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## Synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations

### Executive summary

WFP's long-standing commitment to country capacity strengthening is reflected in key strategic documents. The WFP policy on capacity development and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development launched in 2015 provided further impetus to efforts to strengthen capacity support for countries in pursuing their Sustainable Development Goal targets, particularly for Sustainable Development Goals 2 and 17. An internal audit of WFP's capacity strengthening and a corporate evaluation of its 2009 policy on capacity development noted successful examples of capacity strengthening support, identified areas for improvement and highlighted capacity strengthening as an area of risk for WFP if implemented without adequate support.

**Purpose.** The purpose of this synthesis is to provide evidence of WFP's performance in country capacity strengthening, both for the purpose of learning and in the interest of accountability for results to its stakeholders.

**Context.** WFP developed a framework and approach to country capacity strengthening in 2017<sup>1</sup> that comprises five pathways of change and activities within three domains: laws, policies, strategies and procedures (enabling environment); well-functioning organizations (organizational domain); and educated, skilled people (individual domain).

**Scope and methodology.** Thirty-two decentralized evaluations were completed between 2016 and 2019. The activities and operations covered by the evaluations were designed prior to the publication of the 2017 country capacity strengthening framework and associated guidance.

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<sup>1</sup> WFP. 2017. WFP Corporate Approach to Country Capacity Strengthening (CCS), CCS Toolkit Component 001.

*In line with the Evaluation Policy (2016–2021) (WFP/EB.2/2015/4-A/Rev.1), to respect the integrity and independence of evaluation findings the editing of this report has been limited and as a result some of the language in it may not be fully consistent with the World Food Programme's standard terminology or editorial practices. Please direct any requests for clarification to the Director of Evaluation.*

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### Focal points:

Ms A. Cook  
Director of Evaluation  
tel.: 066513–2030

Ms F. Zelada  
Evaluation Officer  
Office of Evaluation  
tel.: 066513–3240

Evidence from the evaluations was assessed according to an analytical framework in order to answer key questions on the relevance and results of country capacity strengthening interventions and the factors that contributed to their success.

**Key findings.** All the evaluations found country capacity strengthening to be integral to WFP interventions and approaches, regardless of programme or region, and to be generally aligned with national priorities. Improved identification of specific capacity needs by WFP or others would have increased the relevance and targeting of country capacity strengthening interventions, particularly at the local level. Appropriate identification of national and local partners for country capacity strengthening delivery (such as non-governmental organizations, academia or government) was key to the relevance and effective targeting of interventions.

Capacity strengthening results are evident for individual and organizational domains, but less so at the level of the enabling environment.

Long-term engagement that is responsive to changing government needs contributes to successful changes in policy and strategy. Two thirds of the evaluations include considerations of gender in country capacity strengthening interventions, although they are not well addressed; other WFP cross-cutting issues are virtually absent.

Elements of the evaluated interventions that contributed to success and more sustainable results included strengthening national ownership, building strong and trusted relationships and effective partnerships (through prolonged engagement) and promoting good coordination. Adaptation to local context was also critical to achieving positive results.

**Conclusions.** Country capacity strengthening interventions that delivered simultaneously in all three domains (individual, organizational and enabling environment) made the greatest contributions to long-term outcomes. Issues raised in the 2016 audit and the 2017 evaluation of the corporate policy continue to be evident in the evaluations, including inconsistent and incomplete approaches to country capacity strengthening, lack of expertise needed to support capacity strengthening design and implementation, and weak monitoring of and reporting on performance in capacity strengthening.

**Lessons.** Successful country capacity strengthening interventions require needs assessments and expertise at the design stage. There is a need to combine advocacy with technical advice that is aligned with national government frameworks for transformative change. Collaborating with partners, including other United Nations agencies, and establishing (where appropriate) clear transition plans and agreements prior to transition also help to sustain results.

