



IMPACT EVALUATION

Annual Report for the Strategic Advisory Panel on Impact Evaluation at WFP

2020 in Review



**World Food
Programme**

**SAVING
LIVES
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LIVES**

June 2021

Contents

Foreword	i
Strategic Advisory Panel Annual Meeting	2
Discussion highlights.....	2
Guided discussion on lessons learned in 2020	3
Impact evaluation strategy review	4
Annual Report for the Strategic Advisory Panel on Impact Evaluation at WFP	5
Introduction.....	5
WFP's impact evaluation strategy and pilot	5
Progress Implementing the Pilot in 2020.....	6
Impact evaluation activities in 2020	6
Impact evaluation windows in 2020.....	6
Non-window impact evaluations	11
Impact evaluation in fragile and humanitarian settings	11
Capacity development activities	11
Partnership activities in 2020.....	11
Impact evaluation resources in 2020	13
Lessons Learned and Challenges.....	14
Matching demand with windows.....	14
UN partnerships and joint impact evaluations.....	15
Impact Evaluation approaches for adaptive and humanitarian contexts.....	15
WFP capacity to deliver the impact evaluation strategy	16

Foreword



To achieve Zero Hunger by 2030, WFP and our partners need to identify what works best for the people we serve.

We have to know which interventions work best in each area we operate. To do this, we must both generate and follow the evidence.

In 2020, WFP continued implementing its first ever Impact Evaluation Strategy (2019-2026), with

the explicit aim of supporting the organization to use rigorous impact evaluation evidence to inform policy and programme decisions, optimise interventions and provide thought leadership to global efforts to achieve Zero Hunger.

New programmes, technologies and data sources present opportunities for WFP to harness the full potential of impact evaluation as a tool for learning.

WFP's Office of Evaluation has established a Strategic Advisory Panel to guide efforts as we pilot new approaches to delivering rigorous impact evaluations.

As Director of Evaluation, I am pleased to share the Annual Report of the Strategic Advisory Panel, which captures progress to date and lessons learned from piloting our new strategy.

Director of Evaluation
Andrea Cook

Strategic Advisory Panel Annual Meeting

5 March 2021

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INTRODUCTION

The Annual Meeting of the Strategic Advisory Panel (SAP) reviews progress made in implementing WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy (2019-2026). Following a presentation of the 2020 SAP Annual Report, the SAP discussed progress made in 2020, highlighted the importance of WFP efforts to increase the availability of impact evaluation evidence for fragile and humanitarian contexts, and reflected on issues for future consideration. Here is a summary of the discussion among panel members.

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

- *Overall progress during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020:* Panel members welcomed WFP's ability to continue delivering its impact evaluation strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. All panel members reflected on the difficulties associated with switching to virtual engagements and remote data collection. WFP's Office of Evaluation (OEV) confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic delayed all impact evaluations by at least six months, and the process of switching from in-person to remote engagements has been very challenging. Advantages of the WFP-DIME partnership model for delivering impact evaluations have been the presence of field coordinators in-country, strong cooperation from the country offices, and continued virtual support from both Rome and Washington D.C. to advise on operational and data related challenges.
- *Cross-country analysis & addressing programme specific needs:* The panel members highlighted the need to closely examine the common interventions and outcomes that allow for cross-country analyses. Since this will be the unique contribution of the window-approach, (see page 7) some members stressed the importance to keep cross-country comparisons central to the analysis. Members also pointed out that not all questions about programming can be answered through experimental methods. They suggested that the window approach is strengthened by exploring additional methods (simulation and qualitative) to answer these questions. This will also ensure

that the impact evaluations align as much as possible with the evidence priorities of the country offices while contributing to the window questions.

- ▶ *Revisiting the opportunities and challenges for remote data:* Panel members highlighted the importance of revisiting both the opportunities and challenges presented by relying on remote data collection, in particular, the sampling bias that can be introduced and high rates of attrition from surveys. OEV welcomed these reflections and will continue exploring how combinations of phone surveys, transactions data, satellite imagery, monitoring data, and others can be used to measure outcomes in a more representative and meaningful manner.
- ▶ *Maximising the use of data collected during impact evaluations:* The panel welcomed recent progress in collecting baseline and high-frequency data. They highlighted that the data collected during impact evaluations, including baseline surveys, can be a rich source of information for learning about contexts and improving the programmes being implemented. OEV welcomed these comments and sees the analysis of baseline and high-frequency data as a key next step in the process for ongoing impact evaluations.
- ▶ *Engaging local research capacities:* The panel enquired about the extent to which OEV engages with national researchers in its ongoing impact evaluations. OEV confirmed that this is a future priority but has so far been limited to the selection of field coordinators. Going forward, OEV hopes to engage in a more in-depth process of identifying the most effective avenues for both developing and collaborating with evaluation and research capacity either in-country or regionally in areas where WFP operates.

GUIDED DISCUSSION ON LESSONS LEARNED IN 2020

OEV facilitated a group discussion focused on exploring the following question:

Matching demand with windows: Given growing demand for impact evaluations that fall outside of windows, what are the trade-offs between building evidence in pre-defined areas and generating evidence in new priority areas? What alternatives can be used to steer demand towards common evidence priorities?

