



LESSONS ON UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION ON PRIORITIZATION OF ASSISTANCE TO REFUGEES

UGANDA

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This document captures key lessons from the prioritization exercise and supporting activities harnessed from over 20 interviews and group discussions with UNHCR and WFP staff and donors.

The lessons learnt exercise was undertaken from mid-August to mid-Oct 2022. Interviews and team discussions were held with WFP and UNHCR country office staff, at both the field and capital level, and included staff that were involved extensively at both earlier and later stages of the process, as well as with the WFP country director and UNHCR representative. Interviews with key donors were also conducted.

The results reflect views from colleagues in WFP and UNHCR country teams, with inputs from the Joint Hub.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

The collaboration on the prioritization of food assistance between UNHCR and WFP in Uganda has resulted in the following key outputs.



Through the engagement of the Joint Hub, and support from UNHCR and WFP regional and HQ colleagues, **the working relationship between UNHCR and WFP in Uganda has greatly improved.** There had been longstanding differences of opinions between the two agencies on what targeting and prioritization approaches, including methods, should be utilized. The Joint Hub helped to unlock what had previously been a deadlock.



Activities throughout the prioritization process were **conducted jointly**, leading to a more **efficient use of resources** that reduced duplication in data collection, community engagement, and analysis.



There was a **strong commitment to accountability in the design of the prioritization model** by both UNHCR and WFP country office teams. Both agencies worked closely together to

ensure community engagement informed and influenced decision-making, including by adapting programmatic approaches based on community feedback. The Joint Hub supported the processes and systems to achieve this; engaging with community members, analyzing findings, and making recommendations, in a structured and systematic way.



Throughout the process UNHCR and WFP **focused on implementing a prioritization method that would best support humanitarian outcomes**, with a focus on **transparency and acceptance**, and on **minimizing errors** to the maximum extent possible. Challenges to the process mainly arose from disagreements on how to achieve these goals.



The Joint Hub's engagement helped to **support programming to be more data driven and evidence-based**, through rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis. Similarly, it helped to **improve the quality of the use of the data** of the Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE) undertaken by UNHCR and WFP for the prioritization process and the beneficiary selection.



UNHCR and WFP country offices both made **significant changes to their ways of working**, with an increase in dialogue and joint activities, and staff undertaking a range of new activities, and incorporating new tools and approaches in their work.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION

Following the [2018 Audit of UNHCR operations in Uganda](#), new **senior management priorities were primality directed on internal processes**, and as a result a close programmatic and strategic partnership with WFP was not prioritized by UNHCR. As a result, the agencies

did not have a common approach or a shared vision for joint approaches on programming and targeting and prioritization of assistance. This also extended to potential support from the Joint Hub, which WFP were keen to engage with at a much earlier date.

WFP had wanted to engage the Joint Hub at its establishment in early 2020, with support beyond targeting and prioritization that included strategic and broader programmatic elements.

However, at this time UNHCR was focused on internal processes, partnership with the government, and their leadership and coordination role in the overall refugee response. In 2021 the Hub was brought in due to a long-standing disagreement on the prioritization of WFP's provision of food assistance, including significant pressure from donors for an agreed prioritization strategy and implementation.

It was generally agreed by both UNHCR and WFP colleagues that the **Hub was brought in at too late a stage** when longstanding positions between both agencies had become entrenched, and reaching a common agreement was more difficult.

THE ROLE OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT

A point that was highlighted by many colleagues was that **senior management were not involved in some of the technical decisions that were strategic** in nature, such as on the possible use of a joint UNHCR-WFP helpline, or UNHCR-WFP joint post-distribution monitoring. Some colleagues also expressed that it was not always clear when engaging in technical discussions what the agency line was on certain topics.

Similarly, the inverse was also true, with senior management highlighting that **technical disputes can severely affect senior management relationships** and overall partnership engagement. It was suggested that if technical teams agree and have a **common understanding and vision** it is then

much easier for senior management to ensure collaboration and a close partnership.

ONE APPROACH ACROSS AGENCIES

The joint prioritization approach that was developed was **focused on WFP's provision of food assistance** (cash and in-kind). In interviews with staff, the entire exercise was often **seen as specific to WFP**, with frequent comments that "this is a WFP exercise". UNHCR's core relief item programming and cash assistance for basic needs was not provided on a regular basis, making it harder to join-up assistance packages.

This created the **feeling that WFP programming became beholden to UNHCR,**

with an unequal partnership developing. One colleague noted that "*it was like we had to get permission from UNHCR for our own programming*". It was pointed out by colleagues that a joint targeting or prioritization approach between the two agencies should not only be for one sector of a humanitarian response (food security).

