JOINT PROGRAMME EXCELLENCE AND TARGETING HUB

UGANDA LEARNING REVIEW

Learning from UNHCR-WFP collaboration on prioritizing food assistance for refugees, with support from the UNHCR-WFP Joint Hub

APRIL 2025

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DISCLAIMER

This review draws on the experience of the Joint Hub in Uganda and other joint operations, as well as WFP, UNHCR, and joint UNHCR-WFP guidance, alongside existing research, literature and recognized best practice. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the Joint Hub team and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR and WFP. Responsibility for the opinions expressed rests solely with the authors. Publication of this document does not imply endorsement by WFP or UNHCR of the opinions expressed.

This learning review looks back at the prioritization process from 2021-2024, identifying strengths and good practices, while also highlighting gaps in standards and practices. Drawing on insights and experience from similar contexts, it includes some technical options, exploring prioritization models, community consultation approaches and appeals processes relevant to Uganda. For in-depth enhancements or the development of new approaches, further analysis and additional data would be required. The Joint Hub remains available to provide additional analytical and programmatic support if required by the country offices.

INTRODUCTION

This review documents learning from the process of collaboration between the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the prioritization of food assistance for refugees in Uganda, between 2021 and 2024.

The findings presented here are based on a learning review conducted by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub (Joint Hub) in October 2024, during which interviews and discussions were held with staff from WFP, UNHCR, the Government of Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), donors, non-governmental organization (NGO) partners, and refugees themselves. Combined with information drawn from available literature and documentation, the learning presented here reflects the views of the people consulted, as well as those of the Joint Hub team.

The learning review process sought to identify what has worked well and why, and what challenges were faced throughout the process. This report aims to distill lessons learned from the prioritization process - by identifying good practice and areas for improvement – in order to inform future collaboration between WFP and UNHCR in Uganda, as well as to inspire similar approaches in other contexts. For the Joint Hub, this review also serves to improve the quality of support it provides to WFP and UNHCR country operations.

BACKGROUND

Uganda offers refuge to over 1.8 million people, most of whom have fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan and South Sudan.[1] The number of refugees continues to grow, with approximately 10,000 new arrivals entering the country each month (UNHCR 2024). The Ugandan government has a progressive refugee model, granting refugees access to land, schooling, health care, vocational training and jobs; welcoming policies which have opened up important avenues for self-reliance (OPM 2024). However, despite refugees having some opportunities to make a living, the majority are still in need of assistance to meet their basic needs and available funding for humanitarian assistance is insufficient.

In 2021, against a backdrop of significantly reduced funding, WFP and UNHCR shifted from a status-based to a needs-based approach to delivering food assistance for refugees, by prioritizing those households identified as being most vulnerable. The Joint Hub provided technical and coordination support to the process of assessment, data analysis and design of a protection-sensitive prioritization strategy.

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[1] Figures correct at time of writing. Source: UNHCR Country - Uganda

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIORITIZATION APPROACH

Between 2021 and 2023, WFP and UNHCR, with support from the Joint Hub, developed a prioritization approach for food assistance that considered the complexity of the context, resource availability, the data available, and the perspectives and feedback of the community. Throughout the process, emphasis was placed on community engagement and communications, as well as developing and strengthening joint processes to manage appeals.

FOOD RATION REDUCTIONS

From 2020 onwards, due to resource constraints, there were food ration reductions for all refugees (down to 70 percent in May 2020 and then 60 percent in April 2021), following which the country offices decided to adopt a needs-based prioritization process, implemented in phases, as described below.

PHASE 1 (2021)

In Phase 1, geographic prioritization was adopted, with the ration size adjusted according to location, based on the overall vulnerability level of each settlement (rations at 70 percent in five settlements, 60 percent in three settlements and 40 percent in five settlements). The settlements were divided into these three groups due to important differences between the regions such as local market prices, economic opportunities, and agricultural potential that had an impact on refugees' food security.

PHASE 2 (2022)

In Phase 2, index-based ranking was used to identify the most vulnerable refugees in those settlements where food rations were lowest in phase 1 (i.e. 40 percent rations), as an interim measure before the national rollout of household-level prioritization. These households (approximately 14 percent according to resource availability)[2] started receiving higher food rations (60 percent), to contribute to meeting their relatively greater food needs. The ranking of households according to their vulnerability level was based on both socio-demographic and protection-related variables mostly linked to food insecurity such as household dependency ratio, women/girls at risk, child protection cases, serious medical conditions, disability, and older persons at risk.

PHASE 3 (2023)

In Phase 3 (July 2023), household level prioritization was implemented across all settlements in Uganda. This prioritization model was based on the combination of an updated index-based approach to prioritize the most vulnerable households, and the use of categorical criteria to identify refugees thought to be self-reliant which would no longer be eligible for food assistance.

- The index was based on statistical analysis and then adapted according to community feedback. Of the model's 13 indicators, 6 were statistically linked to essential needs vulnerability[3] and more than half were identified by refugees. Both socio-demographic variables and specific-needs codes contained in proGres registration data were then used to rank households according to their vulnerability and identify those eligible for two different levels of food assistance.

- In addition to the index, a categorical approach was used to identify households that were considered self-reliant and thus not eligible for food assistance. These households include refugees with salaried occupations and/or certain businesses, refugees receiving significant assistance through livelihoods or resilience programmes, and refugees that have not collected their assistance for three consecutive months.

[2] The initial plan was to reach 25 percent, but due to a lack of resources this was not possible.

[3] Vulnerability was defined as per WFP's Essential Needs Assessment guidelines and as UNHCR-WFP Joint Analytical Framework guidance

In phase 3, the following rations have been provided to refugees:

- Highly vulnerable households, category 1 (13.4 percent of households) receive 60 percent of the food ration[4]

- Moderately vulnerable households, category 2 (82.2 percent) receive 30 percent of the food ration

- Least vulnerable or self-reliant households, category 3 (4.4 percent) are no longer eligible to receive food assistance.

New arrivals receive three months of 100% ration, followed by three months at the same level as category 1 (60% ration), before automatically receiving assistance on the same level as category 2 (i.e. 30 percent ration). The prioritization index has not been applied to new arrivals.

TIMELINE – IMPLEMENTATION OF PRIORITIZATION FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE
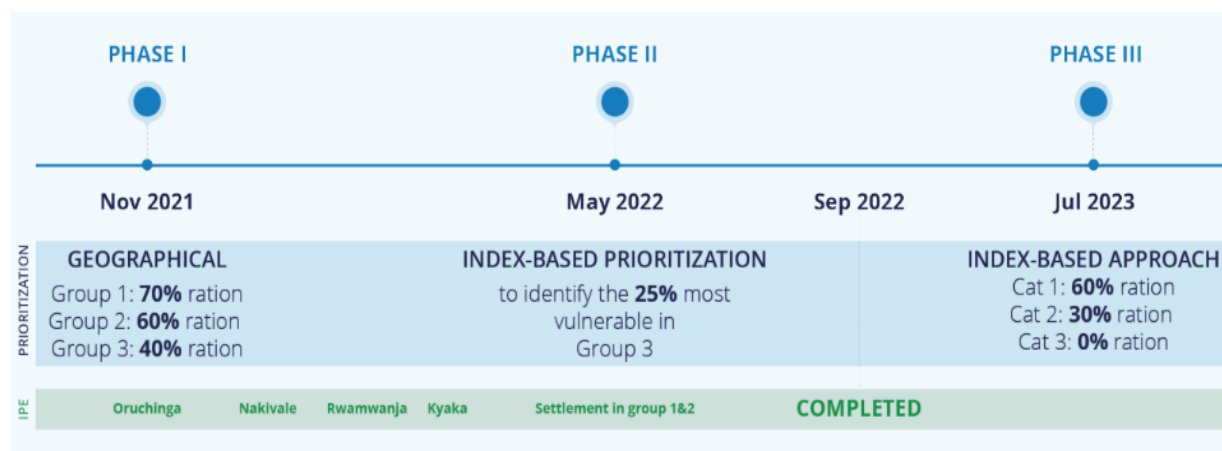
Note: IPE refers to the Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE) sample assessment, data from which was used to inform the prioritization approach.
Source: WFP (2024). Analysing the impact of prioritization in Uganda, A Longitudinal Study of Refugees' Food Security

