

SOUTH SUDAN LEARNING REVIEW 2025

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



JOINT PROGRAMME EXCELLENCE AND TARGETING HUB



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub (Joint Hub) team expresses its gratitude to the UNHCR and WFP staff in South Sudan for their invaluable contributions to and participation in this learning review.

DISCLAIMER

This review draws on the experience of the Joint Hub in South Sudan. Publication of this document does not imply endorsement by WFP or UNHCR of the opinions expressed.

This learning review looks back at the targeting and prioritization process from 2023 to early 2025, identifying strengths and good practices, while also highlighting gaps in standards and practices.

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INTRODUCTION

This document captures learning from the collaboration between the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the targeting of food assistance for refugees in South Sudan, implemented since 2024.

The review was conducted by the UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub (Joint Hub) in May-June 2025, during which interviews and discussions were held with staff from WFP and UNHCR in South Sudan (*details on methodology at the end of document*).

The process sought to identify what has worked well and why, and what challenges were faced throughout the process. This report aims to distil lessons learned from the targeting process - by identifying good practice and areas for improvement - in order to inform future collaboration between WFP and UNHCR in South Sudan, 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

South Sudan hosts over 585,000 refugees and asylum seekers (as of June 2025, [UNHCR](#)), of which 95 percent are from Sudan. In addition to refugees, many South Sudanese nationals who were living in Sudan have now returned home. Since the outbreak of the Sudan crisis in 2023, more than one million people have sought safety in South Sudan, 70 percent of whom are South Sudanese returnees.

Even prior to the Sudan crisis, the needs of displaced people have been far greater than the funding available. Already in April 2021, WFP's food rations for refugees were reduced to 50 percent. WFP and UNHCR agreed that a harmonised targeting approach was required so that food assistance could be delivered to refugees based on their vulnerability. In 2023, a joint assessment and community consultations were conducted, and a targeting approach was developed based on this data. The targeting approach was rolled out as the Sudan crisis continued, meaning that the needs of both the protracted refugee caseload and the new arrivals had to be taken into the account.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TARGETING APPROACH

The approach included geographic and household-level targeting with eight initial eligibility criteria that correlated highly with vulnerability. Country offices analyzed the prevalence of combinations of these criteria using UNHCR's proGres registration data while also considering WFP's available budget.

After assessing several scenarios, five criteria most closely associated with household vulnerability were selected and used to identify 'prioritized groups.' These prioritized groups—as well as new arrivals—were targeted to receive food rations throughout the year and were known as the 'protection top-up' group.

All other refugee households, i.e. those not meeting these eligibility criteria, received food assistance only during the location-specific lean season (ranging from four to eight months, starting May 2024).

The final eligibility criteria used to identify those receiving the protection top-up were:

1. Households with member(s) suffering from chronic illness
2. Households with member(s) with disabilities
3. Child-headed households
4. Elderly-headed households or elderly living alone
5. Households with children at risk or unaccompanied children

In 2025, due to severe funding constraints, country operations implemented more restrictive targeting measures, limiting the food assistance to only the most vulnerable groups, i.e. those targeted for protection top-ups and new arrivals. All other refugees, including those who had received support during the lean season in 2024, no longer received food assistance in 2025.



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

A. COLLABORATION

The roll-out of the targeting approach in 2024, and the subsequent further prioritization in 2025, were successfully implemented and represent a strategic step-change in the delivery of household-level assistance in South Sudan. Overall, the joint effort underscored the value of collaborative problem-solving, proactive communication, and inclusive planning in complex operational contexts.

It is important to note that the targeting process was implemented concurrently with the Sudan crisis and the influx of people into South Sudan. This undoubtedly affected collaboration efforts as staff had to wear “multiple hats” while responding to the emergency and managing competing priorities.

UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION AT TECHNICAL AND STRATEGIC LEVELS

The collaboration between WFP, UNHCR, and the Joint Hub was largely effective, demonstrating strong complementarity despite institutional differences, staff turnover, high workloads, and differing agency priorities.

For example, early in the process, the two agencies reached an agreement on targeting criteria that identified those most in need, while also considering WFP’s budget constraints. This critical milestone was achieved through regular dialogue and compromise, often facilitated by the Joint Hub.

Colleagues consulted for this learning review acknowledged that inter-agency collaboration introduced new complexities. Tensions and disagreements inevitably emerged on occasion, with “heated discussions” and strongly differing viewpoints. Nevertheless, those differences were navigated constructively, driven by a shared commitment to find solutions.