This lack of programmatic balance and food security focus have caused tensions between the two agencies and could have hindered collaboration. It was suggested that **the scope should be expanded to be a real and equal partnership that focuses equally on both UNHCR and WFP assistance** for essential/basic needs, and food.



DISAGREEMENTS ON THE APPROACH

The development of the prioritization approach, in terms of methods used to determine eligibility criteria, was a point of contention between the two agencies. With UNHCR, WFP and the Joint Hub advocating for different approaches.

Reaching a shared agreement was a particularly challenging exercise, with the **Hub acting as a technical reference and convener** in the latter part of this process. During this period, as the Joint Hub adopted technical positions based on their expertise and knowledge (alongside regional and headquarter technical experts from both agencies), they were **sometimes seen as not neutral or impartial**.

A particular point of contention was the integration of protection considerations in the analysis, where WFP advocated for only physical disabilities to be considered.

WFP advocated for a categorical approach driven by a view that its adoption could easily be explained and be acceptable by persons of concern, coming from an accountability and transparency perspective. WFP wanted the approach focusing only on specific needs codes with correlation with economic vulnerability. An index-approach was eventually adopted – as the preferred approach of UNHCR, integrating protection considerations, and reflecting the Joint Hub’s technical recommendation to retain flexibility as per WFP’s resource availability.

THE JOINT HUB AS A TECHNICAL CONVENOR

The Joint Hub provided coordination support, including through the deployment of a dedicated **in-country UNHCR-WFP Joint Coordinator**.

Relationships between the actors were key: **The issues between UNHCR and WFP were affected by personal relationships, and not all colleagues prioritized relationship building.**

As the Hub came in at a late stage to already tense discussions, without the background, this hindered the speed at which decisions could be taken collaboratively. The Joint Hub was **not aware of all of the previous discussions and dynamics at play** and could have, in hindsight, tailored the approach to be more sensitive early on. This includes having **more one-on-one discussions and proactively forging close relations with key stakeholders.**

In essence, the Joint Hub was brought in to unlock a stalemate, as an arbiter, but had not prepared for a mediation role, which was a difficult starting position for what is meant to be a neutral coordinator and technical advisory service. **The Joint Hub was not seen as neutral**, as it had to take a technical position, and this was **perceived at different times as siding with either UNHCR or WFP.**

A technical taskforce consisting of UNHCR and WFP colleagues at the headquarters, regional, and country levels, alongside Joint Hub colleagues, was created. The taskforce helped to steer the entire process and ensured broader ownership.

At the beginning, the Joint Hub approach was focused on technical elements through convening large online meetings, which works well when relationships and trust is already in place. However, the Joint Hub did adapt this approach, focusing on one-on-one calls and providing information and updates to bring actors together. As one colleague noted *“the good work is often done outside of the office”*.

The Hub provided **comprehensive materials and analysis**, but this was not sufficient for all staff, who wanted the Joint Hub to conduct further analysis to show the proposed approach was the optimum solution. It was also suggested that **further examples from other operations** would have been helpful, with the examples provided by the Joint Hub from a recent exercise in Rwanda seen as very useful.

The UNHCR-WFP Joint Country Coordinator brought the two teams together and built

trust, which helped to accelerate the process. Throughout the Joint Hub's support **detailed action plans** (outlining who, what, and when) **helped to further enhance the collaboration.**

The work of the Joint Hub was greatly appreciated by colleagues, and now that there is an agreed approach, relationships between the two agencies are very positive. However, although WFP and UNHCR were aware and signed off on the Hub's engagement with the donor group in-country, the Hub was seen to overstep its scope of reference in discussions with donors on the prioritization approaches. It was noted that **representation and information sharing with donors at the country level should be the remit of the two agencies only**, with the Joint Hub only brought in upon invitation.

The Joint Hub also **provided significant technical support and missions on risk analysis, community consultations, communications strategy, implementation planning, and complaints and feedback mechanisms**, including providing some funding, and this was greatly appreciated by the country offices.

MAINSTREAMING PROTECTION, AND INCORPORATING ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED PEOPLE IN THE PROCESS

Protection was mainstreamed throughout the process. Protection dimensions were included in analysis and development of the prioritization approach, communities were engaged, and **community feedback informed the design of the prioritization approach**, including the eligibility criteria and the implementation approach.

With support from the Joint Hub, both agencies **prioritized the inclusion of refugee perspectives in decision-making.**

The sensitization and information sharing with refugees was generally seen as a success, but as Phase 1 of the prioritization process was done quickly, it was felt that messaging was

difficult and there was **not enough time for proper community sensitization.**

The community messaging for Phase 2 was given more time, and information was better received by refugees. **More time therefore needs to be allocated to information sharing** (at least one to two months), including to Government, donors, partners and other stakeholders, as it takes time to deliver messages.