PLANNED REPRIORITIZATION (2025)

In October 2024, country offices decided to reprioritize food assistance in 2025, and at the time of conducting this learning review staff were in the process of planning this reprioritization exercise.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

This learning review focused on several themes and processes involved in the development and implementation of the prioritization approach: WFP-UNHCR collaboration, with support from the Joint Hub; engagement with partners (government, NGOs, donors); designing and communicating a data-driven prioritization model; engagement with refugee communities and their hosts; and the prioritization review mechanism which was designed to receive and manage appeals. This section presents key achievements, challenges and lessons learned for each of these thematic areas.

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[4] It should be noted that the ration size and/or value of the cash transfer is adjusted according to local market prices.

UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION

The roll-out of the prioritization approach in July 2023 was successfully implemented and represents a strategic step-change in the delivery of household-level assistance in Uganda. Throughout the learning review, it was widely acknowledged that this roll-out had been achieved through exceptional collaboration, planning, and implementation between OPM, WFP, and UNHCR and by placing importance on the need to actively communicate with affected communities. OPM's leadership and the engagement of key partners led to a relatively smooth prioritization roll-out, with no major negative impacts on safety and security as the identified risks did not materialize.

UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION AT TECHNICAL AND STRATEGIC LEVELS

Initially, between 2021 and 2022, the joint process in Kampala relied heavily on analytical and coordination support from the Joint Hub and the WFP regional bureau in Nairobi. Country office colleagues noted limited involvement in the foundational analytical work which underpinned the prioritization model, leading to poor understanding and ownership of the process, as well as disagreement on the integration of specific protection indicators. Colleagues in the Joint Hub and regional bureau contributed to addressing this issue by dedicating time to clarify for country office colleagues the analytical framework and methods used. However, despite these efforts, country office colleagues continue to face challenges in effectively communicating and justifying the logic of the model to external stakeholders and partners, which remains a significant gap and is often seen as a key weakness in the overall process (see section below on 'Communicating a data-driven model' for further details).

Additionally, weaknesses were observed in the limited involvement and consultation of relevant colleagues (e.g., field, programme, etc.) in the prioritization discussions and decision-making process from the outset[5]. These discussions were largely treated as a 'technical' exercise, despite their significant impact on the overall operation – which extends beyond just WFP's Strategic Outcome 1[6] - thus missing opportunities to align other types of programming with the prioritization approach.

Without a clear understanding of what the prioritization approach would entail, a small group of colleagues in both country offices ended up shouldering much of the responsibility. This resulted in limited engagement from other critical programme areas which could have played a more active role in the process. Colleagues highlighted that their closer involvement could help improve implementation, facilitate greater partner engagement, and achieve alignment at the sector working group level.

Following management changes and key staff turnover, the country offices saw a positive shift in the WFP-UNHCR relationship in 2022, as noted in a previous lessons learned exercise. By Q4 2022, the country offices took the lead in facilitating the joint process, assuming responsibility for analytical work linked to Phase 3 prioritization. This marked a gradual reduction in the Joint Hub's involvement in coordination and analysis, while continued support for accountability to affected people (AAP) workstreams remained in place.

The appointment of a new UNHCR focal point in Q2 2023 also further improved the communication and collaboration. However, at working level the process continues to rely heavily on the goodwill of two focal points - one in each agency. Country office colleagues also found that having two dedicated and clearly assigned focal points, was particularly beneficial in keeping the process on track and improving communication.

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[5] This finding has been raised in previous learning exercises and has now been integrated into the Joint Hub's standard ways of working for CO-level engagement. These 'Standard Operating Procedures' ensure that all relevant entities are involved and engaged throughout the process, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative approach.
[6] WFP's Strategic Outcome 1: People are better able to meet their urgent food and nutrition needs. General Food Assistance falls under S01.

At the management level, deliberate efforts to maintain open and constructive communication between the agencies, despite challenges, were seen as critical in finding solutions, reaching compromises, and ensuring joint decision-making. At both operational and managerial levels, it is increasingly recognized that managing complex or ongoing processes requires dedicated capacity.

From Q4 2022 to the end of Q1 2023, there were delays in decisions regarding protection indicators, data sharing and analysis, as well as the creation of beneficiary lists. This resulted in a three-month postponement of the prioritization roll-out.

On the UNHCR side, the delays were due to the decentralized nature of the organization, which meant the Kampala office had to internally mobilize and build consensus. There were also hesitations to lead on decision-making without first reaching full confidence in the technical areas involved.

In general, WFP viewed the delays as an indication that the exercise was not being prioritized by UNHCR, feeling they were compelled to wait despite the significant pressure they were under. On the other hand, UNHCR perceived that WFP was prioritizing its own interests and decisions, whilst characterizing the outcome as a joint exercise. However, at the time of writing, as evidenced in the interviews conducted, both agencies have gained a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives and internal processes, acknowledging the challenges faced and the complexities involved. This has led to a more collaborative approach, recognizing that both sides have areas to improve and a shared responsibility in the process.

Despite notable improvements in collaboration between WFP and UNHCR country offices, joint efforts often place an additional burden on already stretched capacities. The cost-benefit of this collaboration may not always be immediately apparent to colleagues directly involved in the day-to-day work. As one colleague in Kampala noted: "It's nice to collaborate, but at what cost?" Country office colleagues indicated that the complexity of the exercise, combined with the scale and scope of the changes implemented, underscored the need for dedicated resources, as well as a collective effort and expertise from multiple teams.

Although not an explicit part of the learning review, the following finding emerged during discussions and is important to note: there is a natural tension between management's need to address external pressures while managing internal resources and the plans and advice of technical teams. While management is focused on strategic decision-making, technical teams who aim to deliver good practice and meet targets sometimes see their advice not fully applied, which can have negative repercussions on implementation, outcomes, and refugee populations. Greater clarity in decision-making and a closer attention to technical input - often grounded in agency policies, standards, and external advice (such as that provided by the Joint Hub) - could help alleviate these tensions. This also extends to timing and the importance of clearly communicating externally what is realistically feasible. Ensuring that both internal and external stakeholders understand what can be achieved within a given timeframe will help manage expectations, prevent misunderstandings, and support a more effective and coordinated response.

UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION AT FIELD LEVEL

Consultations with UNHCR and WFP in the field indicated limited involvement in the design, development, and decision-making surrounding the prioritization approach. This lack of early engagement led to several negative consequences, including challenges in understanding the prioritization model and its underlying rationale, which in turn made external communication difficult. As a result, there was a knock-on effect on partner and refugee acceptance, despite significant efforts to communicate and engage with communities. Greater involvement of field staff in the preparation, roll-out, and implementation phases could have helped mitigate challenges encountered (such as increasing staff confidence when responding to refugees' complaints) and could have alleviated a certain level of frustration felt by field colleagues.

