



Evaluation Brief – Ethiopia, endline evaluation of USDA’s McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program, 2019-2025

CONTEXT

Ethiopia has a highly diverse population of almost 130 million people with nearly 40 percent aged under 15 and only 3 percent over 65. Around 80 percent live in rural areas and mostly depend on rain-fed agriculture. Pastoralist populations tend to be poorer, more vulnerable to environmental shocks, and lagging in access to education and other services. The largest pastoralist populations are in Afar and Somali Regions and parts of Oromia. Afar Region is exceptionally vulnerable to chronic food insecurity, which is reflected in its high incidence of child malnutrition. Multiple shocks in recent years have increased the number of people who are at risk in Ethiopia and exacerbated the situation for those who were already vulnerable.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has supported school feeding in Ethiopia for many years, and the WFP Ethiopia Country Office (ETCO) secured a FY18 award of USD 28.3m from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. The McGovern-Dole project (2019-2025) supports school feeding in Afar Region and selected woredas (districts) in two pastoral Zones in Oromia (Borana and East Hararghe). It builds on a previous McGovern-Dole project managed by WFP in Afar and Somali Regions from 2013-2018. The project has had to cope with multiple stresses including the Covid-19 pandemic, internal conflicts, and persistent droughts.

THE PROJECT

The FY18 McGovern-Dole project intended to assist 187,425 children¹ in 450 public primary schools in Afar and two zones in Oromia. The project's objectives aligned to McGovern-Dole's strategic objectives (SOs) concerning improved literacy of school-age children and increased use of health and dietary practices. A linked objective was to improve food security through the effect of school meals on the income and the resilience of food-insecure households.

The project activities comprised the provision of hot meals to pupils, limited provision of take-home rations (THR) in Afar, the promotion of better health and dietary practices, promotion of improved food preparation and storage practices, promotion of improved literacy and increased enrolment, and the strengthening of institutional capacities and capacities of agricultural groups. It was envisaged that schools would exit the project and then be supported by the government's Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) programme.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The decentralized endline evaluation, undertaken by Mokoro Limited, was commissioned by ETCO, as an evidence-based, independent assessment of project performance, both for accountability and to influence future school feeding programmes. It built on a baseline study completed in 2021 and a mid-term evaluation undertaken in 2023-24. The key evaluation questions concerned the quality of project design, the

¹ The caseload was expected to taper to 139,000 in 348 schools by Year 5.

results of its implementation, its sustainability, and lessons that can be learned from the project.

The primary users of this evaluation are stakeholders directly involved in implementing the project. These include WFP's ETCO and its main implementing partner, Ethiopia's federal Ministry of Education (MoE), together with the Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) for Afar and Oromia Regions. The evaluation is also of direct interest to USDA, to WFP headquarters and to WFP's Regional Bureau in Nairobi (RBN), which provides oversight and support to ETCO.

METHODOLOGY

The endline evaluation was framed as a theory-based evaluation using mixed methods. It conducted three inter-related surveys: an endline survey to assess project performance over time by comparing with the baseline survey; a Knowledge Attitudes and Practices Survey (KAPS) to investigate outcomes of the nutrition education activities, and an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to provide data on literacy performance.

The main endline survey was administered in 91 schools (5 project schools and 2 non-project schools in each of the 13 sampled woredas) and collected data from 1,089 pupils. KAPS was administered to 152 students, 44 school administrators, and 15 cooks in 13 schools, and the EGRA in 26 schools covering 830 pupils. The evaluation team also gathered qualitative data from stakeholder interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), with particular emphasis on fieldwork in schools and at local level. 394 informants participated in KIs and FGDs including students, teachers, PTA members, school directors and other school staff.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Relevance

The McGovern-Dole project was highly relevant from the outset and adapted well to unforeseen circumstances. The project's focus on food-insecure populations in pastoralist areas has been highly relevant. The project's design was internally coherent, its different components were complementary, and it remained well aligned with the policies and programmes of government and other donors. Unfavourable changes in context (including Covid-19, drought, and conflicts) increased the relevance and value of school meals to students and their households. Adaptations to unexpected situations were appropriate (most notably in distributing Take-