**Recommendations.** Country capacity strengthening is critical to WFP's contribution to the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of its strategic objectives. This evaluation synthesis therefore puts forward five recommendations aimed at enabling WFP to improve its effectiveness in this area. One recommendation is strategic and states that:

- WFP should reaffirm its commitment to country capacity strengthening through the preparation of a new or updated policy that ensures strong integration of country capacity strengthening approaches into second-generation country strategic plans.

The remaining four recommendations are operational. They call for WFP:

- To strengthen and fund expertise in country capacity strengthening throughout the organization by conducting a workforce planning exercise (or similar exercise) and implementing a skills development programme.
- To integrate capacity needs assessments into programme design and second-generation country strategic plans.

- To refine the country capacity strengthening indicators in line with the new strategic plan and the corporate results framework for 2022–2026. Linked to this is the inclusion of qualitative as well as quantitative indicators to better capture and measure country capacity strengthening results, and the production of enhanced guidance.
- To strengthen guidance and provide technical support that enhances the integration of gender, protection and accountability to affected populations into country capacity strengthening interventions and to ensure advocacy for and the mainstreaming of gender equality and women's empowerment in country capacity strengthening.

### **Draft decision\***

The Board takes note of the synthesis of evidence and lessons on country capacity strengthening from decentralized evaluations (WFP/EB.A/2021/7-C) and management's response (WFP/EB.A/2021/7-C/Add.1) and encourages further action on the recommendations set out in the synthesis, taking into account considerations raised by the Board during its discussion.

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\* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the decisions and recommendations document issued at the end of the session.

## Introduction

### Synthesis features

1. The purpose of the synthesis is to provide evidence and learning on WFP's performance in country capacity strengthening (CCS) and accountability for results to WFP's stakeholders based on a synthesis of 32 decentralized evaluations completed between 2016 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>
2. The evaluations included assessments of a range of CCS activities carried out in countries covered by all six regional bureaux. The most common activity area was school-based programmes. The evaluations analysed for the synthesis are listed in annex I, along with an explanation of the abbreviations by which they are referred to.

### Context of the synthesis

3. A policy on building country and regional capacities was released in 2004, focusing attention on the importance of national capacity strengthening.<sup>3</sup> In 2009, the Executive Board approved the WFP Policy on Capacity Development: An Update on Implementation,<sup>4</sup> which was followed by guidance documents including the National Capacity Index, Measuring Change in Capacity for Hunger Governance in Support of Projects to Strengthen National Capacity to End Hunger (2014), and the Design and Implementation of Technical Assistance and Capacity Development (2015).
4. The launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 gave impetus to the provision of support to countries pursuing their Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, particularly for SDGs 2 and 17. The latest United Nations report on implementation of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (April 2020) affirms the importance of an integrated approach to CCS that is "demand-driven and focused on actual change rather than on activities to strengthen capacities".<sup>5</sup>
5. An internal audit of WFP CCS (2016)<sup>6</sup> found examples of successful CCS but noted that suboptimal use of corporate concepts, guidance and tools, had limited the visibility of CCS results. WFP's management of financial and human resources for CCS and fragmented knowledge management systems were insufficiently supportive of capacity strengthening interventions.
6. An evaluation of the capacity development policy<sup>7</sup> found that while its generic nature facilitated adaptation to various contexts the related action plan<sup>8</sup> did not provide sufficient practical guidance on how to use capacity development-related output and outcome statements. The evaluation concluded that capacity development would probably contribute to the long-term impact of WFP's work but cautioned that continuing "business

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<sup>2</sup> Evaluations completed in 2020 were not included because they had not been assessed through the WFP post-hoc quality assessment system by the time this synthesis was completed. Post-hoc quality assessments are carried out by independent assessors who rate the quality of all WFP completed evaluations against international evaluation quality standards.

<sup>3</sup> "Building Country and Regional Capacities" (WFP/EB.3/2004/4-B).

<sup>4</sup> "WFP policy on Capacity Development: An Update on Implementation" (WFP/EB.2/2009/4-B).

<sup>5</sup> *Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR)* (A/75/79-E/2020/55), para. 239.

<sup>6</sup> WFP. 2016. Internal Audit of WFP's Country Capacity Strengthening.