“Internally we do have our own system... but with other partners, there’s a need to accommodate different perspectives.”

“There have been gaps working with change of focal persons, but generally it’s been great work. Addressing solutions and challenges jointly was quite great.”

Gaps in coordination and decision-making

Despite strong collaboration, respondents acknowledged several inefficiencies. These included the absence of key decision-makers, overlapping priorities, heavy workloads, delays in feedback loops, and the frequent need for numerous meetings to reach agreement between the two agencies. As a result, translating data into action was often slow, with decision-making processes prolonged by each agency's internal procedures.

Staff's absence due to Rest and Recuperation (RnR) and high turnover were an added challenge, meaning that key people were often unavailable when decisions needed to be made.

“There were times where maybe we weren't the most efficient... the people you wanted in the meeting didn't show up.”

Effective collaboration did occur when the right individuals were involved. For instance, one dedicated colleague was praised for maintaining coordination efforts. While strong collaboration should ideally be standard practice, in reality, it often hinges on the presence of committed individuals—and this was the case in South Sudan.

Communication challenges and team dynamics

Communication between teams and agencies is of utmost importance, and some staff consulted stressed that this could have been improved. Some colleagues felt that during the onset of the collaboration, there were instances of dismissive behaviour by some colleagues and undervaluing of staff from their agency, which strained team cohesion.

In addition, while it is important to contextualise targeting approaches, some colleagues noted that during the process, in some locations, changes were introduced (such as additional targeting criteria) without consultation and agreement with staff elsewhere. This led to confusion and, it was felt, weakened the spirit of collaboration.

Data and systems challenges

Inconsistencies in beneficiary data across UNHCR and WFP systems were also described by people consulted for this review. Reportedly, UNHCR field teams record changes to registration data (such as births, deaths, etc.) in real-time in proGres, and based on this, UNHCR Juba creates the distribution lists that are shared to WFP. Meanwhile during distributions, it appeared that WFP's lists were missing some cases.

“Our (UNHCR's) data is live data... but it's not reflected in WFP's list... this always gives a challenge.”

UNHCR-WFP COLLABORATION AT FIELD LEVEL

Field-level collaboration was generally seen as strong, with WFP and UNHCR complementing each other during assessments. Initial technical design and fieldwork were conducted jointly and effectively. Field involvement in categorization made the process transparent and inclusive.

“With this one, I’ve seen that the engagement started right from the assessment... when we are still setting the stage.”

However, some people perceived collaboration between field teams and Juba-based colleagues as functional but constrained. And in one location where WFP withdrew its office presence, the gap was widely felt on the ground.

COLLABORATION WITH THE JOINT HUB

There was already a good working relationship between UNHCR and WFP, but this was cemented by the involvement of the Joint Hub. Almost all participants in this learning review commended the Joint Hub's diligent role in being persistent yet flexible, providing technical guidance without imposing, and for keeping momentum going whilst managing competing priorities, as well as high staff turnover.

“I think you guys did a really good job... if you guys weren’t there to keep pushing things along, it would have been a very different exercise.”

The Joint Hub was able to find middle ground for differing opinions of both agencies.

“You guys have been very incessant in following up... bringing two different bodies with different interests together.”

Documentation was considered to be very good. During WFP’s 2024 audit, one of the findings was that the Joint Hub-led documentation was “thoroughly maintained” and appeared as a good practice within WFP.

ENGAGEMENT WITH PARTNERS

Government partners, such as the Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA), and NGOs were involved throughout and have been part and parcel of the process, particularly in community engagement and help desks. Though partners were heavily involved in implementation, their engagement in design and decision-making appeared limited. UNHCR and WFP staff reflected on whether consultation with partners could have been deeper and more meaningful, given that they are at the forefront of engagement with refugees.

“Partners were present, but often just relayed what we said—they didn’t have a say in the outcome.”

Interestingly, the two NGO partners consulted (one each of UNHCR and WFP) did not mention this as a gap during the targeting process but assured that they were meaningfully engaged.

Security coordination was led by the Government, boosting legitimacy and community acceptance and contributing to safety in the camps. Having a joint CRA-WFP-UNHCR approach meant one single voice, supporting buy-in from partners and communities.