Home Rations (THR) when schools were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic). The menu was nutritious and culturally acceptable but there was limited progress towards diversifying it with fresh foods.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

The project covered the envisaged districts, although the number of schools involved was higher than anticipated. However, the number of school meals served was lower than planned. The number of immediate beneficiaries (children enrolled in participating schools) was slightly above target (192,594 in 2020/21 reducing to 182,621 in 2023/24), and total beneficiaries (including the students' households) ranged from about 963,000 in 2020/21 down to 913,000 in 2023/24. However, the number of school meals served was only 55 percent of what was planned. Use of THR during the Covid-19 pandemic was an appropriate response, but subsequent THR distributions were less strategic, and unplanned. THR accounted for over 20 percent of commodity distributions.

The largest single factor in failure to meet the target for number of school meals served was the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but other unplanned use of THR largely reflected leftover stocks of food at school level. Deliveries often arrived after the beginning of a semester, but it is likely that lower-than-anticipated attendance levels were another factor in the accumulation of leftovers. Their distribution as THR was a second-best solution to avoid food wastage.

The evaluation team observed some improvements in school-level management of meals, e.g. by serving classes in sequence, but operational challenges to the quality of the school meal service included wide variations in the quality of cooking and dining facilities, shortages of cooking utensils, plates and cutlery ('non-food items'), and difficulties in ensuring adequate hygiene in the face of water scarcity. The evaluators observed several examples of unintended negative effects, including loss of teaching time and, at first, disadvantaging of girls in the way meals were being served. These have implications for school-level management of meals and for planning of HGSP.

Project Results

On **food security**, the project made a substantial contribution to household resilience in food insecure areas during a period of exceptional stresses. The safety-net role of school feeding is enhanced in vulnerable contexts; school meals are treated as part

of a household's overall food security strategy, and the value of the implicit income-transfer is substantial, especially for the poorest households.

On **educational results**: the EGRAs in 2023 (mid-term evaluation) and 2024 (endline) confirm that early-grade literacy outcomes are weak in both regions, and especially Afar (where mother-tongue teaching was more recently introduced). In 2024 58 percent of Grade 2 and 52 percent of Grade 3 children tested in Afar failed to register a score on the test of oral reading fluency; in Oromia 42 percent of Grade 2 and 24 percent of Grade 3 children were also "zero readers". However, there are clear indications of improvement, with Afar making bigger gains. The role of school feeding in supporting education results is confirmed by survey evidence of a positive association between participation in the school feeding project and grade completion rates, and by additional qualitative and quantitative evidence of school feeding's influence on enrolments, attendance and children's readiness to learn.

On **health and nutrition results**: the endline KAPS indicates significant improvement in knowledge about hygiene and nutrition. The project has contributed to this, but putting knowledge into practice is difficult without adequate water and sanitation facilities. The nutrition screening component was conceptually sound, but its implementation was limited in its scope and effectiveness.

As regards **social effects**: school feeding programmes are having a positive influence on girls' education in pastoral communities, but girls continue to face disadvantages, which are exacerbated by environmental and conflict-related crises. Recent analytical work on the social dimensions of school feeding will be a useful input to future programming, but progress in making education accessible to children with disabilities has been slow and partnerships have not been able to fill the gap.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Since the project was designed, WFP has taken important steps to strengthen its monitoring and reporting. These include strengthened staffing for the monitoring and evaluation function, a shift to electronic data gathering and the better articulation of responsibilities and procedures for both WFP and its cooperating partners. However, the evaluation identifies many specific areas for improvement. The project's initial Project Monitoring Plan (PMP) was weak, and this led to persistent weaknesses in reporting. Baseline and mid-term recommendations

for strengthening monitoring and reporting were not well followed up. As well as hindering project evaluability, weaknesses in monitoring and reporting meant that available data (e.g. on attendance rates) was not well used for management of the project. There is scope for better use of monitoring data to tailor food deliveries to actual requirements and to help understand reasons for poor attendance and lost school feeding days. Moving forward, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) will be a more important, but likely more difficult, challenge as WFP steps back from delivery of school meals.

