



Strategic evaluation of WFP's approaches to targeting and prioritization for food and nutrition assistance

Context

Humanitarian needs have risen sharply in the last few years, with the number of people facing acute food insecurity in countries supported by WFP increasing from 135 million to over 319 million between 2019 and 2025. Consequently, global humanitarian requirements grew from USD 28 billion in 2019 to almost USD 45 billion in 2025. Unprecedented funding cuts in 2025 have forced WFP and most humanitarian and development actors to prioritize more sharply and make difficult choices about whom to assist, where and for how long.

Subject and focus of the evaluation

The evaluation examined WFP's approaches to targeting and prioritization during the period 2019–2025, drawing on the organization's normative framework, institutional arrangements and field practices. WFP guidance note on targeting and prioritization (2021) defines targeting and prioritization as follows:

Targeting refers to the process of selecting communities, households and/or individuals for assistance, based on programme objectives and needs assessments and with the participation of communities.

Prioritization concerns determining which individuals within a targeted population receive assistance when needs exceed available resources or entitlements are reduced.

The analysis assessed both the strategic underpinnings and operational application of these approaches, focusing on their contribution to reaching the most vulnerable. Targeting and prioritization were reviewed within WFP's broader programme cycle, covering activities that deliver direct food, cash and nutrition assistance. The evaluation did not examine the prioritization of resources allocated at the corporate level across countries.

Objectives and users of the evaluation

The evaluation served the dual objectives of accountability and learning, with an emphasis on the latter. The main intended users of the evaluation were WFP country offices, various functions within WFP's Programme Operations and Partnerships Departments in Global headquarters, Executive Board members, donors and various partners, including host governments, other UN agencies, cooperating partners, and ultimately the people that WFP aims to serve.

Key evaluation insights

WFP's normative framework and support structures:

Following the 2020 internal audit that found WFP's targeting practices to be only partially satisfactory, the organization has made significant improvements. The introduction of the global assurance framework in 2023 and the targeting assurance framework in 2025 strengthened accountability and clarified expectations for country offices. Together with the enterprise risk management policy, WFP now has a more comprehensive set of guidance which strikes a good balance between prescription and flexibility to adapt to context. However, the normative framework remains fragmented, difficult to navigate and incomplete. Prioritization has received limited attention until recently, and existing guidance focuses mainly on targeting within crisis response rather than resilience activities. Country offices are also seeking clearer strategic direction on targeting and prioritisation in light of rapid changes and funding constraints. Global and regional support structures played an important role in strengthening operational practice to target and prioritise those most in need. However, major funding cuts now threaten this capacity.

Appropriateness, agility and cooperation:

Appropriateness: WFP's targeting choices are constrained by donor earmarking, host government positions and

operational realities. Within these constraints, approaches were found to be largely appropriate. WFP uses a mix of data-driven, community-based and hybrid methods, adapting to data availability and access conditions. However, the rationale for choosing specific approaches is rarely documented.

Staff demonstrated a strong understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different methods, despite limited systematic evidence on costs and performance of the various approaches. WFP has increasingly shifted toward vulnerability-based targeting, though this transition remains uneven and not fully scaled. Community-based approaches dominate but vary widely and often lack documentation. Hybrid approaches are increasingly used to offset limitations of single methods.

WFP has made progress in integrating gender, disability and inclusion considerations, but vulnerability criteria are sometimes applied too generically, and community-based processes are not always sufficiently inclusive or gender-responsive.

Agility: WFP lacks agility to adapt in real time its targeting and prioritization approaches to changing circumstances. Once caseloads, budgets and partner agreements are set, it becomes difficult to adjust assistance in response to appeals received through community feedback mechanisms and new monitoring findings because of insufficient contingencies.

Cooperation: Internally, WFP has institutionalized cross-functional involvement of management, programme and vulnerability mapping and monitoring and evaluation teams in targeting and prioritization decisions, but real-world practice varies. Where responsibilities are shared across functions, it has shown positive results.

WFP targeting and prioritization practices have important implications for other actors. Early engagement of cooperating partners has improved ownership and alignment. Cooperation with UNHCR and UNICEF has also strengthened. However, broader coordination through humanitarian clusters and working groups remains limited, reducing opportunities for joint targeting.

Although WFP supports governments in strengthening social protection systems, national social registries have rarely been used for WFP's own targeting as they often require follow-up through community-based verifications.

Effectiveness: WFP does not systematically measure inclusion and exclusion errors, limiting its ability to assess targeting effectiveness. Geographic targeting based on integrated food security phase classifications is widely trusted but can mask variations in vulnerability and lead to exclusion errors. Overall, the evaluation found that targeting approaches were largely appropriate, and criticism tended to reflect limited understanding among communities and partners, underscoring the importance of transparent communication.

Breadth versus depth: When forced to prioritize, WFP often reduces ration size or duration of assistance rather than the number of beneficiaries, resulting in assistance being spread too thinly to make a real difference. This creates ethical dilemmas between reaching many people with limited impact and supporting fewer people meaningfully. The

Strategic Plan 2026–2029 and recent guidance signal a shift toward ensuring "higher-quality assistance" and improving measurement of nutritional adequacy of assistance.

Programme integration: Despite strong policy commitments, WFP has struggled to better layer and sequence emergency and resilience assistance. Different programme objectives have led to distinct targeting logics, with resilience programmes sometimes excluding the most vulnerable. This practice may change with the recent resilience policy update and the strategic plan 2026–2029 which re-emphasise the importance of integrated programming in areas experiencing acute food insecurity.

Disconnect between standards and practice: The evaluation found a disconnect between WFP's clear standards on targeting and prioritization and its practice, which leaves the organization exposed to some operational and reputational risks. The evaluation found that cooperating partners have uneven capacities and often implement targeting and prioritization approaches with limited oversight and support. Despite progress in communication, limited transparency with affected communities has undermined trust and social cohesion in some instances. Finally, verification and de-duplication of beneficiary lists vary due to inconsistent use of digital registration systems and weak interoperability between WFP's data systems.

WFP's strategic direction and principles: As WFP is forced to prioritize more sharply, it faces significant ethical dilemmas about who to assist, where and for how long. Vulnerability-based targeting supports fairer prioritization, but increases operational costs. Country offices seek clearer corporate guidance to navigate trade-offs and whether to focus primarily on reaching a sub-set of the most vulnerable in the hardest-to-reach areas, or on reaching the greatest number of food-insecure people. While the strategic plan 2026–2029 clarifies WFP's intent to focus on those most in need with adequate and integrated assistance, it remains unclear which activities WFP will scale back or cease. The evaluation concludes that senior management must define its principles and strategic direction to guide country offices and strengthen targeting and prioritization decisions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Support country offices in prioritization decisions by providing a clearer articulation of WFP's strategic focus and positioning to strengthen their targeting and prioritization rationales.

Recommendation 2. Uphold targeting and prioritization standards by making guidance and tools more accessible, enforcing compliance with minimum standards, and safeguarding capacity.

Recommendation 3. Support country offices in adopting more transparent, more agile and more cost-effective targeting and prioritization approaches.

Recommendation 4. Strengthen the interoperability of WFP's own data systems and common data systems or data sharing with other humanitarian agencies for targeting and prioritization.