Key lessons from WFP and partner engagement in the Ebola crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak has led to widespread movement restrictions, disrupted supply chains and economies, triggered a global health response, is severely threatening humanitarian operations and continues to evolve and reshape the humanitarian sphere. As WFP responds to this global crisis through its operational plan, the Office of Evaluation has drawn together some of the key evidence from the Ebola response evaluation and other relevant documents to produce a quick reference tool that WFP managers can use to inform the COVID-19 response.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

OVERALL, WFP RESPONDED WITH INNOVATION AND ADAPTABILITY IN RESPECT OF BOTH FOOD ASSISTANCE AND SUPPLY CHAIN SUPPORT FOR THE ENTIRE UN COMMUNITY.

WFP’s response was characterized by the introduction of new modes of in-kind distributions and cash-based transfers in high-risk contamination areas; the extensive use of advance financial facilities; a consolidated supply chain for procurement and delivery; and the provision of specialized infrastructures in partnership with other health actors.

WFP activated large reception and storage facilities along the supply chain, built staging areas, central logistics units, forward logistics bases and numerous ancillary depots and Ebola treatment units and rehabilitated several units at clinics and medical centres.

WFP also established long-distance cargo charter flights alongside the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service cargo and passenger services to augment WFP and partner capacity to intervene.

The common services platform was made available, free of charge, to the entire humanitarian community to facilitate the delivery of results and the achievement of efficiency gains and cost savings. Some 77 different organizations made use of the platform, resulting in financial and efficiency advantages for partners.

Risk management was strong and corporate systems and tools were mostly adequate, although they did have to be adapted to the circumstances.
WHAT ELSE HAVE WE LEARNED FROM EBOLA?

Coordination is key

WFP demonstrated flexibility, diversity and agility in partnering, engaging in new and non-traditional partnerships to meet humanitarian needs, particularly with health actors and cooperating partners, and establishing new private partnerships with logistics and communications service providers.

Complex emergencies are seldom similar and often require different approaches; WFP’s Ebola response is instructive. Internally, WFP succeeded in activating all the components necessary for working efficiently towards its goals: delivery of food assistance; ensuring the effective operation of a supply chain routing large quantities of food and non-food items; providing services through UNHAS; operating a network of well-located UNHRDs; and establishing a resourceful engineering platform.

However, it was also observed that WFP needed to adopt a comprehensive capacity development perspective for partner organizations’ resilience and sustainability in collaboration with national stakeholders.

Preparedness is essential

The 2015 WHO and WFP Cooperation in their Response to the Ebola Virus Disease Emergency Lessons Learned exercise concluded that WFP should define the services it can offer to its partners who bear first-line responsibility in responding to emergencies (such as WHO in public health emergencies). It should undertake preparedness measures to ensure that its processes can be quickly adapted to meet those partners’ needs.  

What are other studies showing? The conclusions of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance Ebola and Cholera Epidemic Study include the following:

• National health systems need to be better supported in dealing with epidemics when they occur.

• WASH was at the core of the responses to Ebola and cholera outbreaks.

• Patients’ families, neighbours and local institutions are the first responders and the first at risk, and they should therefore be the first to be supported during epidemics.

• Effective response requires community trust and engagement.

• Epidemics have gendered impacts and responses should be gender-inclusive.

• Containment is needed to stop transmission of disease, but coercion is often counterproductive.

• During epidemics, transparent communication saves lives.

New epidemics such as Ebola challenge traditional humanitarian coordination structures and require, more than ever, deliberative scientific-operational forums.

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1 2015 WHO and WFP Cooperation in their Response to the Ebola Virus Disease Emergency Lessons Learned exercise.

2 Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance Ebola and Cholera Epidemic Study.