The outlook for sustainability and the HGSP approach

Capacity development, community support and sustainability are interlinked. Capacity development has been integral to the project design, and both the Government and local communities have shown strong commitment to school feeding. However, handovers from the project to Government have been limited. During 2024/25 (a no-cost extension year for the project) there were no new McGovern-Dole deliveries, and most schools (especially in Oromia) had to rely on HGSP supplies. Experiences during this year have highlighted the gap in coverage and quality between the project's standards for school feeding and what government programmes are realistically able to deliver.

It was always optimistic to expect a seamless handover to Government provision at the end of the current phase of the project, and the crises Ethiopia faced during project implementation have made this even less practical. Communities are actively engaged in supporting schools and school feeding in particular. This demonstrates the value they attach to school feeding. However, community resources are limited and cannot realistically sustain the school meals service without external support. The project itself does not address the underlying causes of household food insecurity and cessation of external funding would increase vulnerability.

The Government's long-term strategy is to base national school feeding programmes on a HGSP approach, and the evaluation offers some tentative lessons for further development of the approach. Project efforts to link school feeding to local procurement, and to support for smallholder farmers, are still in their early stages, but the evaluation noted a need to distinguish the roles of school gardens from larger school farms; also to ensure that farm production reflects agronomic and commercial

opportunities; to be aware of the likelihood that local produce will require increased attention to food safety issues; to ensure that expectations of community contributions to school farms are realistic, and that additional demands on teachers' time do not have a high educational cost. Finally, efficient management of HGSF requires attention not just to the procurement of food from smallholders but also to the whole supply chain, from initial budgeting to last-mile delivery to schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

In a challenging context, school feeding has been a valuable safety net for children and their families. The evaluation demonstrates that school feeding contributes to educational objectives, although education quality remains weak. Project interventions also helped to improve knowledge on health, hygiene and nutrition practices, but constraints on school facilities, especially water, make it hard to put knowledge into practice. School feeding has strong government and community support, but raising government-led HGSF provision to the project's levels of coverage and quality will be a long-term endeavour and will require sustained support and partnerships to be achievable.

The following recommendations are made by the Evaluation Team based on the findings of this evaluation.

Recommendation 1. Strengthen monitoring and reporting of the successor project from the outset and reinforce analysis and learning as the project proceeds. Thus:

- Ensure annual reporting formats fulfil the requirements of all USDA and government mandated indicators. Strengthen school monitoring procedures accordingly, and Include EMIS IDs in all project records.
- Revise the next project's monitoring plan to align with agreed indicator specifications, including sex-disaggregation and evidence-based baseline values.
- Where possible, maintain separate data for Borana and East Hararghe, even if not required for USDA purposes.
- Conduct a timely mid-term evaluation and implement a rapid management response to its recommendations.

Recommendation 2. Ensure real-time monitoring of the successor school feeding project in Oromia and Afar and use

management information to improve efficiency. Thus:

- Strengthen monitoring of school attendance rates and actual days of school feeding in project schools.
- Continue to focus on resolving shortages of non-food items.
- Improve awareness of the complaints and feedback mechanism

Recommendation 3. For the successor project, prioritise capacity-strengthening measures to address issues in equity and efficiency. In particular:

- Focus on capacity-strengthening for procurement and delivery of HGSF commodities.
- Carefully monitor and learn from innovations in local procurement and the promotion of school gardens and farms in the project areas.
- Support recruitment and retention of rural teachers through productive safety net (PSNP). and community-provided staff housing, while avoiding excessive demands on communities.

Recommendation 4. Feed lessons from this project into the design and implementation of school feeding programmes across Ethiopia. Thus:

- Base project designs on social analyses and lessons learned to address gaps and promote girls' education and protection outcomes.
- Engage broad coalitions to strengthen education, health, and nutrition, and enhance school feeding impact, and leverage community support realistically, considering limited resources in crisis-affected areas.
- Reinforce capacity strengthening in school feeding programmes with feasible timelines for government handover.
- Implement robust monitoring and reporting systems from the outset.
- Support national efforts to develop and implement resource mobilisation strategies for school feeding.

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