THE ROLE OF PARTNERS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Partners are vital to ensuring successful accountability to community members and they therefore **need to be involved from the start.** Partners and field colleagues were brought in late and were initially not that well informed.

Involving partners early-on can ensure that there are no mixed messages, and that communication is effectively provided to refugees.

In Phase 2, refugees were informed of their eligibility for assistance through anonymized eligibility lists at village level, as well as SMS messages to refugees' phones. For the most vulnerable refugees, house visits were also conducted by protection staff to directly inform them of their eligibility for assistance.

This worked well in Phase 2 of the prioritization implementation, when an **information package was developed together with partners**, and not by UNHCR and WFP alone, as in Phase 1. As one colleague noted, *"when a new issue is coming, we must inform partners as one team, speaking from the same page"*.

APPEALS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

An appeals process is vital to ensure that the most vulnerable households are not wrongly excluded from assistance.

A joint appeals mechanism was established to jointly receive appeals through existing helplines. Helpdesks and protection desks were also used to process, and respond to

appeals by households concerning their eligibility for assistance.

The Hub also **supported the country offices to establish an assistance buffer**, thereby **enabling assistance to be allocated to vulnerable households** that are identified as eligible through the appeals process.

With funding from the Joint Hub, 49 appeals staff were hired by UNHCR protection partners and 19 by WFP partners, receiving three days of training for their roles.

There was some **initial confusion about the planned appeals desks**, and how they worked. Therefore, in the future all relevant staff members need to be part of the process from the onset, including in the development and roll-out of Standard Operating Procedures for appeals. There was also a delay between training and the implementation of the appeals desks, as equipment was not yet ready.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS WITH REFUGEES

Community consultations, and engagement of both UNHCR and WFP senior staff in this process ensured that **refugee perspectives informed the prioritization approach**, and that **messages to senior management were the same on both sides** in relation to community perceptions and understanding of vulnerability, appeals, key messaging, and the prioritization approach. Having Joint Hub staff support these exercises through in-country missions was seen as extremely helpful.

The consultations helped to **increase engagement with refugees**, with one colleague noting that staff are sometimes afraid to conduct consultations with community members because of fears around negative feedback.

BUILDING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Through collaboration on accountability to affected persons and the positive engagement between both agencies, other areas of cooperation opened up, as **positive relationships created a more conducive environment for more difficult discussions**. AAP components were more straightforward and less conflictive and created space for collaboration.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING?

The collaboration between UNHCR and WFP on the prioritization of food assistance in Uganda was sometimes perceived as a **new way of working**, in particular for UNHCR staff, who had less experience with technical elements of a targeting/ prioritization process.

It was suggested by colleagues to **re-frame new targeting and prioritization exercises** to better show **how they build on existing best practices**. As one colleague noted, *“the framing of [the exercise] ... is very important, as introducing new things scares people”*.

For example, community consultations that have significant overlaps in approach with participatory assessments and other AAP elements should not be perceived as something that is wholly new.

There was agreement that there is no need to change terms of reference for staff, and that this should be seen as part of their day-to-day work. As one UNHCR colleague noted *“this is what we have always been doing, identifying who is in need, speaking with communities”*.

CORPORATE TOOLS

Significant time and discussions were invested in deciding on which tool to use for appeals. Initially, WFP's SugarCRM system was explored, but in the end one single platform (KoBo) to intake appeals and various WFP-UNHCR channels were agreed. This enabled multiple channels to be accessed by refugees, enhancing both agencies' accountability to refugees. It was felt by some colleagues that this could have been much quicker, and some UNHCR colleagues would have preferred more considerations on using the existing UNHCR hosted inter-agency feedback and complaints helpline alone, which has 68 partners using the system. This, however, was not agreed during the joint discussions and the final decision was to diversify the appeals intake channels.

LIVELIHOODS – AN AREA FOR DEEPER COLLABORATION?

Collaboration on livelihoods programming was not prioritized as each agency was preoccupied with the new influxes of refugees and the prioritization of food assistance was the top priority for inter-agency collaboration, with WFP also focused on changing from in-kind food assistance to cash transfers in several areas.

Colleagues raised the need for each agency to work together on livelihoods and resilience programming, but with conflicting opinions on how this could be done. Suggestions were made for dedicated joint sessions of both UNHCR and WFP technical livelihoods teams that can support WFP planning for greater investments in this area, and lead to joint resource mobilization, with support from the Joint Hub.