More generally, it was noted that there was good and timely collaboration between WFP and UNHCR – as well as with OPM - for the roll-out of the prioritization approach and ongoing delivery of food assistance. Meetings were conducted jointly in the settlements, with clear and harmonized guidance received from

respective management at Kampala level, resulting in field teams feeling that the direction given was aligned. From WFP's perspective, some challenges were expressed, specifically relating to delays in receiving data from UNHCR, due to UNHCR's protection concerns around data sharing.

COLLABORATION WITH THE JOINT HUB

The Joint Hub began supporting UNHCR and WFP in Uganda in early 2021, following a request from country offices at the end of 2020 to assist with analysis, design of the prioritization strategy, community engagement and appeals processes. The Joint Hub provided technical and coordination support, including the deployment of a staff member as Joint Hub Country Coordinator for six months in 2022, in-country missions and ongoing remote technical support. The Joint Hub's support significantly reduced in phase 3 with country offices firmly taking the lead.

Due to the focus on Phase 3 of the prioritization process during this learning review, and the time lag in this exercise, feedback on the support provided by the Joint Hub has been relatively limited. However, a few points were raised during the learning review and these are noted below.

Transitioning to the new prioritization model has been complex with implications on understanding, buy-in and transparency and the Joint Hub perhaps underestimated the ramifications of this strategic shift in approach. As mentioned above, prioritization was often considered to be a technical issue, and the inclusion of senior management, as well as multifunctional teams within UNHCR and WFP in the (very early) design phases, was relatively limited. The Joint Hub could have been more insistent on encouraging wider consultation with relevant colleagues, including field staff, and bringing strategic issues to the attention of senior management. The Joint Hub recognizes the importance of ensuring broader participation in these processes, including at senior management level, to lay the groundwork for future programmatic success.

The technical and coordination support of the Joint Hub was considered highly valuable and much needed, enabling the design of a data-driven model that integrated available data in a phased approach, at a time when neither country offices nor the regional bureaux of either agency had the time or resources to develop such an approach jointly. The Joint Hub contributed to a broader understanding of the model and supported the country offices to communicate it to colleagues and communities (acknowledging the challenges described below in communicating the model).

While documentation efforts have been well-received, country office colleagues expressed that more examples from other countries would have better supported the decision-making process. It was noted that the previous Learning Review (2023), covering prioritization phases 1 and 2, had been well received and insights had informed ongoing work. However, dissemination of this first learning review could have been improved and the Joint Hub could have played a role in this. The value of documentation was stressed by country office colleagues, with an acknowledgement that it was essential for them to dedicate time to this post-Joint Hub engagement.

INTEGRATING LEARNING INTO ONGOING RESPONSE

Throughout the prioritization process, WFP and UNHCR have successfully integrated learning from previous phases, with lessons learned from Phases 1 and 2 considered in the development of Phase 3. For instance, the absence of community consultations in Phase 1 led to significant complaints, while communications in Phase 2 were well managed, and again further improved in Phase 3, with enhanced coordination and improved understanding among refugees. The relative failure of the appeals process in Phase 2 prompted the decision to move away from the previous model and adopt the Prioritization Review Mechanism (PRM) approach instead. Additionally, the involvement of OPM as a key stakeholder in Phase 3 was seen as a "make or break" element, which had not been given the same emphasis in earlier phases. The agencies were also receptive to this current learning review being conducted and keen to use the findings to inform the next phase.

These adaptations highlight an operation that is responsive to a changing environment, open to learning, and committed to continuous improvement - an approach that will be valuable when revising the current categories and refining the prioritization strategy in the future.

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LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Good collaboration requires dedicated staff time and a consistent commitment to meet regularly and share information in a transparent and timely manner.

- Leadership for collaboration is necessary at technical. strategic (senior management) and field levels, for greater sense of co-ownership of the process.

- Greater involvement of field staff in the preparation, rollout, and implementation phases is particularly essential for ensuring effectiveness and alignment with on-the-ground realities.

- While it is essential to assign a principal technical focal point within each agency for oversight and coordination within the organization and with respective organization, it still requires collective effort and expertise from multiple teams. Beyond the work on data, and the design of the prioritization approach, other aspects of joint collaboration should not be overlooked, such as programming, protection, communicating with communities, appeals processes, and engaging with Government and partners.

- The prioritization exercise should be integrated into the workplans of both organizations from the outset, with clear identification of interdependencies with other ongoing activities. This approach will help foster co-ownership across teams in both organizations.

- Management must provide clear guidance on how timelines and priorities, of all relevant units, should be adjusted, ensuring that space is created for this exercise and that competing team priorities are addressed early on.

- Create and maintain a culture of learning, reflecting on past experience and using lessons learned to inform future response.

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ENGAGEMENT WITH PARTNERS

ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT (OPM)

Government engagement with WFP and UNHCR at the central level is seen as a critical factor for the successful implementation of the prioritization approach. This involved the joint drafting of official memos to announce the initiative and set expectations, along with the active participation of OPM commanders at the settlement level. It also encompassed community engagement and communications, as well as the establishment of security working groups with NGO partners to mitigate risks in high-risk areas.

Although OPM initially expressed reservations about the prioritization process, their support grew once it became evident that WFP's financial constraints rendered the status-based delivery of assistance unsustainable. With this understanding, a focal point was designated for the prioritization process, which helped to build momentum for the joint effort. However, OPM expressed concerns about the approach to prioritization, particularly regarding the pre-testing of master lists, which they felt was not fully considered by WFP. They also believed that their technical contributions could have been better integrated into the process.

OPM emphasized that the international community and donors must fulfill their responsibilities in supporting refugees, expressing dissatisfaction with the low levels of WFP food rations (US$3-6 per person, per month), which they argued provide limited benefits to refugee well-being. OPM advocated for their own progressive refugee model, which includes freedom of movement, the right to work, and the

allocation of arable land, believing these measures to have a more significant impact on improving refugees' lives. However, OPM also acknowledged the need for a transition to self-reliance and resilience for refugees, and to address the sustainability of the response through local development and skills-building. They noted that a clear national strategy, inclusive of relevant government ministries, is currently lacking.

In terms of areas for improvement, OPM strongly recommended that the country offices focus on addressing inclusion errors (specifically removing the 'least vulnerable' households from category 1), thereby freeing up resources to include the highly vulnerable but wrongly excluded refugees in category 1. The other recommendation from OPM was to increase the value of support for category 1 households, to the extent possible (i.e. ideally to 100 percent ration size), as well as supporting new arrivals for a minimum of one year.[7]

ENGAGEMENT WITH NGO PARTNERS

Most NGO partners recognized and agreed on the importance and rationale of the prioritization process, with one partner stating, "Prioritization makes a lot more sense in this protracted crisis, given dwindling resources and increasing new arrivals."

While some partners understood the need for country offices to withhold certain details of the prioritization model to reduce the risk of data manipulation, others expressed frustration over this lack of transparency. Regardless of whether NGOs supported the approach, the opacity around technical aspects of the model, such as how vulnerability was determined, made it difficult for partners to fully understand and trust the decisions. For instance, some NGO partners consulted felt the model did not sufficiently account for protection-related factors like age, gender, and disability.

