

Evaluation Brief



Evaluation of WFP's 2012 Nutrition Policy

Context

This evaluation of WFP's 2012 nutrition policy, commissioned by the Office of Evaluation, was requested by the Board at the time of the Policy's approval.

In recent years nutrition has enjoyed unprecedented global attention manifested in international partnerships such as the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement.

The nutrition policy was adopted in the context of WFP's shift from food aid to food assistance. It presents WFP's vision and framework for its contribution to the global movement on nutrition through nutrition-specific (treatment of moderate acute malnutrition and prevention of acute and chronic malnutrition) and nutrition-sensitive programming

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

While the evaluation serves accountability, the accent is on learning, as this is an evaluation focused on the early implementation period of 2012-2014.

The evaluation assessed the Policy's quality, initial results and factors affecting its implementation using a theory based approach; five country desk studies (Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Lesotho and South Sudan); documents review and programme design analysis of 38 operations in 15 countries; stakeholders interviews; and e-surveys of WFP staff, and a workshop with the internal reference group to engage on the findings and discuss the draft recommendations.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Quality of the Nutrition Policy

The evaluation found that the nutrition policy was relevant and timely. It rightly provided a useful analytical framework, including the distinction between nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions.

The Policy was consistent with WFP's mandate and coherent with WFP's Strategic Plan and other Policies. In relation to coherence with other agencies, it provided a clear statement of WFP's envisioned role across different aspects of nutrition. This implied wider role, particularly in the prevention of chronic malnutrition in development and emergency context, was not intended to displace that of any other agency.

The Policy cited available evidence, which was strong in areas such as the inclusion of physiological requirements for nutrients. However, some prescriptions were not (and are still not) adequately supported by evidence. There was strong evidence that treating moderate and acute malnutrition saves lives; however there was – and is – much less evidence on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of supplementary feeding programmes in preventing malnutrition. The Policy emphasis on supplementary feeding understandably reinforced

external (and internal) perceptions of WFP as too product-focused.

Gaps were identified in: i) follow-up guidance on nutrition-sensitive programming, reflecting the general scarcity of knowledge of what works in this area and ii) guidance on working with governments to build nutrition governance.

Other gaps included omission of the increasingly important issue of obesity/overweight, and the treatment of gender was found superficial.

The Policy had a practical orientation, but was overambitious in its implied targets for expansion of WFP nutrition programming. It focused too narrowly on product-based solutions, with insufficient attention to the complementary factors that are recognized in its analytical framework.

Initial Policy results

Initial results include upgraded nutrition specifications for the commodities WFP procures, but nutrition programmes have not scaled up to the extent envisaged by the Policy. There has been rapid growth – albeit it from a low base – of programmes to prevent stunting, but beneficiary numbers in other focus areas such as treatment and prevention of acute malnutrition have not increased.

WFP is in the early stages of adapting to the implications of nutrition-sensitive programming across its entire portfolio; given the scale of WFP's operations, this is an important area for continued effort.

The Policy is reasonably well understood within WFP but could be further supported with follow up guidance for its operationalization. The multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches rightly advocated for in the Policy, were somewhat undermined by too much emphasis on food-based as distinct from multi-sectoral solutions.

The approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in WFP's Strategic Results Framework is logical, but further development is required. For instance there is a lack of indicators for nutrition-sensitive programming. Funding for M&E was found an issue that was not adequately addressed when new indicators were initiated under the 2014-17 Strategic Plan.

The Policy is credited with standardizing WFP's use of nutritious foods, with higher-quality specifications of foods procured by WFP.

The WFP's nutrition interventions target women, and data is disaggregated. However, addressing gender requires more than targeting women and the evaluation found only fragmentary evidence of gender analysis such as the role of gender in household decisions – as a basis for programme design, implementation or evaluation.

WFP has invested considerable efforts in maintaining global level nutrition partnerships, notably through its

active engagement with SUN and REACH¹. While a United Nations global nutrition agenda should soon be published it remains to be seen whether this constitutes a major step towards the enhanced partnership and agreed division of labour among United Nations nutrition agencies as envisaged by the Policy.