Strong coordination at multiple levels—including technical teams, field offices, and with government counterparts like the CRA—was key to ensuring community acceptance and safety. The structured, early, and inclusive engagement with community leaders, even before finalizing the targeting criteria, contributed to smoother implementation and greater trust. Regular joint technical calls, thematic coordination, and transparent stakeholder communication, particularly with a range of people within affected communities (not just their leaders), were identified as significant enablers of this process.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Sustainable collaboration must be built into agency structures and processes—not left to individual personalities. Accountability for effective collaboration and decision-making should be institutionalized so that staff turnover or absence have a minimal impact on joint processes.
- Joint planning processes must include technical staff, field colleagues, community representatives and other stakeholders from the outset to enhance acceptance and reduce resistance.
- Consistent engagement of leadership is essential to reinforce joint approaches, align with technical teams' recommendations and resolve inter-agency tensions. Internal coordination structures within each agency could be improved, to ensure management accountability as well.
- Targeting criteria must be jointly defined, clearly communicated, and consistently adhered to in order to maintain fairness.
- Joint responses must prioritize interoperable systems and real-time data sharing to ensure accuracy and operational efficiency.
- Given that blanket support to new arrivals triggered tensions with refugees in the protracted caseload, there is need to follow corporate guidelines from UNHCR and/or WFP¹ regarding targeting in emergencies, while contextualizing to the extent possible by engaging with local stakeholders, including the communities.

¹ [Considerations for prioritising humanitarian assistance](#)

B. EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

There was broad consensus that the targeting and prioritization process was grounded in robust evidence, drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative household assessments conducted in camps such as Yambio and Maban directly influenced key operational decisions, including the duration of blanket assistance and the thresholds for prioritization.

Generation of evidence was done through high-quality data analysis carried out collaboratively, with technical experts from both UNHCR and WFP playing a central role.

“It was largely evidence-based... both qualitative and quantitative.”

The findings were instrumental in ensuring that the targeting approach reflected the realities and opportunities within each camp. Data from both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys informed the process.

“We took correlations from the assessment... and tried to match them with targeting criteria.” “Based on our findings... Yambio came out clearly that the vulnerability level is lower than other camps.”

The Joint Hub played a key role in facilitating collaboration among technical colleagues, including econometricians, data analysts, and program staff. Its central role was especially critical given the high staff turnover in both agencies. The Joint Hub ensured continuity by maintaining documentation and facilitating the handover of key data and insights to incoming staff.

However, concerns were raised about the timeliness and static nature of the data. Some staff felt the data was outdated, lacking recent insights into household dynamics, economic conditions, and new arrivals. There was also a call for better contextualization of data, especially in light of the Sudan crisis.

“We often act like data speaks for itself, but context matters.”

The data successfully incorporated perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders, including refugee communities, humanitarian staff, donors, and government representatives.

“The community voices were really included.”

However, while refugees were consulted, the host community was often excluded from consultations. Some participants also noted that community engagement focused too heavily on leaders, which may have limited representativeness.

While the design was evidence-based, the implementation faced resistance, varying by location. For instance, Gorom adapted well due to existing livelihood opportunities, while Maban rejected the approach due to perceived gaps in how vulnerability was represented. Field officers noted that although there was the intention to respond to community feedback, resource constraints and corporate guidelines often hindered implementation.

“People say vulnerability is not just about disability.”

Despite the strong analytical foundation, some felt there was need to have a joint targeting governance structure set up to ensure alignment between technical recommendations and senior management decisions.

“We went through a lot of technical effort... and then the senior management wanted something totally different.”

Finally, post-implementation feedback mechanisms were found to be weak. For example, the coping strategies used by the community following the targeting implementation have not been adequately explored or used to inform revisions to the targeting criteria. A post-implementation review of the targeting/prioritization is yet to be conducted, limiting opportunities to understand the coping strategies that communities have adopted since the implementation of the targeting/prioritization.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Robust, mixed-method data collection and analysis can effectively guide targeting/prioritization decision-making:** The targeting and prioritization process was strongly grounded in evidence, using both qualitative and quantitative data. Technical collaboration between UNHCR and WFP ensured high-quality data analysis.
- **Data must be timely and contextualized to remain relevant and actionable:** While data for the exercise was comprehensive, some staff felt the data was outdated and lacked current insights, especially after the Sudan influx.
- **Inclusive consultation must go beyond leadership to capture broader community perspectives:** The process included diverse stakeholder voices, including refugee communities and donors. However, host communities were often excluded, and engagement focused too much on community leaders, potentially limiting representativeness.
- **While local context and flexibility are critical for successful design and implementation of targeting/prioritization, it is equally important to consider available resources and corporate guidelines on acceptable levels of food assistance.** Specifically, WFP recommends that rations do not fall below 70 percent of daily Kcals needed, taking households' own resources into account².
- **Clear governance structures within WFP and UNHCR are needed to bridge technical and managerial priorities.**
- **Continuous feedback loops – using both quantitative and qualitative data – are essential for adaptive programming.**

