WFP EVALUATION

IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE HOME-GROWN SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMME IN THE GAMBIA

The Gambia is one of the world's poorest countries, with nearly half the population living in poverty. About 80 percent rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Stunting affects over 15 percent of children, and school completion rates remain low, with rates in the east of the country as low as 36.

To tackle these challenges, the United Nations World Food Programme in partnership with the Ministry of Basic Education and funded by the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) through the Gambia Agriculture and Food Security Project is implementing a Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programme.

The programme provides meals to students in 421 schools across three of the country's six regions, five days a week. Local suppliers, selected by school food management committees, deliver commodities to schools, which then organize daily meals, which include five typical Gambian dishes made of nine perishable and non-perishable ingredients.

In October 2022, WFP's Office of Evaluation and the World Bank's Development Impact Group (DIME) launched an impact evaluation under the School-based Programmes Impact Evaluation Window.

The evaluation used a phased-in cluster Randomized Control Trial (RCT) comparing Grade 3 children in 92 schools (encompassing 2,175 children). It also cross-randomized an accountability system based on teacher incentives to increase teacher attendance and study its impact on children's outcomes.

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KEY EVIDENCE

School meals improved food security and dietary diversity, with significant benefits for girls. It also substantially improves mental well-being, reducing stress and depression, especially among girls.

An accountability system based on teacher incentives effectively increased teacher attendance, with the strongest impact on female teachers.

Both school meals and teacher incentives led to higher student attendance and fewer dropouts, particularly among children with low attendance rates.

While children's literacy test scores showed limited improvement, combining school meals with teacher incentives improved performance on very basic reading tasks.

School meals, on their own or combined with teacher incentives, are as cost-effective as cash transfers or school inputs (e.g. textbooks, uniforms) in improving learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS).

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES IMPACT EVALUATION WINDOW

School-based programmes are one of the most extensive social safety nets worldwide. There is a growing need for more evidence to inform the trade-offs in school-based programmes' designs and implementations and understand how they can play a role as a social safety net protecting boys and girls during shocks.

In 2021, the World Food Programme, in partnership with the World Bank, launched the School-based Programmes Impact Evaluation Window to generate a portfolio of impact evaluation evidence to inform policy decisions and programmes. Since then, six experimental impact evaluations have started in The Gambia, Jordan, Burundi, Guatemala, Malawi, and Madagascar.

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KEY FINDINGS

1 Does the provision of HGSF impact children's food security, nutrition, health, and education outcomes?

The HGSF programme significantly improved children's food security and dietary diversity, with a 12 percent increase in food security and a 22 percent rise in dietary diversity. The strongest results were seen in girls.

School meals reduced self-reported stress and depression in children, with a 13 percent decrease in depression and a 20 percent decrease in medium to high stress.

School meals increased child attendance and reduced drop-outs among children whose attendance was low to begin with.

There were limited improvements in children's literacy test scores during the evaluation period. Given the limited duration of the evaluation, there were no measurable effect of school meals on malnutrition outcomes.

2 Are there heterogeneous impacts of providing HGSF meals to primary school students in terms of gender?

Girls benefited the most from school meals, with increased food security, and higher dietary diversity. They also experienced the biggest reduction in stress and depression.

3 Do school feeding programmes mitigate children's vulnerability to seasonal fluctuations and shocks?

Food security and dietary diversity among children fluctuated throughout the year. Similarly, the impact of school feeding on food security and dietary diversity showed variations across the different survey rounds. However, the magnitude of these variations is not statistically significant.

4 Does greater teacher attendance, boosted through monetary teacher incentives, enable a greater impact of school feeding programmes on educational outcomes?

An accountability system based on teacher incentives increased teacher attendance by 10 percentage points (from 74 to 84 percent) and teacher retention by 17 percentage points (from 70 to 87 percent), with stronger effects for female teachers.

While the evaluation did not find large differences in impacts or complementarities, results showed potential initial gains in children's ability to read when school meals and teacher incentives were combined.

Further research is needed on how school meals can complement interventions that maximise learning potential, such as cognition and learning outcomes.

5 What is the cost-effectiveness of school feeding relative to other interventions?

Home-grown school feeding alone, and combined with teacher incentives, is as cost-effective as cash transfers or school inputs (e.g. providing textbooks, uniforms, etc.).

As home-grown school meals impact multiple dimensions, the cost analysis on child outcomes covers multiple outcomes including dropouts, food security, mental well-being and reading abilities.

The cost per additional standard deviation of impact per child over a seven-month period is:

- USD 126.54 to reduce dropouts
- USD 56.12 to improve food security
- USD 175.36 to enhance mental well-being with school meals
- USD 48.38 to improve reading ability (when combining school feeding and the teacher incentive arm)

For every USD 100 spent on school meals over seven months, two children avoid dropping out of school, one child avoids food insecurity, and one child avoids reporting high levels of depression.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1 INVEST CONTINUOUSLY IN SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMMES.

Given the positive impact on food security, nutrition, and mental health, the Government of The Gambia, the WFP country office, and its partners are encouraged to consider continuing the investment in school meal programmes.

Moreover, the positive impacts of school meals on children's food security and dietary diversity are concentrated among girls; similarly, the decrease in the share of children reporting moderate to severe depression and medium to high levels of stress were concentrated among girls.

2 MAINTAIN FOCUS ON CONSISTENT SCHOOL MEAL DELIVERY RATHER THAN ADJUSTING TIMING TO ADDRESS SEASONAL FOOD SECURITY FLUCTUATIONS, AS THERE IS NO STRONG EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THIS APPROACH.

Children experienced fluctuations in food security and dietary diversity throughout the year. Similarly, the impact of school feeding on food security and dietary diversity showed variations across the different survey rounds. However, the magnitude of such variation was not statistically significant.

3 CONDUCT MORE WORK TO UNDERSTAND HOW SCHOOL MEALS CAN COMPLEMENT INTERVENTIONS THAT MAXIMISE THE LEARNING POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS.

School meal programmes were effective in improving child outcomes across multiple dimensions, such as food security, education attendance, and mental well-being outcomes. However, they might not be sufficient to

4 achieve improvements in educational outcomes if the educational system is not able to translate this into greater learning.

EXPLORE AND DOCUMENT THE IMPACT OF HOME-GROWN SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMMES ON LOCAL ECONOMIES.

School meals have the potential to impact local markets and farmers if food commodities are procured locally. More work should be done to explore and document the impact of home-grown school meal programmes on the local economies.

WFP/Mamadou Jallow

EVALUATION DESIGN

The impact evaluation design used a phased-in cluster Randomized Control Trial (RCT) comparing Grade 3 children in 92 schools (encompassing 2,175 children) across four groups: a school feeding-only group, a teacher incentive-only group, a combined school feeding and teacher incentives group, and a comparison group with no interventions.

This design enabled the evaluation to compare the effects of different interventions on student outcomes. Children enrolled in the 92 schools were all given an equal chance to receive school meals. Due to operational constraints, 46 schools started activities in 2023, and the remaining 46 schools started the following academic year.

Data collection included five rounds of high-frequency child surveys covering all main and secondary outcomes between February and October 2023.

Teacher attendance was monitored through spot-check surveys. School enrolment and attendance registers were developed in partnership with the WFP country office and Ministry of Basic Education. Finally, the evaluation team collected cost data from the country office records.

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