Nevertheless, the country offices' extensive engagement with partners about six months before the Phase 3 roll-out played a crucial role in securing their involvement and buy-in, which was especially important for community engagement.

> *"At the beginning we tried to be engaged, but we would just not get responses... From around 2023 onwards, there was a more committed approach (by WFP and UNHCR) to outreach to NGOs. WFP and UNHCR leadership have done a remarkable job, really appreciated job, to make sure we are core stakeholders in the process."* - NGO representative.

Most NGO partners also recognised that involvement at field level could have been improved, acknowledging their own role in improving communication between Kampala level and with their staff or partners in the field.

> *"We should also look at ourselves and not just easily blame WFP-UNHCR. We could also have done a better job and could have supported the process better, as funding crisis has affected us also."* - NGO partner.

In terms of alignment with partners' own programming, there have been limited efforts and interest to do so. Some partners, such as the Uganda Cash Consortium (UCC), previously used the prioritization model as the basis for targeting of their cash assistance. However, since the household categorization and assistance lists have not been updated since March 2023, the UCC has shifted to targeting its beneficiaries based on referrals – i.e. delivering cash assistance to households that no longer receive WFP food assistance and are identified through a referral system. If the categorization of households is updated, and closer partnerships with NGOs are forged, there is interest from some partners to align their programming – such as cash and livelihood programmes - with the prioritization model.

There were also some differences in opinion regarding the role NGO partners should play in the prioritization process. Some partners felt that such a critical exercise, with wide-reaching implications for

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[7] As noted above, at the time of writing new arrivals receive three months of 100% ration, followed by three months at the same level as category 1 (60% ration), before automatically receiving assistance on the same level as category 2 (i.e. 30 percent ration).

all stakeholders, should be coordinated through a mechanism that extends beyond UNHCR-WFP. However, UNHCR and WFP country offices perceived this joint exercise as primarily their responsibility, linked to their mandates, and accountability and reach at country-level, believing that while partners are important stakeholders, their role is more advisory than decision-making. Increased exchange may have been fruitful to help overcome the divide.

ENGAGEMENT WITH DONORS

The prioritization process seems to have been largely shaped by donor expectations, which led WFP to take action despite initial challenges in preparedness, with the understanding that adjustments and improvements would be made as the process unfolded. Like other stakeholders, donors broadly supported the shift to vulnerability-based assistance, especially given the context of reduced funding, and they acknowledged the smooth communication at the field level. However, they also highlighted some negative impacts on partners, dissatisfaction with the absence of an effective appeals system,[8] and a limited understanding of the technical aspects of the prioritization approach. This has led to misunderstandings and, in some cases, unrealistic expectations and timelines. It should be acknowledged that purely donor-driven timelines have not previously left sufficient space for technical teams and agencies to integrate learning from previous phases, take decisions jointly and implement all the necessary steps for prioritization. It is important that timelines are developed collaboratively.

There are ongoing questions about the appropriateness of Category 3, its size, and whether WFP and UNHCR can further reduce assistance to households believed to be least vulnerable (previously referred to as *'self-reliant'*). Notably, some donors have included data-sharing provisions in their awards with partners to address assistance duplication and facilitate the removal of self-reliant and graduated refugees from WFP assistance streams. Additionally, donors recognized that the prioritization process has increased demand for livelihood and support for refugee self-reliance but also highlighted the lack of effective coordination in this area.

Although not an explicit part of the learning review, it was noted that donor expectations and demands on the agencies, particularly WFP, are not always fully aligned, which can sometimes lead to unrealistic expectations regarding already agreed-upon joint decisions between UNHCR and WFP. This misalignment presents challenges in coordination as well as managing the prioritization process, as the agencies work to balance the diverse needs and demands of various stakeholders. Addressing this gap by regular, transparent, joint discussions with donors could help improve coordination and support more achievable outcomes.

RESPONSE ACROSS THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

It became clear through the process of the learning review that the current approach to prioritization for food assistance assumes that some refugees are already self-reliant – or can potentially become more self-reliant – and this requires a huge shift in approach for humanitarian and development actors collectively. At the time of exercise, however, WFP and UNHCR were working on redefining the re-prioritization categories, specifically considering category 3 as 'least vulnerable' rather than being 'self-reliant' (and revising the approach for identifying such household, focusing on the absence of certain characteristics that render refugees 'most vulnerable').

As part of the shift towards the prioritization of food assistance, the agencies indeed sought to find alternative solutions and promote refugee self-reliance. While there was limited collaboration between WFP and UNHCR in this area initially, WFP was able to secure funding and implement a livelihood project benefitting approximately 10,000 households. Country offices are now collaborating with OPM and partners to develop a national self-reliance model and measurement, aiming for better coordination and alignment with development programming. Additionally, WFP and UNHCR country offices have submitted

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[8] It was noted by UNHCR and WFP that the agencies had made requests to donors for the funding of appeals processes, but these funding requests were unsuccessful.

a joint proposal to the European Union Directorate-General for International Partnerships. The prioritization process has also fostered greater exploration of humanitarian-development nexus programming and has led to increased dialogue within the humanitarian sector to enhance refugee well-being.

It is important to recognize that while WFP and UNHCR are pivotal in this transition, the vision of achieving greater refugee self-reliance necessitates the involvement of a broader range of actors and over a considerably longer timeframe. While existing self-reliance and graduation initiatives are positive, they will not be sufficient to achieve the desired scale (under current conditions, the number of refugees who 'graduate' each year and/or not to be assisted, is significantly outpaced by the number of live births). Managing expectations for both refugees and stakeholders is key. To reduce pressure on humanitarian budgets, bolder investments in local economic development and inclusion are needed and this should involve a multi-stakeholder approach matched against a national plan. Exploring how to align the prioritization approach with broader social protection systems (even if nascent) should be an integral part of long-term planning.

This is a strategic issue that requires collective responsibility and burden-sharing across the humanitarian-development nexus. There is a significant opportunity to rethink and reshape the humanitarian business model in Uganda, for example by developing a Theory of Change and a strategic plan to facilitate this transition. A long-term vision will alleviate pressure on agencies and technical teams, enabling more sustainable and effective responses. UNHCR can play a key role, as facilitator in the Government's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- All relevant stakeholders – government, donors and NGOs partners – should be consulted at key milestones of the prioritization exercise and briefed on technical aspects of the approach, to improve understanding, buy-in and potential programmatic and strategic alignment.

- Securing the government's buy-in for its leadership in the joint processes is critical to subsequent buy-in from the stakeholders and the community.

- The shift from status-based to needs-based assistance is a critical change, one which needs to be seen as a strategic issue requiring collective responsibility and burden-sharing across the humanitarian-development nexus.

DESIGNING A DATA-DRIVEN PRIORITIZATION MODEL

TRANSITIONING FROM STATUS-BASED TO NEEDS-BASED HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The prioritization model in Uganda is widely acknowledged by partners, as well as UNHCR and WFP alike, as a significant step in achieving a challenging paradigm shift: transitioning from status-based to needs-based humanitarian assistance. Country office colleagues highlighted the scale of this shift and cost-efficiency of the model, which simultaneously allows refugee needs and available resources to be balanced. The fact that the model is strongly data-driven[9] was also appreciated.