² See WFP, Nutritional Adequacy of Household Food assistance, Interim Policy Brief (January 2025) page 5. Internal document available at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000161802/download/>

C. COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

Collaboration between key actors

UNHCR and WFP teams in both Juba and at the field level agreed that collaboration between the two agencies, with partner organizations and the Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA), was positive. Partner organizations played a key role in the communication activities.

Some colleagues pointed out that communication and coordination between senior management in Juba and teams in the field could have been better, as key decisions were sometimes taken without the prior consultation of field teams.

Others suggested that colleagues from Juba should support initial communication with communities, especially before any major changes to the assistance, as this would show alignment between Juba and field teams and help to “reemphasize the key messages.”

Joint strategy and key messages

Key messages were mainly shared through community leaders, especially block leaders, and refugee committee members. Other communication channels such as radio, meetings with community members other than leaders, and posters were also used in some contexts. Protection and help desks were set up to respond to refugees’ questions, feedback and complaints.

Community leaders helped in the translation of the key messages so that these could be communicated in the refugees’ languages. The eligibility criteria were transparently shared with staff, partners and communities and as a result key stakeholders knew who would be eligible.

However, both Juba and field-level colleagues pointed out that the communication channels should have been diversified further to reach more community members with the key messages. Some colleagues noted that the key messages didn’t trickle down easily from the community leaders to the community members. And while radio was used in a few locations, some colleagues advocated for its use in other locations where it hadn’t been used, e.g. in Gorom.

Juba and field teams confirmed the importance of having a joint communication strategy and key messages in place, which were seen as crucial in ensuring a robust joint approach to communication with communities. The Joint Hub’s support in the development of the strategy and key messages was appreciated.

Community buy-in

Overall, Juba and field teams mostly indicated that communication with communities was carried out properly during initial implementation of the prioritization in 2024. However, the differing implementation timelines for the different camps had an impact on the communication process.

In the camps where prioritization was rolled out first, such as Gorom and Makpandu, there was little time for field teams to prepare and implement communication activities. Field colleagues emphasized that additional time should have been allocated to develop and deliver key messages, which would have strengthened community understanding and buy-in ahead of the rollout.

In Jamjang and Maban more time was available to communicate with communities as the first prioritized assistance distributions were implemented later in the year. This was especially helpful in Maban, where the situation has been more volatile compared to other regions.

Field colleagues in Maban explained that the extended period for communication with refugees - which was initiated in March while prioritization was implemented from September - significantly helped to raise community understanding and buy-in. Before the implementation of assistance prioritization, both agencies shared concerns about making changes to general food assistance in Maban, and refugee leaders responded negatively when first learning about the planned prioritization. However, the extended communication period helped to increase community understanding of the rationale behind the prioritization.

Even though community buy-in was still mixed by the time the first prioritized assistance distributions began, with some field colleagues saying it was “about 50/50”, the situation was sufficiently stable to allow for implementation. Despite the fact that community buy-in had increased at that point, additional security measures were nevertheless put in place.

In contrast, at the beginning of 2025, further prioritization of WFP’s food assistance faced strong resistance from communities in Maban, who had been hoping to receive blanket assistance once again as communication about the changes was delivered only shortly before the rollout. As a result of this resistance and strained relations with the community, WFP was forced to suspend general food distributions for the first three months of the year, resuming only in April.

Tension between new arrivals and the protracted caseload was also felt, with refugees who had been there longer feeling that they were given less preferential treatment.

***“Some Congolese refugees felt that Sudanese were prioritized...
that created a lot of tension.”***

New arrivals had high expectations and believed they should be fully taken care of by UNHCR. These differing expectations from both populations – new arrivals and the protracted caseload - meant additional efforts for community engagement were necessary. Furthermore, if new family members were added to households in the protracted caseload (family reunification), these changes were not always considered when assessing if households met the eligibility criteria.

Juba and field teams emphasized that early, transparent and regular communication are essential for community buy-in, otherwise the risks of rolling out in a volatile context are too high (e.g. distribution sites could be raided by refugees). Colleagues pointed out that key messaging before any major changes to assistance should start months in advance. Early, transparent and regular communication helped to build trust, increase understanding, and

manage community members' expectations, especially within the context of severe resource constraints.