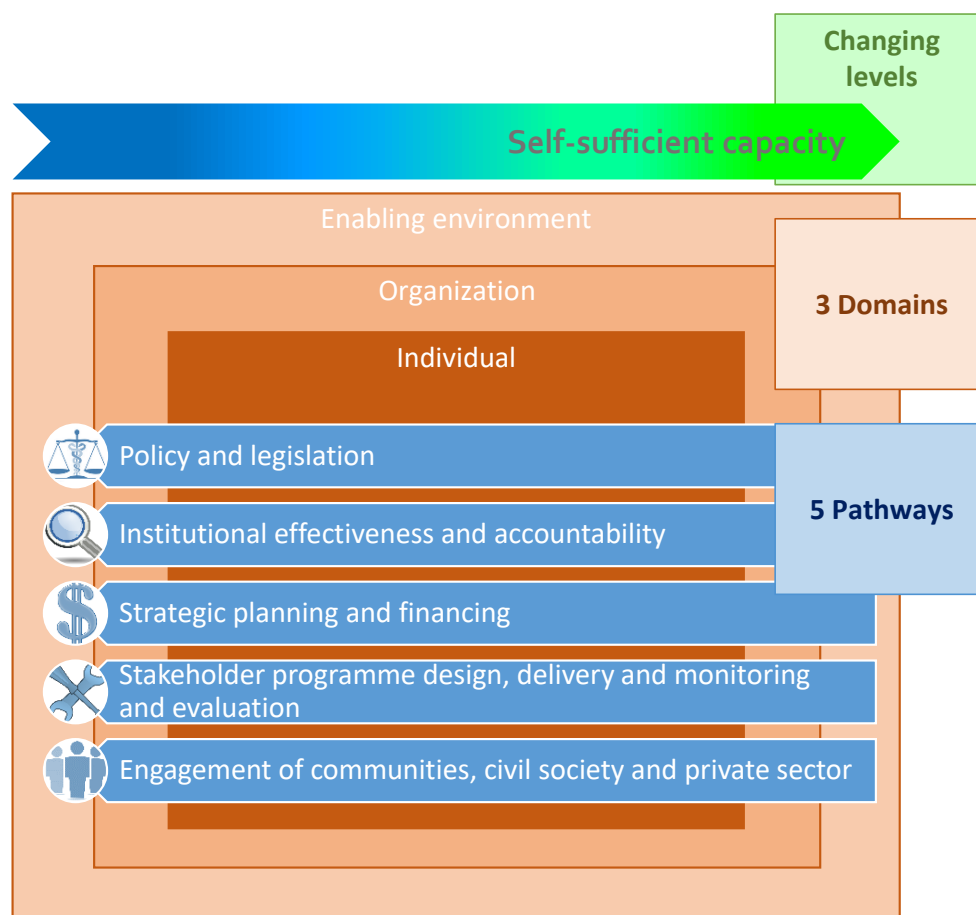
<sup>7</sup> "Summary Evaluation Report of WFP Policy on Capacity Development" (WFP/EB.1/2017/6-A/Rev.1).

<sup>8</sup> The 2009 policy update was followed in 2010 by the approval by the Executive Board of the "Action Plan for the Implementation of the Capacity Development and Hand-Over Components of the WFP Strategic Plan (2008–2013)" (WFP/EB.2/2010/4-D). This document was intended as a road map for the transformation into action of the 2004 policy "Building Country and Regional Capacities" (WFP/EB.3/2004/4-B) and the 2009 policy update.

as usual" in prioritizing capacity development without increasing internal support would generate "considerable reputational risk".

7. WFP developed a framework and approach to CCS in 2017<sup>9</sup> that includes supporting principles and guidelines and outlines how CCS should be applied (figure 1). The framework comprises five pathways of change and activities within three domains: laws, policies, strategies and procedures (enabling environment); well-functioning organizations (organizational domain); and educated, skilled people (individual domain).

**Figure 1: Components of the WFP country capacity strengthening framework**



Source: WFP. 2017. WFP Corporate Approach to CCS, CCS Toolkit Component 001.