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[9] The term data-driven is used in alignment with the WFP-UNHCR Joint Guidance for Targeting of Assistance, see page 52: "Implementing targeted assistance based on a data-driven targeting approach (demographic/categorical or Proxy Means Testing (PMT)), where individuals are identified for assistance from a database based on specific characteristics, differs from a community-based approach where the community in collaboration with partners select those most vulnerable and in need of assistance."

WFP and UNHCR colleagues in both Kampala and field offices, as well as the refugees consulted for this learning review, perceived that the model had a limited ability to identify the most vulnerable households (i.e. those that should be in category 1) and, even greater limitations in identifying the least vulnerable households (i.e. those that should be in category 3). Refugees and country office colleagues highlighted that category 3 did not, in their opinion, fully succeed in identifying the least vulnerable households[10] but rather excluded vulnerable households from assistance. Refugees conveyed a preference for removing Category 3 and providing assistance - albeit in smaller amounts - to all refugees. Throughout the review, significant concerns were expressed with regard to the adequacy of the categorical criteria used to identify category 3.

Country office and field colleagues highlighted challenges in data collection and the need for greater inclusion of refugee perspectives in decision-making. These factors, discussed further below, were identified as possible reasons for the model's perceived limitations in accurately identifying the most and least vulnerable households. Field colleagues requested a more context-specific prioritization model, taking into account the differences in vulnerability across camps.

Country office colleagues highlighted that the prioritization model was a useful tool to undertake the transition from status to needs-based assistance, as requested by donors and with the resources available at the time. Whether this type of model will still be fit for purpose in the future is something that needs to be carefully assessed over time.

INCLUDING REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES IN MODEL DESIGN

The prioritization model was built both on quantitative and qualitative data. Focus group discussions were conducted in different locations in Uganda to validate the results of the quantitative analysis and to identify additional relevant eligibility criteria which were directly included in the prioritization model.[11]

There is consensus among country office colleagues, however, that the views of the refugees were not sufficiently incorporated in the process of decision-making. In particular, with regard to the decision on the type of prioritization model and its design, it is understood that refugees would not have advised using such a heavily data-driven model.

The definition of vulnerability used in the prioritization model was clearly confusing for many refugees and at odds with their own perceptions of vulnerability. For refugees, vulnerability was frequently conflated with the well-established concepts used by UNHCR of 'people with specific needs' (PSNs) and 'extremely vulnerable individuals' (EVIs). Some refugees explained that they had understood that people recognized as PSNs and EVIs (sometimes referred to as elderly, disabled, single mothers, etc.) would necessarily be in category 1, and the fact that they observed that this had not been the case caused them to doubt the verity of the categorization process.

The refugees consulted for this learning review confirmed their preference to include community leaders in the design of the prioritization model and requested their involvement. In one of the discussions with refugees, they suggested however that the prioritization exercise should not follow a purely community-based approach, as they understand this would come with shortcomings as well, but to take into account the views of community leaders and representatives to a greater degree, especially with regard to the appropriateness of different prioritization models. Exploring alternative combinations of targeting models that further involve community leaders and representatives in the design of the model, as is the case in other countries such as Niger, should be considered.

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[10] WFP and UNHCR country offices have to date called Category 3 households 'self-reliant' households. However, the methodology to identify these households is constructed on vulnerability criteria designed to identify the least vulnerable households, rather than those which can be considered to be 'self-reliant'. Colleagues stated that in the next phase this is likely to change in the next phase of prioritization and category 3 will be called 'least vulnerable' rather than 'self-reliant'.

[11] 104 consultation sessions were held in 7 refugee settlements (Nov 2022). For further details see: Phase 3 of WFP food assistance prioritisation in Uganda, Community consultation report.

MIXED METHODS - COMBINING QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DATA

The prioritization model in Uganda is an example of how both quantitative and qualitative data can be harnessed to build an evidence-based, people-centred model. The way statistical models were combined with qualitative consultations with communities, taking into account age, gender and diversity factors, is a good practice that other operations are also steering towards.

To build such a heavily data-driven methodology, the confidence in the quality of the data needs to be high. Country office and field colleagues, as well as refugees and OPM, however conveyed concerns regarding the quality of the collected data, which may have impacted the effectiveness and acceptance of the model.

DATA COLLECTION LIMITATIONS

Refugees conveyed that they were very familiar with the survey questions used to collect outcome data, particularly for those related to expenditures and food consumption, and that they understood how these questions were used to determine the assistance they receive. Additionally, one refugee reported that, when responding to the survey, the enumerator refused to report the responses the refugee was providing, considering them impossible to be true according to his observations (i.e. the respondent was stating he had consumed cereals only once in the previous week, but the enumerator recorded a different response than the one provided).

This suggests possible distortions in the collection of outcome data in recent needs assessments in Uganda, including the Individual Profiling Exercise (IPE) sample assessment, which might have weakened the data quality of these assessments. These distortions can be attributed to the protracted refugee situation in Uganda, where refugees have lived in the same settlements for decades, often across multiple generations. The construction of the model's index, based on this type of self-reported outcome data, as well as the Category 3 profiles, built from a statistical relation with expenditure[12], might have suffered from these distortions and could partially explain the concerns raised by refugees on the ability of the model to identify the most and the least vulnerable. Exploring an alternative vulnerability framework, such as the Multidimensional Deprivation Index (MDDI), and ensuring the surveyors visit the shelter of the households being surveyed to include observation data (such as assets ownership, shelter quality, etc.), could be a possible way forward. The suitability of an index model so heavily built on statistical analysis of outcome data could also be reconsidered.

It should be noted that in contexts where data quality might be limited, the importance of having robust appeals processes in place cannot be underestimated. An adequately resourced appeals process could help rectify some of the implementation errors incurred through issues with data quality. See the section below on the 'Prioritization Review Mechanism' for more details about managing appeals.

Of note, country office colleagues from both agencies reported their confidence in the quality of registration data in proGres, while nevertheless raising concerns about the quality of the socio-economic data collected in the 10 percent sample survey of the IPE.

> ### LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS
> - Combining quantitative and qualitative data in the design of the prioritization model is considered good practice and this approach was central to the model used in Uganda.
> - A data-driven model requires high confidence in the quality of the data used. When data quality is limited, exploring alternative models that combine both data-driven and community-based methods and strengthening the appeals systems is recommended.

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[12] To note, the model used professions which were chosen based on a lasso regression against expenditure data.

COMMUNICATING A DATA-DRIVEN PRIORITIZATION MODEL

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

The difficulty of communicating and understanding a complex and data-driven prioritization model was raised as a key concern by colleagues both in the field and in Kampala. This inherent challenge was compounded by fears that refugees' knowledge of the model may result in them manipulating their registration data (in order to positively affect their eligibility for assistance), resulting in a decision to withhold certain technical details of the model, even with partners working on prioritization.[13]

It is important to note that the assumption that refugees may manipulate their registration data has not been tested. NGOs have expressed a 'principled pushback' against this idea.

> *"If we really believe people will self-harm or harm a child in order to get US$3 per month, show us the evidence. Otherwise we need to end the rhetoric that refugees are adept at manipulating the system, or we need to see it not as cynical manipulation but as a desperate and negative coping mechanism."* - NGO representative.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRIORITIZATION MODEL

Due to challenges in communicating the model, most of those consulted during this learning review - except for some technical staff within WFP and UNHCR - reported difficulty in understanding the technical details of the approach, including how vulnerability was calculated and how refugee households were categorized. This was true for many UNHCR and WFP staff, both in Kampala and field offices, as well as OPM staff and NGO partners, community leaders, and refugees themselves. One government official expressed dissatisfaction that they were "not privy to that information", stating it was "left in private", despite the fact that they were key stakeholders in the process. Several field and country office colleagues admitted they did not understand how the model worked, reflecting the difficulty of explaining it to external partners and, by extension, to refugees.