Factors explaining initial results

Positive factors were strong ownership of the Policy and extensive consultation with WFP's Board leading up to its adoption. However, consultation with Country Offices and with other United Nations agencies was found less thorough.

The internal environment has been generally supportive. The main caveat – not unique to nutrition operations – is the difficulty for WFP to adopt long-term approaches (as implied by the policy emphasis on prevention and on work to develop government and other partner capacity) in the context of typically short-term funding cycles.

The evaluation found most available nutrition guidance of good quality, but it could be strengthened; there is little guidance yet on nutrition-sensitive programming or on gender considerations. While much guidance has been drafted, especially by WFP's Nutrition Division (OSN), its dissemination has been limited.

Financing and staffing are experienced as the major constraints to implementation of the Policy, undermining initial expectations that implementation could rely on existing budgets. Funding for prevention activities has been particularly scarce, reflecting skepticism about the underlying evidence and widely held perceptions that WFP's comparative advantage is in short term emergency response.

In its approach to academic partnering and operational research related to nutrition, WFP is rightly concerned with gathering better evidence and recognizes the importance of academic partners for improving the quality and credibility of research in which WFP participates. However, it has been difficult to develop a coherent operational research programme, and research efforts are spread too thin.

The Policy used a robust analytical framework, but the sustainability of its results is doubtful given the difficulties for WFP to support national capacity development, and legitimate concerns that product-focused interventions (even if effective) are unsustainable by national governments; long-term progress must depend on nationally-owned, multi-sectoral strategies that address food systems as a whole.

Overall Assessment

The evaluation concluded that the Policy was timely and provided a useful and robust analytical framework. It continues to be relevant to WFP's mandate and generally coherent with other WFP strategies. It had a practical orientation (although dissemination of guidance to support Policy implementation has been unsystematic), and rightly advocated working through partnerships.

However, the Policy was overambitious in its implied targets for an expansion of WFP nutrition programmes. Some of its prescriptions and recommendations were not

adequately supported by evidence. Financing and staffing are major constraints to fulfill the Policy's ambition.

It is unlikely that product-focused interventions – even if effective – are sustainable by national governments in the long-term.

Recommendations

The evaluation's eight recommendations, covering different aspects of implementing and strengthening the Policy, should be seen as a coherent set of proposals. All recommendations were agreed by the Management Response.

1. Policy revision: Do not revise the Nutrition Policy at this time. Ensure nutrition objectives are embedded in the next Strategic Plan and consider a full revision of the nutrition Policy during 2017, aligned with the new SP. In the meantime, submit annual nutrition Policy update papers to the Board in 2016 and 2017.

2. Policy development: Develop the Policy further through subject papers to support improved guidance for policy implementation; include nutrition considerations in other WFP policies and guidelines.

3. Guidance for Policy Implementation: Strengthen practical and targeted guidance to WFP staff and management, taking in account international best practices and findings from this evaluation and WFP's operational research.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation: Strengthen M&E of WFP nutrition operations, particularly by supporting COs to report on the current SRF indicators.

5. Operational Research and Knowledge Management: Develop, disseminate and implement a comprehensive operational research strategy that supports effective design, delivery and use of research within WFP, and a research agenda that addresses gaps in knowledge required for WFP's effective programming.

6. Capacity Development in WFP: Ensure an appropriate balance of competencies among country office and regional bureaux staff to ensure high-quality implementation of nutrition programmes and enable effective advocacy with external stakeholders – particularly governments – and effective support for national strategy and planning processes.

7. Collaboration and Multi-sector Partnerships: WFP should continue to stress the importance of multi-sector partnerships in addressing undernutrition in support of national nutrition policies and strategies, and participate actively in such partnerships in emergency, transition and non-emergency contexts.

8. Resourcing the Implementation of the Nutrition Policy: Seek to mitigate resource constraints hampering nutrition policy implementation by addressing their systemic causes such as funding mechanisms limitations.



Reference: Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation
For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation
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¹ Renewed Effort Against Child Hunger