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DECENTRALIZED EVALUATION FOR EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING

Decentralized Evaluation

Evaluation of WFP's Unconditional Resource Transfer Activity under
the Social Safety Net Programme in Palestine

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Executive Summary

- 1 This decentralized evaluation was launched by the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP), Palestine Country Office (CO), in October 2019 and started in February 2020. This report covers the period between January 2018 to December 2020 for WFP's first strategic outcome for its Unconditional Resource Transfer (URT) activity under the National Social Safety Net Programme (NSSNP) in Palestine.
- 2 The purpose of this evaluation is to provide information for future programming directions, strategic positioning within the NSSNP in Palestine, and reflect on food insecurity and poverty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip context. This evaluation serves WFP's dual and reinforcing objectives of accountability and learning and is expected to feed the upcoming 2021 Country Strategic Plan (CSP) formulation.
- 3 Key users of the evaluation findings and recommendations are the WFP Palestine Country Office (CO), who commissioned the evaluation; WFP's Regional Bureau in Cairo (RBC); WFP's Headquarters (HQ); and WFP's Office of Evaluation (OEV). In addition, the Palestinian Ministry of Social Development, cooperating partners, other UN agencies, donors, and recipients of URT assistance will have interest in the evaluation findings.
- 4 Since 2012, WFP has employed a range of modalities for the URT, including in-kind food assistance, vouchers, and cash. In 2020, actual URT beneficiaries reached 428,554. The majority of assistance provided is in the form of food restricted cash-based transfers (CBT's) through the voucher modality. In 2020, actual URT/CBT/voucher beneficiaries reached were 351,782. Importantly, the subject of this evaluation are URT/CBT/voucher beneficiaries who are part of MoSDs' National Social Safety Net Programme (NSSNP) and receive cash-based transfers through the national cash transfer Programme (CTP). Under the current Country Strategic Plan (CSP), the activity has been operational at scale for over three years, increasing coverage from 127,668 beneficiaries in 2018 to 170,557 beneficiaries in 2020.
- 5 The Palestinian socioeconomic and political context has undergone significant changes since the outbreak of the novel COVID-19 pandemic. The Palestinian Authority (PA) government's response faced a set a set of challenges, including a stalled peace process, cessation of direct security coordination with Israel, a fiscal crisis extending from 2019, decelerating economic growth, and the urgent need for foreign assistance. Cash transfers under the NSSNP were delayed and cut in 2019 and 2020.
- 6 WFP's emergency preparedness and response included a scaling of activity 1 through the voucher modality to cover non-refugees who are marginalized and living in deep poverty. The poor, vulnerable, and marginalized communities in Palestine are the least equipped to cope positively through health crisis adverse impact and the associated shocks. It is exemplified in the effects on labour markets and income loss for the poor and vulnerable,

especially noting that in comparison to more economically secure households, those in deep poverty showcase higher percentages of food expenditure share in relation to total expenditures.

- 7 The Evaluation Team (ET) for this evaluation employed a mixed-method approach to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data from primary and secondary sources while utilizing the criteria of relevance, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability for completing this decentralized evaluation. The ET finished a random survey sample with 2,421 social safety net beneficiaries receiving cash assistance under the national transfer programme (CTP), interviewed seven key informants and eighteen beneficiaries, conducted eight focus groups and four case studies.
- 8 Notwithstanding the completion of this evaluation, the ET faced limitations that included the unspecified effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated response measures. It created restraints for the process and conduct of this evaluation. More importantly and relevantly, these effects also impacted the dynamics and realities of food security and poverty for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. To mitigate the impact of the crisis on the conduct and result of this evaluation, the ET undertook a set of measures that included data collection timing, employing multimode data collection, and evoking the necessary health precautions.

Key Findings

Criteria: Relevance and Alignment

- 9 Under the NSSNP, the URT/CBT/voucher is highly relevant to the context and aligns with the Palestinian Authority's national priorities and the Ministry of Social Development's (MoSD) strategic priorities. The URT/CBT/voucher is scalable, serves as an example of innovation, and proved essential to WFP's COVID-19 response. Targeting is done mainly through the MoSD. Yet, despite being limited by macro-level data, targeting is informed by regular and credible analyses. The findings within this evaluation suggest that 85 percent of those targeted are within the lowest echelons of poverty.
- 10 While the URT/CBT/voucher transfer value is tailored to complement the CTP transfer for NSSNP beneficiaries, it does not account for the regional differences and large disparities defining poverty and food insecurity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In this regard, satisfaction with the voucher value is higher in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank. The shifting vulnerabilities in the Gaza Strip, the widening gulf in living standards between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and limited data on marginalized families in the West Bank led to lower satisfaction with voucher values. The assumptions in the 2018-2022 CSP, namely, the socioeconomic and complementarity assumptions were invalidated because of multiple shocks between 2018 and 2020. Although the transfer value does not fully

meet the scale and the scope of food gaps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it does provide an essential food security safety net to those in deep poverty.

Criteria: Effectiveness

- 11 Despite donor cuts and funding shortfalls in 2018 and 2019, the outputs and the outcomes of activity 1 were largely met in 2018 and 2019 and were exceeded in 2020. A majority of beneficiaries were found to have an “acceptable” food consumption score (FCS). The URT/CBT/voucher constituted the majority of the assistance under activity 1, while in-kind food transfers constituted less than a sixth. Multipurpose cash assistance was introduced during the evaluation period and piloted in November 2020.
- 12 Most recipients under this evaluation agree or strongly agree that the URT/CBT/voucher assistance is a vital source of food security and is effective in diversifying their diets and decreasing their reliance on consumption-based coping strategies.