Country office colleagues emphasized that the communication regarding the model's cut-off score was particularly misunderstood and damaged trust with some partners, who did not recognize the vulnerability-driven foundation of the model. Partners and some country office colleagues reported being unaware of the fact that the model was built on socio-economic vulnerability indicators, including food consumption, as these outcome indicators did not appear as eligibility criteria after the correlation analysis had been conducted. Overall, there was much confusion about the definition of vulnerability on which the model is based, with WFP perceiving it as being heavily protection-focused, while conversely some NGO partners perceived the model as *not* adequately inclusive of protection-related factors such as disability, age, gender and caring responsibilities within the household. It is important to note that, in reality, the

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[13] According to UNHCR, this decision was primarily motivated by concerns on the part of WFP.

prioritization model is based on a vulnerability definition[14] which combines both food insecurity and protection concerns, but this is little understood.

The refugees consulted stated that the details of how the prioritization methodology worked, including how eligibility was determined, had not been explained to them, except for the fact that it was based on vulnerability.

MANAGING TRADE-OFFS

The difficulty in communicating a complex, statistically built prioritization method is inherent to this type of model. This difficulty, combined with the fears around refugees potentially manipulating their registration data, meant that the technical details of the model were not widely shared.

There is an opportunity to better communicate the technical details of the model to colleagues, partners and donors through technical briefs and dedicated meetings, as well as to be more transparent with communities about the eligibility criteria on which the model is based. Country office colleagues acknowledged that providing clear, detailed explanations of how the final prioritization model works and the reasons for its selection would have helped address some of the identified shortcomings. Although communicating this type of model is challenging and requires significant effort, it is still essential to do so.

In summary, difficulty in communication is an intrinsic trade-off of this type of model. If the trade-offs are deemed not acceptable in this specific context, or if the benefits do not outweigh the drawbacks, alternative prioritization models should be considered.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- When choosing a prioritization approach, the ease of communication and its potential risks and repercussions should be carefully considered and then monitored. For example, it would be useful to monitor whether or not there is evidence of fraud (through refugees manipulating their registration data).

- If a complex, statistically-based prioritization method is chosen, as in Uganda, efforts should be made to transparently communicate the model's technical details to colleagues, partners and donors through technical briefs and dedicated meetings, as well being open and transparent with communities about the associated eligibility criteria.

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[14] As noted in footnote 1, vulnerability was defined as per WFP's Essential Needs Assessment guidelines and UNHCR-WFP Joint Analytical Framework guidance

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PROCESS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

UNHCR, WFP, OPM and partners dedicated considerable time and resources to communicating with communities, resulting in a wide-reaching and well-structured process of community engagement (despite some of the inherent challenges in communicating the model, as described above). Key messages were created as part of a jointly developed communications strategy that was also accompanied by a 'Frequently Asked Questions' document, ensuring that messaging was consistent. The people consulted during this review reported that significant efforts were made to reach out to all groups of refugees, across all geographic areas.

> *"Using community consultations and learning how to explain the process to refugees was a gamechanger."* - WFP country office

Refugees recalled that teams had visited their villages to discuss the upcoming prioritization process and its rationale. One community leader also reported that she was part of a group of refugee representatives from various settlements that were invited to travel to Kampala to discuss the prioritization process with UNHCR and WFP. This was likely part of the Refugee Engagement Forum, which has been recognized as a good practice for refugee participation in decision-making. However, while community leaders were undoubtedly involved and informed about prioritization, some were apparently reluctant to relay messages, including around the PRM, reporting that they did not want to "share bad news" with their communities.

Verbal communication was mainly used in exchanging with community leaders, such as through in-person meetings and consultations, and some colleagues consulted highlighted that this was a highly time-consuming and resource-intensive process. They questioned whether channels (such as information points in the settlements) could have been better utilized to ease the burden on staff, particularly partners. Other colleagues consulted had doubts about whether marginalized groups were properly represented in focus group discussions and whether this could have been improved, however the validity of this concern could not be explored further within the scope of this learning review.

TIMELINESS OF COMMUNICATION

Overall, adequate time was given to communicate about the prioritization process, with community engagement taking place over a period of several months. However many people consulted, including both staff and refugees, considered that not enough time was given to inform each individual household of their new categorization (and thus eligibility for assistance) for phase 3 of the prioritization process. While WFP and UNHCR reported that SMS messages were sent out from May 2023 onwards to those households that had registered their phone numbers (i.e. 2 months before changes to assistance were implemented), most refugees consulted described only being informed of the changes either during the June distribution (i.e. 1 month before) or during the July distribution itself, when the new lists came into effect.

> *"June 2023 is when we got the information. After we got our ration, we were told 'here is your categorization, don't come back for a ration in July.'"* - Woman refugee in Category 3, Rwamwanja settlement.

For those refugees affected, people described being 'in shock' when they realized their rations would be significantly reduced at such short notice (for category 2) or stopped altogether (for category 3). The timeliness of communication concerning changes to ration levels could have been improved, ideally providing a minimum of 3 months' notice to households, in order to give them adequate time to absorb the information and to take informed and timely decisions.

REFUGEES' UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROCESS AND RATIONALE

Most refugees consulted during this learning review acknowledged that there had been wide-reaching communications about prioritization and that they had a broad understanding of the process, rationale and drivers behind it. Many refugees consulted during focus group discussions expressed that they had understood that prioritization would occur, that differentiated assistance would be provided, and that a lack of funding was the cause for this shift in approach.

Some refugees consulted stated that they knew that the IPE data was used as the basis for categorization in phase 3 (though this was only understood later, after IPE data had been collected). Some also knew that they needed to update their registration data (with OPM) if their situation changed, as this could affect their categorization, though many refugees consulted seemed unaware of this. One refugee consulted who had tried to update their data with OPM described this as 'difficult' due to long queues, reporting that they were told to come back the next day, 'got tired' and eventually gave up.

Overall, despite refugees having a solid comprehension of the prioritization process and rationale,[15] a number of misconceptions remain, causing confusion about how vulnerability was determined and how categories were assigned to households. The challenges refugees faced in understanding the technical details of the model are explored above.

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LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Considerable planning, staff time and resources are required for community engagement and this was successfully achieved.

- Regular consultations with communities should be conducted, particularly when implementing any changes to the prioritization model (such as reprioritization) but also throughout implementation, so that community perspectives can be integrated and feedback can be provided to communities if a different approach is taken.

- Households that will see their level of assistance decrease due to (re)prioritization should ideally be given a minimum of 3 months' notice to give them adequate time to prepare. Timelines for (re)prioritization should take into account this notice period.

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PRIORITIZATION REVIEW MECHANISM (PRM)

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE JOINT MECHANISM

Close collaboration between UNHCR, WFP, OPM and NGO partners in the establishment of a joint review mechanism is seen as a success by all key stakeholders consulted as part of this learning exercise. The process of developing the PRM was also viewed by country office colleagues in Kampala as a positive experience, one that felt genuinely collaborative, where they were able to find ways to compromise through shared analysis and decision-making. At the same time, UNHCR and WFP field teams indicated that they should have been involved earlier on in the design of the PRM. The perception is that involving field teams as well as partner staff earlier in the process would have helped to design tools and processes that are more fit for purpose.

