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After Action Review – Learning Workshop Summary

2017 Famine Response in Unity State

Juba, South Sudan, 25 August 2017

Subject of the Workshop:

This learning workshop focused on identifying good practices and challenges from the lead-up and response to the declaration of famine in central and southern Unity in February 2017, carried out under WFP's ongoing emergency operation 200859. The objective of WFP's famine response was to restore food security to below famine levels (IPC classification) in the affected areas, and reduce malnutrition levels to below emergency level (<15 percent GAM).

In addition to WFP representatives, the workshop had participation from the food security and livelihoods cluster, OCHA, Samaritan's Purse and Welt Hunger Hilfe.

Key Findings

Following the February 2017 IPC famine declaration, WFP and its partners were successful in improving the situation in the affected counties to end their famine status or prevent famine from occurring by May 2017. This success was largely due to an early detection of the crisis combined with a strong pre-famine response capacity, which allowed for immediate and massive scale-up. This capacity could otherwise have taken about four months to build up. However, there were delays in increasing the frequency of WFP and its partners' blanket supplementary feeding programme (BSFP) response due to human resource shortages linked to security risks and slow administrative approval processes. In addition, the nutrition sector faced pipeline challenges.

Overall, the workshop found that **the successful response should be seen as a reason for maintaining the current strong response capacity**, not cutting it, since other potential famines are looming on the horizon (e.g. northern Jonglei). This should be coupled with preparedness activities to **strengthen capacity for rapid scale-up of blanket nutrition responses**.

In addition, the workshop identified the following 10 key recommendations based on what worked well (positive lessons learned) as well as challenges encountered during the famine response effort:

For WFP Country Office and Partners

1. A key component of the success was the existence of strong network of informants in the field. Such **strong informer networks should be established in advance of other potential famines.**
2. The strong emergency response capacity **can be further improved through enhanced needs assessment capacity, in particular for nutrition, to provide robust county-level data** (either as part of IRRM teams or by strengthening partner needs assessment capacity).
3. There is a need to **streamline information flows**, both internally in WFP and among partners. This includes avoiding duplicate information requests from WFP HQ and its Regional Bureau.
4. Logistics should **mix air drop commodities** to allow distributions to begin immediately (rather than having to wait for the rest of the food basket to arrive).

5. The **Integrated Rapid Response Mechanism (IRRM) should strengthen its mechanism to serve the most vulnerable**, including through longer field deployments, improved assessments and through gender-responsive approaches and protection-sensitivity.
6. There is a need for **improved coordination between IRRM and Inter-Cluster Working Group (ICWG) and between IRRM and Inter-Cluster Response Missions (ICRMs)**, taking into account the recommendations from a recent review of this issue.
7. There is a need for **improved communication with communities** to better understand the 'who' and 'why' of the response as well as **improved beneficiary feedback mechanisms.**
8. **Distribution sites should be close enough for people to reach without exposure to protection-related risks**, but also not so close as to allow double registrations (unless mitigated through biometrics or simultaneous distributions).
9. **Livelihoods and recovery activities should be implemented as part of the response package**, while ensuring that the emergency response does not undermine critical efforts in this area in other parts of the country (which could lead to exacerbated food crises down the road).

For WFP Headquarters and Regional Bureau

10. The **purpose of WFP's internal L3 response mechanism to be clarified** to ensure tangible support, e.g. to boost communications capacity at the outset of a famine declaration and support planning and prioritization.

Background

Context

The food security and nutrition situation in South Sudan has deteriorated progressively since conflict started in December 2013. Traditional livelihood patterns have been disrupted and hunger and malnutrition are at historic levels. Susceptibility to disease has risen, with high numbers of cases of malaria, cholera, kala-azar and measles.

Chronic food deficits in the Greater Upper Nile region further aggravated since conflict flared up again in July 2016 with heightened tensions and renewed clashes across the country. By January 2017 the situation had come to a head in central and southern Unity State: the IPC classified Leer County to be in famine, Koch at elevated likelihood that famine was happening and Mayendit to have avoided famine through delivery of humanitarian assistance. GAM of above 30 percent was observed in Leer and Panyijar while Mayendit had GAM levels of 27.3 percent (recent data on acute malnutrition was not available for Koch at the time). From February to July 2017, the IPC projected Leer and Mayendit to be in famine, while Koch was classified as famine likely to happen. Panyijar was in Phase 4 ("emergency") in January and was likely to avoid a famine if the humanitarian assistance would be delivered as planned from February to July 2017. The IPC projected that with consistent, adequate, and timely humanitarian interventions, the Famine classification could be reversed with many lives saved.

Delivering humanitarian assistance to the areas affected by famine has been a challenge for relief agencies for the last several years. Central and southern Unity is cut off from road access for 7-8 months of the year, and pre-positioning and storing food stocks is not possible because of insecurity and conflict. As a consequence, supplies of food assistance are limited to WFP's capacity to carry out air-drops or airlifts in many locations. However, airdrops of food and nutrition supplies can only be carried out in places where relief workers are on the ground, and negotiations for this kind of access can be protracted and difficult. Key to the delivery of assistance in central and southern Unity is the Integrated Rapid Response Mechanism (IRRM), spear-headed by WFP. The IRRM is a partnership between WFP, UNICEF and a number of NGO partners, and seeks to re-open humanitarian space, using mobile teams to carry out general food distribution, conduct registrations and allow screening to trigger services in nutrition and other sectors.

Methodology

The workshop included a short presentation of the response timeline and main results, followed by thematic group discussions. There were groups focusing on general food distribution (registration, delivery and distribution); nutrition (targeting, delivery and distribution); assessment, planning and coordination; security, access and logistics; and resourcing, monitoring and communications. Each group considered the following questions:

1) **What did we do well – positive lessons learned.** Actions, activities or positions we would consider that we did really well this time that we would want to ensure is repeated next time. Which factors / causes (both internal and external) contributed to our success? Which factors need to be in place for success?

2) **What could we do better – negative lessons learned.** What was challenging or difficult, or did not go well? What factors or causes (internal and external) contributed to this being a challenge? What will we do differently next time?

3) **Recommendations:** How do we address the lessons?

The group discussions were followed by presentations in plenary, and participants then identified the most crucial recommendations. Participants were also encouraged to identify recommendations they could champion in their work.

Response Timeline

RESPONSE TIMELINE

PRE-DECLARATION   **RESPONSE**   **SCALE-DOWN**

July 2016	October 2016	January 2017	February 2017	May 2017	June 2017	July 2017

July 2016: Conflict restricts access in central Unity. Very low levels of assistance

October 2016:
Oct: Planned start of WFP assistance in Leer
Sep-Dec: MUAC screenings find very high GAM rates

January 2017: IPC analysis

February 2017:
Early Feb: Famine declaration and alert
Mid-Feb: Beginning of scale-up (planned for 3 months)
Response plan:
Leer & Mayendit – 30 day cycle (GFD and BSFP)
Koch & Panyijar – 60-day GFD cycle; 30-day BSFP cycle

May 2017: IPC update analysis

June 2017:
Early June: Unity counties out of famine
June-July: Leer & Mayendit to 45-day cycle