Criteria: Impact

- 13 Overall, the URT/CBT/voucher has a positive impact on food security and the extent of poverty on beneficiaries. Applying consumption-based coping strategies by URT/CBT/voucher beneficiaries in the Gaza Strip, seems to be negatively impacted by the assistance they receive. It is attributed to market dynamics and scarcity of cash and income resources among persons living in the Gaza Strip. These conditions have increased the ability of MoSD/NSSNP/CTP beneficiaries to buy food on credit. The URT/CBT/voucher beneficiaries seem able to extend the extent of food debt gained by MoSD/NSSNP/CTP beneficiaries by a marginal yet significant proportion. It is pronounced especially for male-headed households in the Gaza Strip. Additionally, the URT/CBT/voucher has positive effects on beneficiaries’ dietary diversity, as measured by the food consumption score.
- 14 Findings show the food expenditure ratio for the treatment group is significantly lower than the control group. This finding shows that the URT/CBT/voucher household beneficiaries are less vulnerable to food insecurity than the control group. In fact, food expenditure for the treatment group was close to national averages in both regions, even amid crises. Results suggest that the URT/CBT/voucher has a small yet positive and significant effect on reducing the poverty gap of beneficiaries in the West Bank. This effect on poverty is unexpected, given the depth of poverty and the poverty profiles of URT/CBT/voucher household beneficiaries in the West Bank. Importantly, the findings show that overall, the treatment and control groups are deeper in poverty than they were when admitted to the NSSNP. Henceforth, those in poverty, especially in the Gaza Strip, are falling deeper into poverty regardless of assignment to treatment or control. The positive effects of the URT/CBT/voucher on the poverty gap of household beneficiaries in the Gaza Strip is, however, less pronounced.

Criteria: Sustainability

- 15 WFP continues to sustain good relationships with the MoSD. In a context of persistent political violence, deepening poverty, and widespread food insecurity, the URT/CBT/voucher continues to be a pillar of the NSSNP and an essential part of emergency preparedness and response. Food security is a clear priority of the Social Development Sector Strategy (SDSS). WFP will need to continue its partnership with MoSD and its commitment to the long-term institutional development of the social protection sector and capacity development of social safety nets in Palestine. A food security dedicated approach will need to be adopted to institutionalize the food security social safety net, which WFP solely provides within the social protection sector, to strengthen the National Social Safety Net Programme.
- 16 WFP continues to build on its strategic position within the social protection sector and the NSSNP to ensure that food assistance is institutionalized and nationally owned by MoSD, the Palestinian government, and Palestinian people.

Summarized Conclusions

- 17 To date, the URT/CBT/voucher is relevant to the context in which it was designed and successfully implemented. While targeting is broadly effective, the limited availability of data does not allow for thorough analyses and learning. The voucher value and degree of coverage should be critically examined, as the current value does not reflect disparities between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Also, the voucher value does not account for the different needs of households based on poverty gaps.
- 18 According to this evaluation, the URT/CBT/voucher is aligned with national priorities and achieves its intended results effectively. The URT/CBT/voucher has an essential impact on food security and the depth of poverty for beneficiary households. The evidence collected suggests that the context in which WFP based its 2018-2022 CSP is changing, namely the inability of the MoSD to sustain the CTP payments to NSSNP beneficiaries and the rapidly worsening economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- 19 The forthcoming CSP provides an opportunity for WFP to strengthen existing aspects of the NSSNP and institutionalize a food security safety net within the MoSD structures.

Summarized Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Critically review the vulnerability and targeting criteria and assess whether they remain relevant to the context, especially the Gaza Strip context.

Recommendation 2: Explore tiered and targeted assistance using varied voucher values based on need.

Recommendation 3: Consider increasing the voucher value for households composed of below-average members

Recommendation 4: Maximize positive effects for female-headed households through:

Recommendation 4a: A synchronized and coordinated approach with the MoSD and sector stakeholders is required to maximize the positive effects of the URT/CBT/voucher on female-headed household.

Recommendation 4b: Customize the voucher value for female-headed households in the West Bank through tiered and targeted assistance based on food and poverty gaps. Scale assistance to cover an increased number of female-headed households in the Gaza Strip.

Recommendation 5: Minimize unintended effects on households with disabled members through:

Recommendation 5a: Investigate the reasons why households with disabled members are the least effected by assistance.

Recommendation 5b: Improve targeting of households with disabled members, conduct validation of household information, and monitoring of household dynamics to ensure accountability to affected populations.

Recommendation 5c: Custom voucher value for households with disabled members.

Recommendation 6: Consider scaling the URT/CBT/voucher assistance due the severity and scope of need in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Recommendation 7: Re-consider Consumption-based Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) as one of the food security outcome indicators used in the Gaza Strip through:

Recommendation 7a: In the Gaza Strip, WFP CO can continue to monitor rCSI but rely on FCS to report on outcomes. Meanwhile, WFP should explore other complementary and appropriate food security indicators, especially given the protracted humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip and the strong correlation between rCSI and FCS.

Recommendation 7b: Work with partners and national stakeholders to discuss the appropriateness of rCSI as an outcome measure of food security in the context of the protracted humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip.

Recommendation 8: Prioritize the MoSD/NSSNP/CTP beneficiaries when faced with funding shortfalls or other shocks.

Recommendation 9: Continue to support the MoSD to expand, enhance, and institutionalize food security within the National Social Safety Net in Palestine.

Recommendation 10: Take small steps towards national ownership. Although the context is

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