8. WFP developed a series of tools for operationalizing the framework, all supported by detailed guidance.<sup>10</sup> The activities and operations covered by the evaluations included in this synthesis were designed after the 2009 capacity development policy but before the publication of the 2017 CCS framework and associated guidance.
9. In the WFP Strategic Plan (2017–2021), CCS is referred to in Strategic Objectives 1–3 at the individual and organizational levels and is core to Strategic Objective 4, particularly

<sup>9</sup> WFP. 2017. WFP Corporate Approach to CCS, CCS Toolkit Component 001.

<sup>10</sup> The CCS database was rolled out in Burundi, Colombia, Mauritania, Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

Strategic Result 5.<sup>11</sup> Capacity strengthening is identified in WFP's corporate results framework (CRF)<sup>12</sup> in several different ways: as an outcome category, as an activity category (individual and institutional capacity strengthening) and as a transfer modality within an activity.

10. New CCS indicators were included in the revised CRF in 2019, but an internal mid-term review concluded that improvements were still required in order to link outcome indicators with high-level and long-term measures of reduction in food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly in development contexts and middle-income countries.
11. WFP is now developing a new strategic plan and CRF for 2022–2026 as well as a new or updated CCS policy.

### **Methodology**

12. The scope of the synthesis was determined through a two-stage process. WFP identified 40 decentralized evaluations that met or exceeded the requirements of the post-hoc quality assessment system. These evaluations were then screened to determine the extent of CCS coverage.<sup>13</sup> Thirty-two component evaluations were identified as having high (9) or medium (23) levels of CCS coverage; these evaluations formed the main evidence base for the synthesis exercise.
13. The following key questions guided the synthesis approach:<sup>14</sup>
  - i) To what extent has the design of CCS interventions been relevant to national development priorities?
  - ii) What are the main contributions that WFP has made to strengthening the capacities of state and non-state actors?
  - iii) What are the common issues and potential opportunities most recurrently highlighted in decentralized evaluations regarding CCS intervention design and implementation?
  - iv) What internal and external factors contributed to positive or negative results in CCS implementation? Are there particular programme areas and contexts in which the CCS approach has worked better and why?
  - v) To what extent has WFP's approach to CCS contributed to achieving sustainable, strengthened capacities at the enabling environment, organizational and/or individual level?
  - vi) What broad principles and lessons related to CCS should inform WFP's engagement with state and non-state actors in the context of the 2030 Agenda?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Strategic Objective 4, support SDG implementation; and Strategic Result 5, developing countries have strengthened capacities to implement the SDGs.

<sup>12</sup> The current version of the corporate results framework was approved by the Executive Board at its 2018 second regular and 2019 annual sessions: "Revised Corporate Results Framework (2017–2021)" (WFP/EB.2/2018/5-B/Rev.1) and "Revised Corporate Results Framework (2017–2021) – Part II: 2021 targets for the programmatic outputs and performance indicators" (WFP/EB.A/2019/5-A).

<sup>13</sup> Protocol used in assessing CCS content in evaluations: High – CCS is a primary focus; medium – CCS included in evaluation assessments (quantitative and/or qualitative); low – CCS mentioned but not evaluated; and zero – no mention of CCS.

<sup>14</sup> During inception, three evaluation questions in the terms of reference were deprioritized because of time and resource limitations and the extensive secondary document review and interviews that would have been required, which would go beyond the scope of the synthesis.

<sup>15</sup> This has been addressed in section "Key lessons for the future".

14. A structured analytical framework was developed around the main questions, and data were extracted using deductive and inductive methods. As language related to CCS varied across the evaluations, terminology and definitions were drawn from the CCS framework,<sup>16</sup> which is directly related to previous corporate frameworks.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the report, CCS is used to describe all capacity building, development or strengthening interventions. Preliminary findings were explored in more depth through nine key informant interviews with staff from WFP headquarters, regional bureaux and selected country offices, and two virtual workshops were held to validate findings and conclusions and consult on recommendations.
15. Limitations of the approach used stem from the wide variation in activity types, terminology and coverage of CCS results in the evaluations, which made it difficult to identify commonality or differentiation in approaches and results. Furthermore, the evaluations selected are a sample that contained sufficient CCS data but may not reflect the full scope of CCS interventions in WFP operations. CCS results were extracted where available, but inconsistent approaches to measurement and major data gaps required the synthesis team to conduct an adapted assessment of CCS using quantitative and qualitative data.