Throughout the implementation of assistance prioritization in 2024 and 2025, refugees complained about the lack of livelihoods opportunities, especially in agriculture. Field colleagues emphasized that the livelihoods support was just “a drop in the bucket”. One colleague called it “reverse programming,” as the agencies have first implemented the prioritization of basic needs assistance, before increasing livelihoods opportunities (e.g. the negotiation of access to land).

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Joint strategy is essential:** A shared communication strategy and key messages ensured consistency and were valued by teams.
- **Broader communication channels are required:** Reliance on community leaders limited outreach; radio, posters, and direct meetings should be used more systematically.
- **Start early, be transparent, repeat often:** Camps with more lead time saw smoother rollouts. Last-minute communication caused resistance and suspension of assistance.
- **Community buy-in is fragile:** Even with extended engagement, acceptance was mixed, showing the need for continuous dialogue.
- **Link with livelihoods:** Refugees stressed the lack of opportunities; prioritization of general food assistance without parallel livelihoods support undermined acceptance (“reverse programming”).



D. JOINT APPEALS PROCESS

Advance verification of registration data

From February 2024, in advance of the implementation of prioritized assistance and the appeals process in the different camps, UNHCR and partner field teams made major efforts to update registration data, including protection and sociodemographic data, by carrying out vulnerability assessments. The intention was that initial household categorizations would be more accurate and field teams would therefore receive fewer appeals during implementation. According to UNHCR, field teams have been building on this approach to strengthen continuous registration activities, which will help to further improve the accuracy of the prioritization process.

While this advance verification exercise is seen as a success by colleagues across the board, field colleagues did point out that communication about the vulnerability assessments was somewhat confusing for refugees. Initial key messaging explained that these were routine registration data verifications. However, later communication clarified that the data would be used for the prioritization of WFP's food assistance, which led to a strong pushback from communities that ended up interrupting the verification process in some locations.

Despite these advance verification efforts, a significant number of refugees still came forward to appeal once the prioritization and appeals process was rolled out, according to field colleagues. Many of them were individuals with disabilities and older persons, requiring updates to protection data in proGres. Some colleagues expressed concern that not all highly vulnerable households that were mistakenly excluded had been identified, citing limited access to the appeals process by such households.

Confusion around design exclusion errors

Juba and field-level staff from both agencies weren't clear on how to respond to cases of highly vulnerable households that do not meet the eligibility criteria (so-called design exclusion errors). While the management of such cases was discussed during preparations for the appeals process, and the Joint Hub suggested potential solutions that were captured in the draft version of the joint appeals process Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), these measures were not taken on by the two country offices. As a result, there was confusion between teams of the two agencies on how to recategorize such households once prioritization was rolled out. Some colleagues suggested that the eligibility criteria should be reviewed and updated to include any missing vulnerability profiles.

Field colleagues advocated for increased livelihoods support to refugee households, especially to those who are vulnerable and able to work but not meeting the eligibility criteria, e.g. support to livestock rearing (such as goats) or start capital to launch small businesses. However, this type of support is not being provided sufficiently as it has been deprioritized due to resource constraints.

Effectiveness and staff capacities

The appeals process was more robust in some locations than others, according to various colleagues. For example, in Maban there has been good collaboration between UNHCR and WFP, and the overall process has gone well, as field teams highlighted. However, in other locations, such as Gorom and Makpandu, colleagues reported that the process has “not been up to standard”, that it has not been very effective, and that the response timeframe has been too long, leaving appellant households without assistance for several months.

Colleagues clarified that the effectiveness of the appeals process largely depends on the available staff capacities at a given location and the level of collaboration between the agencies (including their partners). Even in Maban, where the joint appeals process went relatively well, colleagues from both agencies reported that the UNHCR capacities for appeals follow-up have been “really overstretched”. As both agencies are in the process of downsizing their operations, this will have a significant impact on the joint appeals process, especially since appeals follow-up is a “resource-intensive task”, as a UNHCR field colleague pointed out.

There were differing views on how to handle the staffing constraints. While some colleagues insisted that no additional resources should be invested in an appeals process, others highlighted the lack of capacity as a major weakness and explained that without an appropriate investment in staff capacities, it is very challenging to ensure an effective and timely process.