ROLE OF THE REGIONAL BUREAUS

It was felt by both country offices that the regional bureaus could take more active roles in supporting future prioritization or targeting exercises, and support with **institutional knowledge in the region**. Developing lessons and capturing procedures and processes from countries such as Rwanda and Uganda, giving more guidance, and slowly entering the space of the Joint Hub.

STAFF TURNOVER

One major challenge to the implementation of the prioritization process has been the turnover of staff, and changing focal points. This can often lead to delays, as new colleagues raise questions and concerns on already agreed upon actions. New colleagues joining a targeting and prioritization process need sufficient time and briefings to enable them to engage on all the important elements of the exercise.

CONCLUSIONS

The eventual decisions and approach on prioritization and supporting AAP elements are perceived as a success, and both agencies recognize the value of the approach, collaboration, and the support of the Joint Hub.

Both agencies have developed new capacities and understandings, including on vulnerability analysis, protection, and registration.

However, significant time and resources were wasted on intransigent positions, that led to significant delays in implementation.

Collaboration needs to be as seen as a default obligation and a role for every colleague from senior to more junior staff, as currently some staff prioritize coordination, while others do not.



ANNEX: BACKGROUND TO TARGETING AND PRIORITIZATION IN UGANDA

Uganda has a longstanding history of welcoming refugees, and hosts over 1.5 million refugees from South Sudan (57%), Democratic Republic of the Congo (32%), Somalia (4%), Burundi (3%), and other countries (Nov 2022, UNHCR).

Over 90% of refugees are hosted in 13 districts in the North and South-Western regions. They live in villages known as settlements, where they co-exist with communities that host them.

This approach, combined with progressive refugee laws and freedoms, provide refugees in Uganda with significant prospects for dignity and self-reliance. However, **most refugees in Uganda remain extremely vulnerable and reliant on assistance.**

Uganda implements the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), emphasizing the inclusion of refugees into national systems, particularly in the education, health, and livelihoods sectors.

VULNERABILITY DATA AND FUNDING CONSTRAINTS

While refugee needs are high, **resource shortfalls intensified the need for household-level prioritisation of WFP's general food assistance**, which was introduced for the first time in 2016. An inter-agency Vulnerability and Essential Needs Analysis (VENA) assessment was conducted in 2019 **to inform an understanding of the needs and vulnerability of refugees.** This assessment found 91 percent of refugee households were highly vulnerable, and 81 percent of households had overlapping high protection and economic vulnerability.

In 2021-2022 UNHCR and the Government of Uganda have jointly conducted an Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE) to **update the current comprehensive dataset, which could also be used to better understand the needs and vulnerabilities of refugees.** This exercise provides detailed information about each refugee household in all settlements across the country.

PRIORITIZATION OF FOOD ASSISTANCE IN UGANDA

From 2020 onwards, **significant decreases in funding for food assistance** resulted in food rations being progressively reduced for all refugees (firstly to 70% in April 2020, then to 60% in February 2021), disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable refugee households.

While the VENA provided information about the situation of refugees, due to the large size of the highly vulnerable group identified, and while the IPE was being rolled out, it was challenging to translate this data into an operational strategy for prioritization which could identify and select the most vulnerable households and provide them with an appropriate level of assistance.

Following **protracted discussions and lack of alignment on the best approach** for the prioritization of food assistance for refugees between UNHCR and WFP, in December 2020, both country offices jointly requested support from the **UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub** to help in reaching consensus and informing an approach on:



Revising the socio-economic and protection vulnerability frameworks to facilitate needs-based prioritisation of WFP's general food assistance programme, and



Operationalizing the shift to a needs-based prioritization approach for the delivery of food assistance.

A PHASED APPROACH BASED ON QUALITY OF AVAILABLE DATA

With delays on the completion of the IPE, the data received was progressively integrated into the prioritisation strategy in a phased approach.

As more data was analysed and community feedback was integrated, the prioritisation approach was increasingly refined. Following the initial food ration reductions for all refugees in 2020, the prioritisation phases were defined as follows:



Phase 1: Geographic prioritisation was adopted, with ration sizes adjusted according to location, based on the overall vulnerability level of each settlement.



Phase 2: An **index-based ranking** was used to identify the most vulnerable refugees in the settlements where food rations were lowest. These selected households received higher food rations to contribute to meeting their relatively greater food needs. The vulnerability ranking of households was based on both socio-demographic and protection-related variables: such as household dependency ratio, women/girls at risk, child protection cases, serious medical conditions, disability and older persons at risk.



Phase 3: In 2023, household level prioritisation will be implemented across all settlements, based on the combination of using an updated **index-based approach** to prioritize the most vulnerable, and **categorical criteria** to phase out self-sufficient refugees from food assistance.