in 2022 compared with 2021:
- *Cost efficiency:* The operational cost per passenger kilometre⁶ was lower in 2021 than in 2020 owing to UNHAS service disruptions at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against that backdrop, the operational cost per passenger kilometre increased in 2022 compared to the previous year (to USD 1.86, from USD 1.80 in 2021). This was due to global factors such as increased contracting costs and fuel prices.
 - *Environmental efficiency:*⁷ In 2022, total CO₂ emissions from all WFP-chartered aircraft totalled 142,620 mt. A sustained decrease has been evident since 2019 – when total CO₂ emissions stood at 246,338 mt – reflecting significant progress in WFP’s efforts to reduce emissions.
 - *User satisfaction:* The satisfaction rates derived from passenger satisfaction surveys and provision of access satisfaction surveys are aggregated at the global level. The overall user satisfaction rate for UNHAS services in 2022 was 95 percent, based on the passenger and provision of access surveys undertaken at the country level for all UNHAS operations. User satisfaction has been increasing since 2020, when a low level of satisfaction (83 percent) resulted primarily from the disruption of UNHAS services due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Operational indicator	2020	2021	2022
Cost efficiency (operational cost per passenger kilometre) (USD)	1.85	1.80	1.86
Environmental efficiency (mt of CO ₂ emissions from WFP-chartered aircraft) (mt)	184 559	160 181	142 620
User satisfaction (percentage of UNHAS users satisfied and very satisfied with the service)	83	94	95

UNHAS funding overview

21. UNHAS continues to add significant value to humanitarian and recovery operations, both in sudden-onset emergencies and protracted crises. WFP is grateful for the ongoing generosity of donors, which enables UNHAS to remain a demand-driven common service for the entire humanitarian and development community, facilitating the provision of life-saving assistance.

⁶ The operational cost per passenger kilometre is calculated for each passenger flown. Contract costs for each aircraft are calculated per “block hour” (the time an aircraft takes between leaving the “blocks” at the departure gate and arriving at the destination gate). The actual fuel consumption of the aircraft and the fuel price at the location where the aircraft is based are used to calculate the fuel cost per block hour.

⁷ Based on the methodology for calculating CO₂ emissions developed by the WFP Aviation Service, in accordance with ICAO guidelines. The methodology tracks CO₂ emissions in real-time, including those from all regular UNHAS flights and those associated with all other WFP air transport services.

22. Against the backdrop of deteriorating humanitarian access in many settings, an increasing demand for humanitarian air services and the frequent need to adjust and scale up operations, UNHAS continues to require consistent, predictable and sufficient funding from the donor community.
23. The total UNHAS budget for 2022 was USD 423.1 million. As of 6 June, the expected 2023 budget was USD 416.9 million.⁸
24. In 2022 UNHAS received contributions from 22 donors in the amount of USD 231.7 million, representing 52 percent of total funding. "Carry-over" balances from 2021 totalled USD 129.2 million (29 percent of total funding), and cost recovery generated USD 129.2 million (19 percent of total funding).

UNHAS centralized funding mechanism

25. UNHAS activities are budgeted and implemented under individual country strategic plans (CSPs). This country-level resource mobilization has in some cases led to challenges in funding UNHAS services. Accordingly, to enhance resource mobilization for UNHAS operations and in response to feedback from the donor community, WFP has explored the establishment of a centralized mechanism for managing direct multilateral contributions to UNHAS globally, with the funds collected being allocated to CSPs through a transparent process approved by senior management. Following the Executive Director's approval of the formalization of this mechanism and a "testing period" and validation process, the new mechanism is now available to donors who wish to support UNHAS operations globally. The mechanism is intended to complement in-country fundraising activities, uphold the principles of transparency and accountability and promote the continuous improvement of common air transport services.
26. The new mechanism is expected to enhance the flexibility of funding allocation, expedite operational responses to urgent needs, and improve operational efficiency. It is particularly salient to operations with limited visibility and little likelihood of attracting sufficient funding. The mechanism will also be critical in enabling WFP to promptly cover the cost of deploying assets to support emergency responses in countries where UNHAS does not operate, where UNHAS activities have not been required for CSP implementation or where UNHAS activities have been part of contingency planning within a CSP and where funds are not readily available.
27. The funding mechanism is managed at the headquarters level, with the overall donor reporting process (including contribution management and financial reporting) managed by the WFP Aviation Service. Resource allocation is managed under the authority of the Director of the Supply Chain Operations Division and is subject to oversight by a committee. Country offices will continue to be able to mobilize and accept contributions for UNHAS activities outside of the mechanism, following the relevant corporate financial reporting rules when they do so.
28. No changes are foreseen for donors who may express interest in providing funding for UNHAS through WFP headquarters, liaison offices, regional bureaux, country office partnership representatives, aviation officers, or other relevant channels. When resources from a donor are identified and channelled through the centralized funding mechanism, however, they will be allocated according to formal prioritization criteria. In such a case a funding proposal will be drafted by the Aviation Service in consultation with the UNHAS operations that will potentially receive funding. The proposal will then be endorsed by the

⁸ According to the implementation plan, which represents the resource-based budget expenditure that will be required to deliver the planned UNHAS services over the year.

Supply Chain Operations Division and shared with the relevant WFP government donor officers for final review and submission to the donors.

29. Requirements for reporting on matters such as operational performance and utilization of funding will be discussed with donors on a case-by-case basis. Donors will continue to be recognized through WFP's various communication channels, such as social media.

Future air transport solutions

30. WFP continues to support the development of cargo delivery through the use of remotely piloted aircraft and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) more broadly. These innovations are expected to enhance air transport capabilities while reducing risk. WFP has established strategic partnerships with leading manufacturers to share knowledge that will inform future efficiency and environmental sustainability gains.
31. In addition, WFP has established a framework for the safe and secure operation of UAS by WFP personnel, ensuring compliance with the minimum standards for UAS operations and assigning the management of UAS cargo delivery to the WFP Aviation Service. The framework is aligned with the international connectivity operations of the Technology Division, with the Aviation Service providing technical guidance as required.
32. More broadly, WFP will continue to explore opportunities for strategic partnerships aimed at leveraging future air transport solutions and enhancing its response capability. Access to cutting-edge innovations and industry talent is considered a key enabler of this effort.

Progress on external audit recommendations

33. Of the 16 recommendations made in the external audit of the WFP Aviation Service undertaken between July 2019 and January 2021, 14 were formally closed as of May 2023. Implementation of the remaining two recommendations is under way and is expected to be complete by the end of 2023, with recommendation 3 on the revision of the financial and budgetary framework for aviation activities complete by the end of July 2023 and recommendation 16 on the development of a passenger eligibility endorsement function within the WFP Aviation Service's flight management systems by the end of December 2023.

WFP aviation policy

34. The external audit of the WFP Aviation Service highlighted the importance of aviation activities for the United Nations and the wider humanitarian community. It concluded that an aviation operations policy should be developed (recommendation 1) and recommended that the policy include the scope of WFP's aviation mandate, appropriate flight coordination mechanisms, identification criteria for the registration of UNHAS users, the relationship between the WFP Aviation Service and its aviation safety unit, and funding rules.
35. Following the drafting of the policy document and its clearance in 2022, it was approved by the Board at its 2023 first regular session.
36. The policy defines the scope of WFP's aviation mandate and is a significant milestone for WFP's supply chain function. Central to the policy are the humanitarian principles and WFP's commitment to providing common, specialized and on-demand aviation services for the humanitarian and development community.

Acronyms

CO ₂	carbon dioxide
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSP	country strategic plan
DG-ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
UAS	unmanned aircraft systems
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service