Juba colleagues emphasized that the appeals process should have started earlier, before making any changes to refugees’ assistance. At the same time, field colleagues suggested that, while an open-ended appeals process is ideal, with the ongoing reductions in staff capacities, in the future the appeals process may have to open regularly at certain points in time for a limited period. In any case, it will be important to ensure there are regular opportunities for highly vulnerable households to access the appeals process as their situation may change over time and vulnerability levels can fluctuate significantly.

Data management

An important part of every joint appeals process is proper data management, including the recording of appeals, their referral and tracking. UNHCR and WFP teams had agreed to both use proGres for this purpose, and that WFP colleagues would get access to the data system to facilitate its joint use in the context of the appeals process. Staff from both agencies indicated, however, that while certain WFP colleagues were given access to proGres, and training of WFP staff was conducted, there was limited actual use of proGres by WFP colleagues.

Reasons for the limited use of proGres by WFP staff were not entirely clear. Some suggested that staff may have been overstretched due to limited capacity. Although some WFP staff did have access to proGres, WFP’s presence on the ground was very limited, with partner staff serving as the primary focal points at the field level.

Moreover, beyond the specifics of the joint appeals process, some colleagues also pointed out that more general feedback on the prioritization and appeals process should have been recorded, analyzed and regularly fed into decision-making processes more systematically. It was suggested that a dashboard with community voices should be created for this purpose.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Verification and communication:** Advance data checks (involving vulnerability assessments to verify registration data) improved accuracy but unclear messaging caused refugee confusion and resistance.
- **Appeals and access:** Many appeals, especially from persons with disabilities and older people, showed gaps in verification and barriers to access.
- **Design exclusion errors:** The absence of a clear approach for managing appeals from highly vulnerable but non-eligible households led to staff confusion. Proposed solutions in draft SOPs were not adopted, pointing to the need for clearer guidance and possible revision of eligibility criteria.
- **Staffing and collaboration:** Effectiveness of appeals processes varied by location, depending on staff capacity and UNHCR–WFP collaboration; appeals follow-up is resource-intensive.
- **Timing:** Appeals processes should begin before changes are made to assistance. It is critical to ensure regular opportunities for highly vulnerable households to submit appeals as situations change and vulnerability fluctuates.

E. LINKAGES WITH SELF-RELIANCE

A core concern shared by staff in WFP, UNHCR and partners has been that livelihood interventions were not delivered, despite being an agreed priority. Long-term solutions for refugees rely on availability of resources, conducive policies and a range of multisectoral players, all of which were lacking. During the joint efforts, supporting the transition should and could have been the focus, but the discussions failed to get enough traction within the agencies.

For this reason, due to the lack of other economic opportunities for refugees, people consulted for this review noted that the timing of the targeting exercise was problematic. As much as it was fit-for purpose considering the context and diminished funding, it could be considered not fit-for-purpose as building refugee capacity had not been done. This was especially problematic for the large number of refugees who were left without food assistance.

“Timing was the issue, since it came very late and took long for implementation. By the implementation time Sudan influx happened.”

“Purpose of targeting is understandable, but it was bit abrupt without necessary preparations for refugees’ empowerment.”

Staff consulted for this review felt that if the targeting process had started much earlier, and in a phased manner, including building livelihood opportunities, then it would have led to more success and greater community acceptance. The lack of alternatives to food assistance was thought to contribute to the push-back from the community, in certain locations, to the

targeting/prioritization approach. This was especially true in Maban in 2025, which initially saw complete rejection, with prioritization roll-out and food assistance paused for up to four months.

“The community didn’t see who wasn’t vulnerable... it was hard to distinguish for them.”

“We had not laid the foundation for this kind of approach... the community was not ready.”

“We have created a generation of people who have lived off aid... then we suddenly say, now you’re on your own.”

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Considerable time is needed to put in place a targeting approach, and this is especially true for prioritization.** Staggered implementation is necessary, to enable sufficient time for community preparation, and to ensure that the enabling environment and investments for livelihood opportunities are such that refugee resilience is built prior to roll-out of a targeted approach.

F. JOINT ADVOCACY

While some joint advocacy efforts have taken place, they are often inconsistent, ad hoc and not institutionalized. The current humanitarian situation in South Sudan—marked by economic hardship, political instability, and severe funding constraints—demands a far more proactive and coordinated advocacy strategy. The collaborative work has generated a significant body of data which could have been more thoroughly utilized to enrich the advocacy efforts.