Creating a UN network or community of practice for rigorous impact evaluation: Given the challenges encountered with joint impact evaluations, what steps can WFP take to identify counterparts and engage or support a community of practice interested in rigorous impact evaluations within the UN?

Capacity to Deliver: the current need to pair external technical assistance with OEV support, what partnership options (e.g. thematic, geographic, etc.) are better suited towards meeting growing demand? What configurations of staff and partners can be used to meet demand while also maintaining central oversight?

The questions led to a lively discussion and debate about some of the trade-offs:

Bottom-up vs. centrally steering demand for impact evaluation evidence: Panel members explored both the opportunities and challenges related to centrally steering demand for impact evaluations towards WFP's corporate evidence priorities. Several panel members highlighted that the value of an impact evaluation should be seen first in relation to its usefulness to a country context, even if it has limited external validity.

Impact evaluations should in the first-place feed into policy and programme decisions at the country level. Other panel members acknowledged that single, country-specific studies can add value, but can also often be ignored and fail to have an impact on humanitarian and development practice. The implicit trade-off between global vs. local demand is also misleading because the windows are conceptualised in close consultation with operations in WFP at HQ and country levels.

Ultimately, WFP will need to seek a middle ground, where impact evaluations answer questions that add to global evidence while simultaneously contributing to local decision-making. This may also require a more flexible window approach, possibly expanding the number of window-level pre-analysis plans (focussing on different research questions) used to guide country-level evaluation designs.

Caution when creating networks and communities of practice: The panel highlighted that numerous communities exist for evaluation, impact evaluation, and research, and sees limited value for WFP to engage in creating any new ones.

Panel members also highlighted that developing a community of practice requires significant resources, which may be used better in other areas. WFP will therefore first engage with existing networks. Some panel members also suggested to

broaden the existing FAO-led community of practice on impact evaluation to the other Rome-based Agencies.

Importance of in-house capacity to conduct impact evaluations: Panel members were unified in promoting the importance of increasing WFP's in-house capacity to conduct impact evaluations. Several members expressed concern that relying on external academic partners can result in unbalanced relationships, where WFP has less control over research agendas and the choice of methods and cannot realise the full benefits of evidence generated.

Other panel members highlighted that collaborative partnerships with external academic partners can be more durable than institutional or commercial partnerships. In many countries where WFP works, academic communities are more stable and don't suffer the high turnover rates of internationally

recruited UN staff. WFP will need to reflect on the level and balance of in-house capacity and types of partnerships required to maximise the benefits and usefulness of impact evaluations in the future.

IMPACT EVALUATION STRATEGY REVIEW

The final agenda item was a brief discussion focused on the upcoming mid-term review of WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy. Panel members welcomed this effort and were curious about findings related to WFP's experience over the first two years. The panel members recommended focusing on how ongoing activities are meeting the objective set by WFP's impact evaluation strategy, and what adjustment may be required if any.



Annual Report for the Strategic Advisory Panel on Impact Evaluation at WFP

2020 in Review

INTRODUCTION

This annual report outlines the progress made towards implementing WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy (2019-2026) in 2020. Impact evaluations can make major contributions towards saving lives and changing lives. The WFP Impact Evaluation Strategy aims to contribute evidence on what works best to achieve sustainable development goals like Zero Hunger by generating operationally relevant evidence on what works and what doesn't, and under which circumstances. Delivering impact evaluations in WFP's operational contexts is challenging, which was particularly visible during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Achieving objectives set out in the Impact Evaluation Strategy requires learning from experience gained by WFP and external partners. WFP depends on the guidance and support of the Strategic Advisory Panel (SAP) in interpreting lessons learned and identifying opportunities for improving its impact evaluation function. This report informs the SAP's annual meeting and discussion on how to finetune WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy considering emerging lessons learned.

WFP'S IMPACT EVALUATION STRATEGY AND PILOT

WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy (2019-2026) aims to deliver impact evaluations relevant to WFP operations and contribute to global evidence. The

and explore different models of delivering them in rapidly evolving contexts. During this time, OEV will work towards increasing capacity within WFP and establish partnerships to support evaluation delivery.

The timing of the pilot phase is aligned with the WFP Evaluation Policy (2016-2021) and lessons learned during the pilot phase will be incorporated into WFP's next Evaluation Policy. OEV will commission a mid-term review of the Impact Evaluation Strategy in 2021. The Review will provide an independent assessment of WFP's Impact Evaluation Strategy, with the aim of ensuring that the strategy is fit for achieving the vision of producing rigorous impact evaluation evidence to inform policy and programme decisions.

Due to COVID-19, the review will be conducted before the completion of any impact evaluations initiated under the Strategy, limiting the scope of the review. The review will therefore be formative and identify areas for adjusting and improving implementation of the Strategy.

The SAP plays a key role in helping OEV to reflect and learn during the pilot phase and beyond, with its members providing guidance and direction for implementation. The SAP will support the mid-term review by advising on the scope and interpretation of findings.

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