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[15] Initially there was a misconception for some refugees that if they no longer received assistance (category 3) would cease to have the legal status of being a refugee. This fear was successfully allayed and refugees consulted understood the difference between legal status and receiving assistance.

Another suggestion mentioned by field teams was to explore the decentralisation of the PRM so that settlement-level committees could take decisions on recategorizations, rather than a Kampala-based team, giving field teams more flexibility and say in the process.

RECATEGORIZATIONS

As a result of the PRM, 1,191 households (7,716 individuals) were recategorized and started receiving assistance accordingly, mostly category 3 households moving to category 2. This included 101 emergency cases facing severe food insecurity and protection risks that were identified and referred by field teams during the initial phase of the PRM.[16] These recategorizations focused on refugee households that were systematically miscategorized by the prioritization approach (correcting some exclusion errors related to the design of the prioritization approach).[17]

UNHCR and WFP staff in Kampala highlighted these recategorizations as an important accomplishment in the context of limited funding. However, while field staff indicated that the existence of the PRM raised refugees' expectations, both field staff and refugees emphasised that only very few households saw their requests for recategorization addressed successfully in the end.

As Kampala-level colleagues pointed out, an important reason why only a very small number of households received a positive response to their request for recategorization was the very limited resource buffer that was put aside for increased food assistance to households whose requests were successful. UNHCR colleagues mentioned that the size of this buffer was not clarified until the very end of the appeals process. Moreover, due to the limited resource buffer available, requests for recategorization from category 3 households were prioritized, while almost all category 2 households that submitted a request were given a negative response. Among the 21,000 requests that were received through the PRM, approximately 70 percent came from category 2 and 30 percent from category 3.

Lastly, the total number of requests also raises a question: why have there been only around 21,000 requests out of a total of about 400,000 households (5%), while other operations see between 15 and 40% of households submit such a request? In the learning workshop in Kampala, it was mentioned that the unsuccessful phase 2 appeals process may have limited refugees' trust in the PRM of phase 3, thereby reducing the number of requests submitted.

RESPONSIVENESS

With the exception of the above-mentioned recategorizations through the PRM, no other changes in vulnerability category have been made since the start of phase 3 implementation in July 2023. With the next reprioritization happening at the earliest in March 2025, this means that vulnerability categorizations will have been frozen for almost two years for the vast majority of refugee households. Nonetheless, since WFP's food assistance is provided per person, any changes in registration data that affect a household's size (e.g. registration of a newborn) have led to respective changes in assistance at household level, a recognized good practice.

Field staff repeatedly raised the importance of increasing the responsiveness of the PRM, especially for highly vulnerable households that were incorrectly categorized at the outset of the prioritization process, as well as for those whose vulnerability increases significantly after experiencing a shock. Country offices should consider giving refugees more regular opportunities to have their categorization reviewed (either

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[16] Excluding the emergency cases, 1,090 households changed category: 20 households (105 individuals) moved from category 2 to category 1, 2 households (17 individuals) moved from category 3 to category 1, and 1,002 households (6,670 individuals) moved from category 3 to category 2. Among the emergency cases, 87 households (529 individuals) moved from category 3 to category 2, and 14 households (65 individuals) moved from category 3 to category 1.

[17] The country offices developed a new tool, serving as an alternative inclusion pathway to refine the results of the primary targeting methodology, focusing on indicators where protection risks and food insecurity strongly converged. This tool was applied to proGres data in November 2023 (and hence considered any changes in registration (data since the prioritization master list was established in March 2023).

through an open-ended PRM window or by opening the PRM at more regular intervals[18]), as this would reduce highly vulnerable households' exposure to the risks of negative coping strategies.

While field teams noted that immediate responses were given to refugees who requested to submit a claim without providing significant reasons, both field teams and refugees emphasised that it took too long – between 4 and 7 months[19] – for responses to be provided to households that had submitted a request through the PRM, meaning that concerned households had to wait at least 4 months for their categorization (and associated assistance level) to be corrected.[20]

The country offices clarified that while responses were available after 4 months, it was challenging to communicate to all community members that they could access their response, e.g. by approaching a help desk. This was especially challenging since the PRM started receiving requests at the same time as changes were made to households' assistance. While the PRM window was open during a three-month time period between July and September 2023, in the future country offices should consider opening the PRM window – and receiving, processing and responding to requests, to the extent possible – before any changes are made to refugees' assistance.

In focus group discussions with refugees in Rwamwanja, numerous participants indicated not having received a response at all. Field staff in Rwamwanja pointed out that the slow responses and small number of recategorizations had diminished refugees' trust in the PRM.

Kampala-based staff suggested that responses should be provided more quickly, especially to the critical cases mentioned above who received their response (and were recategorized, where relevant) at the same time as other households.[21]

RESOURCING

As part of the key messaging on the prioritization and the PRM, refugees have been repeatedly encouraged to keep their registration data on family composition and specific needs up to date, as part of UNHCR's continuous registration[22] and also because data updates can potentially influence a household's categorization (correcting implementation exclusion errors). However, in focus group discussions held with refugees in Rwamwanja, many participants did not seem to understand the link between their registration data and their household's categorization. Field staff in Rwamwanja indicated that refugees seemed to have prioritized submitting a request through the PRM over having their registration data updated, as they didn't fully understand the importance of the latter. Among those refugees who understood the link and attempted to update their data, some reported difficulties, such as long queues when trying to submit their requests or not receiving any follow-up after successfully submitting them.

Field staff highlighted that the teams on the ground, especially protection partner caseworkers, were overwhelmed during both the reception and follow-up of requests, resulting in only limited updates to specific needs data[23]. Both field staff and refugees emphasised the importance of conducting household visits to better understand household vulnerability levels. Even though OPM and NGO partners were

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[18] For example, every 6 or 12 months.

[19] In contexts where an appeals process ensures the updating of appellant households' registration data on family composition and specific needs, operations usually aim to provide responses as soon as possible, ideally within one month. However, considering the time required to follow up on appeals and endorse changes in vulnerability category for successful appellants, especially during the initial peak of the appeals process, operations may instead aim to provide responses no later than two months after an appeal was submitted. If the PRM in Uganda is adapted in the future to integrate procedures that ensure appellant households' registration data is up to date, the above-mentioned response timeframes could be considered.

[20] Field staff in Rwamwanja pointed out that these delayed responses led to civil unrest after 3-4 months.

[21] One way to do this would be to identify critical cases earlier in the process, before changes are made to households' assistance, and to keep their assistance level unchanged until their situation has been reviewed.

[22] Continuous registration refers to the updating and verifying of records that takes place as part of day-to-day case management activities over time. See UNHCR – Guidance on Registration and Identity Management

[23] Field staff and refugees also mentioned that a more detailed PRM intake form would have helped to understand what further follow-up may be necessary to address people's claims.

supported with financing for additional staffing, staff capacity increases were limited and some of these staff members dropped off contract early, i.e. before responses could be provided to refugees. Importantly, to address some of these challenges, various settlements have conducted or are soon to conduct PSN verification exercises so that specific needs data is updated by the time the next reprioritization is implemented.