Participants in this learning review stressed that advocacy should move beyond short-term humanitarian aid and focus on:

1. **Mobilizing resources for self-reliance, livelihoods and recovery.** Without other options, most refugees will continue to require assistance for a long period of time, rather than having a transition pathway to self-reliance.
2. **Aligning WFP and UNHCR strategies with government pledges** (e.g. Global Refugee Forum) and reinforcing government responsibility for integration of refugees.

“We need to harmonize our strategies... otherwise our priorities will continue to diverge.”

“The GRF pledges should be a joint roadmap.”

“We need to rethink how we’re modeling refugee programming... we can’t just keep feeding people for years/decades to come.”

On the other hand, it should be noted that some staff held differing opinions, expressing that the priority should remain on life-saving efforts and going back to the core mandate of our agencies, rather than on long-term solutions.

Respondents also urged the Joint Hub to amplify their country-level concerns in external forums, especially to attract international visibility and funding support.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Advocacy must be institutionalized and strategic:** Current efforts are often ad hoc and inconsistent. A more proactive, coordinated approach is needed to match the scale of humanitarian challenges in South Sudan.
- **Use data to strengthen advocacy:** The collaborative targeting process generated valuable evidence that could be better leveraged to support advocacy and resource mobilization.
- **Shift focus beyond humanitarian aid:** Advocacy should promote long-term solutions such as self-reliance, livelihoods, and recovery, rather than relying solely on continued food assistance.
- **Align agency strategies with government commitments:** UNHCR and WFP should harmonize their approaches and align with national pledges (e.g., Global Refugee Forum) to support refugee integration.

G. LEARNING AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

INCORPORATING LEARNING AND ADAPTING PROGRAMMING

Teams in the country operations did occasionally review the targeting process and that helped them to adapt to the evolving context. For example, teams integrated lessons learned on the importance of early communication and government engagement, strengthening these aspects. The availability of documentation was helpful in regularly communicating with other colleagues on the targeting process. The current learning exercise, however, is the first structured learning initiative of its kind.

As noted above, continuous feedback loops – using both quantitative and qualitative data – are essential for adaptive programming (see section on ‘Evidence-based approach’). However, people consulted for this learning review felt that feedback loops were not sufficiently established and used to inform ongoing programming. Several colleagues highlighted the need for periodic updates, ideally every two years, and called for a shift from “one-time” exercises to continuous learning cycles.

EXISTING CAPACITIES

Most people consulted for this learning review believed that the staff involved have sufficiently strong technical capacity, robust skill sets, the right background and extensive experience to deliver, particularly in data analysis, protection, and coordination. Higher confidence on internal capacities was expressed at Juba level, although noting that this confidence was dependent on operational realities— that while staff had the right skills to do the work, they were being stretched too thin at times, even missing key meetings due to competing demands.

The influx of refugees from Sudan created significant unpredictability for teams and affected their capacity to focus on targeting work. Initial planning was disrupted by fluctuating arrival numbers and informal border crossings. Staffing was not increased, even when more funding was received due to the influx. The shifting priorities and heavy workload caused by the Sudan influx had an impact on the ongoing collaboration for the targeting of food assistance.

Structures for coordination that have been put in place – at both capital and field level - are instrumental as well. This further gave the confidence that the targeting work could be embedded into regular programming.

Capacities remain uneven at field level, for both teams and partners, and particularly on appeals, data systems and communications. Beyond the capacities, more presence from Juba-based managers during critical phases was highlighted as helpful, by field teams.

“We’re doing the work, but sometimes we feel left alone to explain decisions we didn’t make.”

Respondents flagged that recent funding cuts pose a real threat to continuity. They acknowledged that while capacities currently exist, future capacity isn't guaranteed without sustained investment and support, and that the Joint Hub’s continued support would be of particular importance.

“Yes, we have the ability, but society is dynamic and targeting process can’t be static/one-off exercise. We still need the Hub.”

Field staff expressed confidence in their ability to implement targeting but identified recurring system-level and operational bottlenecks that hindered effectiveness, including voucher mismatches, system misalignment between proGres and SCOPE, and logistical issues in cash distribution.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Staff expressed the need to continue having access to the shared Microsoft Teams channel, created by the Joint Hub, with all documents centralized and accessible to both UNHCR and WFP staff. There is a risk of knowledge loss from staff turnover and lack of institutional memory. Participants stressed that the continued access to documentation, shared drives, and tools would be useful for future exercises.

“If the new officer has access to all those documents... they can follow the same recipe in the future.”