## Synthesis findings

### Synthesis question 1: Relevance of country capacity strengthening interventions

#### Key findings

- The component evaluations indicated that CCS is integral to WFP interventions and approaches, regardless of programme or region.
- The design of CCS interventions is closely aligned with national priorities.
- In the absence of national priorities (or where they were weak) WFP's CCS project design included elements that would support the development or strengthening of such priorities. However, WFP's role in facilitating national ownership of the interventions could be improved.
- Programmes were more relevant when an assessment of capacity needs was undertaken as part of programme design, but this occurred in less than a quarter of the programmes covered by the evaluations.
- There is scope to improve the relevance of interventions at the local and individual levels, with more consideration given to local context.
- It is important to identify appropriate CCS partners in order to ensure the relevance of CCS intervention design in various contexts.

16. All evaluations highlighted the broad relevance of CCS, most commonly at the organizational level. The most effective results were seen where interventions across the three domains were appropriately linked, which is in line with capacity strengthening approaches generally.<sup>18</sup> In Tunisia, for example, a white paper on education included improvements to school feeding as part of its education reform (fostering an enabling environment); the national school feeding strategy that guided institutional programming was developed with

<sup>16</sup> WFP. 2017. WFP Corporate Approach to CCS, CCS Toolkit Component 001.

<sup>17</sup> The synthesis team notes ongoing work by the WFP Technical Assistance and Country Capacity Strengthening Service to strengthen the WFP CCS guidance documents that will supersede the reference documents used for this synthesis.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2015. [Capacity Development: A UNDP Primer](#), p. 11.

WFP support (organizational CCS) and a second-phase intervention assisted the Ministry of Education with implementation of the strategy (organizational and individual CCS).

17. Generally, there was strong evidence of strategic relationships between WFP and government partners with clear links between national government policies and WFP's country-level objectives. Where there were no national policies or strategic priorities for a programme area, WFP support included the development of guiding documents as part of the CCS intervention such as school feeding policies; or supporting processes such as strategy developments; and the establishment of management secretariats. In circumstances where WFP had been asked to deliver specific services, a CCS approach may not have been required. In those cases, evaluations highlighted that more could have been done to strengthen national ownership.

### Figure 2: Examples of relevant country capacity strengthening interventions

**Colombia** - *Individual and organizational*: Vulnerability analysis and mapping was used to target the most food-insecure communities and individuals. WFP sub-offices identified organizations and territorial entities (local governments) that had potential as implementing partners in CCS interventions. Such entities, along with non-governmental organizations, national academia and training institutes, provided food security-related capacity strengthening to local communities and individuals while WFP provided operational support to delivery partners.

**India** - *Individual, organizational and enabling environment*: WFP supported the Government of India in formulating a customized package for a food distribution reform programme. Reforms were implemented based on the identified institutional capacity needs of the Odisha regional government and delivery partners. The intervention design combined organizational and individual support in order to build the capacity of implementors to reach and support food-insecure households.

18. Only nine<sup>19</sup> evaluations documented that some form of capacity needs assessment had been conducted, either through previous WFP, government or partner capacity assessments or through the current WFP capacity needs mapping tool or similar approaches. The Systems Approach for Better Evaluation Results (SABER)<sup>20</sup> includes an initial mapping of capacity needs and was used in most school feeding projects, providing an important foundation for the design of CCS activities. The Central America evaluation noted that the use of the Three-Pronged Approach in the food assistance for assets programme had helped to identify capacity strengthening activities linked to organizational, community and individual needs. Capacity needs assessment led to enhanced results; the lack of such assessments reduced the relevance of CCS, particularly at the local level.

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