To ensure the effectiveness of the PRM, it should be resourced appropriately. This includes ensuring sufficient registration and case management capacity so that family composition and specific needs data can be updated as needed, thereby affecting household's categorization. Partner staff pointed out that staff capacity increases should be agreed and planned ahead of time to ensure timely and predictable financing. The other resourcing aspect to consider, as discussed above, is the importance of a predictable and adequately sized resource buffer to allow for the recategorization of, and proper assistance delivery to, incorrectly categorized households.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- A robust appeals process helps address different types of exclusion errors. As the Uganda country offices have been relying on proGres data for the categorization of households, it is essential to ensure appellant households' registration data on family composition and specific needs is up to date (to correct implementation exclusion errors), while also addressing exclusion errors related to the design of the prioritization approach.

- To ensure the effectiveness of an appeals process, it should be adequately resourced – not only in terms of sufficient registration and case management capacity but also with a sufficiently sized resource buffer to ensure recategorized households can be included in assistance lists. The level of resourcing should be decided considering key factors such as the expected exclusion errors (as calculated through quantitative error analyses) and the quality of the registration data used.

- It is important for humanitarian agencies and their donors to acknowledge the value of a robust appeals process and to ensure appropriate budget allocation to support its effectiveness.

- Households should be provided with timely and regular opportunities to appeal, ensuring that their current vulnerability level, including any significant changes over time, is taken into account. This will also enhance the shock-responsiveness of the approach. While the appeals window should open before any changes are made to people's assistance, households with open appeals should not see their assistance decrease until their appeals have been followed up on and responded to.

- Timely responses to appellants are essential to reduce the exposure of highly vulnerable households to the risks of negative coping strategies.

CONCLUSION

The roll-out of the prioritization approach for food assistance in July 2023 represents a strategic change in the delivery of household-level assistance in Uganda. Throughout the learning review, it was widely acknowledged that prioritization had been achieved through exceptional collaboration, planning, and implementation between OPM, WFP, and UNHCR and by placing importance on the need to actively communicate with and engage affected communities. OPM's leadership and the engagement of key partners led to a relatively smooth prioritization roll-out, with no major negative impacts on safety and security.

WFP and UNHCR were driven to pursue this prioritization approach largely due to the external pressures of reducing resources and the increasing demands from donor partners. Though these factors were the catalyst, prioritization was also considered important as an effort to shift away from dependency on humanitarian assistance and to promote a model that recognizes refugees' diverse needs and vulnerabilities. Changing the status quo in such a fundamental manner is never easy, however once the process was set in motion, WFP and UNHCR country offices managed to implement prioritization of food assistance under relatively tight timelines. It was nevertheless acknowledged that prioritization (or rather targeting) of assistance should have been implemented earlier, at a time when Ugandan refugee operations were fully funded and thus identified needs could have been met. Thus, prioritization arguably came too late, resulting in significant pressure being put on WFP and UNHCR to rapidly prioritise food assistance, even in the absence of a clear vision and viable exit strategy for humanitarian assistance, or comprehensive opportunities for refugees to fully self-sustain.

The importance of the shift from status-based to needs-based assistance should not be underestimated. Transitioning to this new and relatively complex approach has required huge efforts, with implications for other humanitarian organizations and the Ugandan government. This transition should be seen as a strategic issue which requires collective responsibility and burden sharing across the humanitarian-development nexus in order to support refugees in becoming increasingly self-reliant and less dependent on humanitarian assistance. While WFP and UNHCR play a role in this transition, the vision of greater refugee self-reliance necessitates the involvement and commitment of a broader range of stakeholders – including government and development actors - over a relatively long timeframe.

In terms of the prioritization model adopted, the fact that it is strongly data-driven was greatly appreciated and the index-based approach offers many advantages from a technical perspective. However, choosing this complex approach necessarily involves a trade-off in terms of reduced transparency and ease of communication with communities and partners. This inherent challenge was compounded by fears that refugees' knowledge of the model may result in them manipulating their registration data (in order to positively affect their eligibility for assistance), resulting in a decision to withhold sharing certain technical details of the model.

Consequently, the majority of people consulted during this learning review, with the exception of some technical staff within WFP and UNHCR, reported having difficulty understanding the technical details of the prioritization approach, from how vulnerability was calculated to how refugee households were categorized. More could have been done to explain the index-based prioritization approach to all involved and to integrate their perspectives into the design of the model, and country offices are keen to do this in the next phase.

With regard to appeals, despite the presence of the PRM and the combined efforts to jointly establish this, a robust and responsive appeals process and capacity are still lacking. To ensure the effectiveness of an appeals process, it should be resourced appropriately – not only in terms of sufficient registration and case management capacity but also an adequately sized resource buffer so that re-categorized households can be included on assistance lists. WFP, UNHCR, and their donor partners should prioritize a robust appeals process and ensure sufficient resources are allocated to support it effectively. Prioritizing the delivery of assistance over accountability is not advisable, as both are essential to ensuring effective and equitable support for vulnerable households.

Throughout the prioritization process, WFP and UNHCR have demonstrated their responsiveness to a changing environment, their openness to learning, and commitment to continuous improvement, an approach that will be invaluable when revising the prioritization strategy in the future. It is hoped that this learning review will contribute to informing the ongoing response in Uganda, not only for WFP and UNHCR, but also for other partners and stakeholders involved.

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NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here are based on a learning review conducted by the Joint Hub in October 2024, inclusive of an in-country mission to Uganda (13-18 October) that included sessions in both Kampala and Rwamwanja.

The learning review was facilitated by a Joint Hub team of five, four of which were directly involved in providing technical and coordination support to WFP and UNHCR country operations during the course of the prioritization process (from 2021-2024).

The information is drawn from the following sources:

- Available literature and documentation (see bibliography)
- Key informant interviews or discussions with:
    - WFP and UNHCR (senior management, technical, field staff, Cash Working Group)

- o   Government of Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), both in Kampala and Mbarara
- o   Donors (Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO), UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), United States Agency for International Development (USAID))
- o   NGOs (Alight, AVSI, Danish Refugee Council, Humanitarian INGO Forum (HINGO), Humanity and Inclusion, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran World Federation, Norwegian Refugee Council, Uganda Cash Consortium, World Vision International) both in Kampala and Rwamwanja
- 6 Focus group discussions with over 80 refugees in Rwamwanja, community leaders and men and women from categories 1, 2 and 3 (15 October 2024)
- Workshops to gather, share and sense-check learning:
  - o   Online workshop with WFP and UNHCR staff based in field offices across Uganda (Arua, Adjumani, Moyo, Rwamwanja, Yumbe) and online survey with field staff (8 October 2024)
  - o   Rwamwanja in-person half-day workshop with WFP and UNHCR staff, OPM and NGO partners (14 October 2024)
  - o   Kampala in-person full day workshop with WFP and UNHCR staff (17 October 2024)
  - o   Debriefing with WFP and UNHCR senior management and staff (18 October and 1 November)

The learning presented here is based on the information collected, as well as the direct experience of the Joint Hub team.

ABOUT THE UNHCR-WFP JOINT HUB

The UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub (Joint Hub) is a dynamic collaboration between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), building on a long-standing partnership between the two agencies to enhance assistance and outcomes for refugees and forcibly displaced people. Created in April 2020, with support from the United States of America's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), the Joint Hub has actively supported UNHCR and WFP in addressing some of the world's largest displacement crises.

Countries in which the Joint Hub has been engaged to date: Bangladesh, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, DRC, Egypt, Kenya, Lebanon, Jordan, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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