JOINT HUB'S CONTRIBUTION TO LEARNING

Participants praised the Joint Hub not just for technical support, mediation and gap-filling, but also for the learning tools it provided. The Hub was seen as adding significant value—especially in joint settings—by bringing analytical rigor and ensuring that results were documented and actionable – this country offices observed as a learning process. The Hub was also seen as a coach—valuable for synthesizing ideas, which the country operations needed and could learn from.

“I learned a lot—wouldn’t wish to see the Hub disappear.”

“Super helpful. Very, very important. Learned a lot”

“You were like a coach... helping us articulate and refine our thinking.”

The Joint Hub was seen as instrumental in providing a model framework for coordination and documentation. Participants highlighted that the Joint Hub presents the opportunity to see how the process should be, what needs to be documented, and teams can learn from this. Respondents emphasized that if other colleagues “invested time to look,” they could learn a great deal from the guidance already developed by the Joint Hub. Further, the Joint Hub’s role in inter-agency collaboration and bringing voices together has been an inspiring learning experience for the staff involved.

The online targeting training done by the Joint Hub learning program also helped.



LESSONS LEARNED AND SUGGESTIONS FOR JOINT HUB

Many participants did not have any notable areas identified for improvement for the Joint Hub. Some reflections, new ideas or suggestions are:

- More frequent in-country support to ensure that the process moves forward in a timely manner.
- Consider more capacity-building sessions, including in-person sessions.
- Provide light-touch support to countries in need—guidance or technical advice that doesn't require major inputs.
- Enable cross-country learning or “cross-fertilization” by sharing practical solutions from other operations.
- Strengthen coordination with donors and stakeholders, including mobilizing support and feeding back insights from high-level advocacy.
- Establish a higher-level governance structure at country-operation level, like a steering committee, for clarity on official, accountable decisions-making.
- Make outputs like reports more accessible through visual summaries to ensure field colleagues and others can digest the complex information.
- Support to sustain institutional memory given unavoidable workforce changes in country operations.

H. PRIORITISATION, FIT-FOR-PURPOSE?

The status-based assistance models which the humanitarian sector in South Sudan had relied on for years, were no longer tenable. This was due to a combination of worsening food insecurity, reduced resources, donor pressures and the fact that vulnerability was not necessarily linked only to displacement status. There was evidence, for example, that IDPs were more vulnerable than refugees, yet had generally been receiving less assistance.

“It was just the time to question the status quo... targeting was really required.”

Despite the context, the targeting process did not initially garner buy-in from UNHCR and WFP staff, especially given the high set-up costs in terms of time needed for planning and consultations. However, as staff and even the community grew more familiar with the process, most began to see the value of the approach.

At the time of this learning review, staff consulted within UNHCR and WFP country operations as well as partners, agreed the targeting/prioritization process was necessary and fit for purpose, particularly in a complex and resource-constrained context. Considering the confluence of numerous factors at this time, with the Sudan conflict requiring increased resources, the closing of some field offices for WFP, targeting was largely seen as timely.

While staff appreciated the targeting logic, this was a context of prioritization and it was felt that implementation therefore fell short due to the severe lack of resources. This resulted in coverage that was too limited (not all those in need could be assisted and some vulnerable households were wrongly excluded) and transfer values (whether cash or food) that were too low to cover needs.

“The cash can provide only one meal in a day... to me, it’s not serving the purpose.”

On the other hand, it was also noted that the fear of catastrophic outcomes for non-assisted refugees has not materialized. Though negative coping mechanisms for some are reported, community systems have adapted, and refugees have also learnt to self-sustain. However, it was noted that further follow-up and monitoring is necessary to properly ascertain what happens to those households who are no longer assisted.



NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here are based on a learning review conducted by the Joint Hub between May and June 2025.

The review was facilitated by a Joint Hub team comprising three members, all of whom were directly involved in providing technical and coordination support to WFP and UNHCR country operations throughout the targeting process from late 2022 to 2024.

The information is drawn from the bilateral key informant interviews or team discussions with:

- WFP Juba team [SO1/Emergency response team; RAM/Research, Assessment & Monitoring team; Protection, Gender & AAP team; Partnerships; and mid-management (Deputy Head of programme)]
- UNHCR Juba team [ODM/Operations Data Management; Registration & Identity Management; Economist; Livelihoods & Economic Inclusion]
- Field teams of both UNHCR and WFP
- One partner each of WFP and UNHCR



JOINT PROGRAMME EXCELLENCE AND TARGETING HUB