



World Food Programme

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Evaluation Brief –Mid-term evaluation of the USDA’s McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program, 2020-2026

CONTEXT

Côte d'Ivoire, a lower-middle-income country with 29.4 million people (48.4% women) and an HDI of 0.534 (166/191), faces persistent food insecurity, malnutrition, and sex-based disparities in education and resources. Primary school enrolment rate is 49% for girls and 51% for boys; and girls account for only 39% of secondary and 11% of post-secondary enrolments. Adult illiteracy affects 51.5% of the population (57% women, 46% men), with the North, West, and North-East showing the lowest female enrolment due to socio-cultural barriers. Malnutrition rates exceed 40% in the North and North-East, and 30% in the West and North-West. The World Food Programme (WFP) Côte d'Ivoire Country Office secured US\$26,513,178 from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program (2020–2026). This represents the second award for the McGovern-Dole program in Cote d'Ivoire, which combines school feeding and literacy interventions, and is implemented in the West, North, and North-East regions.

THE PROJECT

The FY20 project under the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program assists at least 125,000 children¹ in 613 public primary schools in the regions in the country facing the greatest challenges with malnutrition (Cavally, Bafing, Bagoué, Poro, Tchologo, Bounkani, Gontougo), providing them with a daily hot meal during the school year for the duration of the project. The project has four components, including (i) the provision of hot meals to

pupils, (ii) the promotion of better health and nutrition, (iii) the promotion of better reading and learning, and (iv) the strengthening of institutional capacities and capacities of agricultural groups.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The decentralized evaluation, commissioned by the WFP Côte d'Ivoire Country Office, pursued the dual objectives of accountability and learning, with a stronger focus on learning and evidence generation. The midterm evaluation aimed to critically and objectively review programme implementation, draw lessons, and assess whether targeted beneficiaries are receiving the intended services, and whether the project is on track to achieve its stated goals and objectives.

The expected users of this evaluation are the WFP Country Office and its decision-making partners, Office of Evaluation (OE), WFP Headquarters in Rome, WFP Executive Board, USDA, Directorate of School Canteens (DCS); implementing partners such as ANADER and AVSI; Ministries of Education, Agriculture and Health; other UN Agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO etc.) and other stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

The midterm evaluation used a quasi-experimental longitudinal design and mixed-methods approach, tracking a cohort of schools across seven regions to measure changes over time since the baseline study in 2022. Quantitative data were collected from 1,090 pupils (745 in intervention and 345 in non-intervention schools) and their households, as well as 117 headteachers, 300 teachers, and 71 school canteen managers. Qualitative inputs came from a desk review, 37 key informant interviews, and 25 focus group discussions with diverse stakeholders, including students, parents, farmers, traders, and community members. Limitations included reading assessments conducted in a subsample of schools and potential test preparation by teachers; these were mitigated through repeated cross-sectional sampling in the same school cohort.

¹ The caseload was increased to 136,500 around the time of data collection (Amendment B included this change and became effective 3 April 2024)

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Relevance

There was evidence that the McGovern-Dole project is highly relevant and well aligned with the policies, strategies, and priorities of the Côte d'Ivoire Government, WFP and other UN agencies. The design of the project was based on a situation analysis that highlighted the needs of different population groups.. Regions with poor enrolment indicators, disparities in access and opportunities between girls and boys, and literacy difficulties were prioritized. By targeting the most affected areas of the country with high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition, the project also adopted a pro-poor approach. The design and objectives of the project incorporated sex-specific and social considerations in various ways, including: the choice of pedagogical approaches, the design of reading tools, the construction or rehabilitation of separate latrines to protect the privacy of girls and boys, the training of school management committees on sex-related factors as a cross-cutting issue affecting children's schooling, and the targeted support to farmer groups. The project's adaptability was evident in its response to emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Burkinabé refugee influx in 2023. However, there was little or no consideration of children with disabilities since this was not in the project design.

Effectiveness

The project has largely achieved its intermediate outcomes, as set out in the project's logical framework—particularly in reducing hunger, improving school enrolment and attendance, and enhancing literacy competencies. Effectiveness, however, varied across regions and demographic groups, and was constrained by the non-implementation of key elements in the transition plan. Notably, the planned government provision of 25 days of school feeding per year in project schools from the second year onwards had not been implemented by midterm.

Food security improved, with a significant increase in the proportion of households achieving an acceptable Food Consumption Score (FCS) from baseline to midterm. In the intervention group, FCS rose from 72.5% to 85.5%, and in the comparison group from 64.7% to 84.3%. Female students in intervention schools (86.2%) outperformed boys in both intervention (84.8%) and comparison schools (85.3%), as well as girls in comparison schools (83.4%). Similarly, more female-headed households in the intervention group (88.4%) achieved acceptable FCS than male-headed households (84.8%). Conversely, the Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) indicated rising stress levels across both groups, with scores increasing from 4.8 to 6.9 in the intervention group and from 4.4 to 7.3 in the comparison group. Female-headed households in the comparison group recorded the highest stress levels (8.9), followed by their intervention-group counterparts (8.3).

Education outcomes were mixed. Intervention schools had higher median enrolment than comparison schools, with girls in intervention schools (110) exceeding boys (107), while in comparison schools boys (79) surpassed girls (71).

Absenteeism rose across both groups, particularly among boys in intervention schools (3.4% to 6.0%) and in comparison schools (4.3% to 7.1%). Literacy outcomes improved substantially, with the percentage of pupils meeting minimum grade-appropriate reading scores rising from 12.2% to 54.0% in the intervention group, compared to 11.3% to 35.9% in the comparison group. Younger pupils in grades CP1 and CP2 in intervention schools recorded the highest gains (83.9% and 50.7%, respectively). Sex-based differences in literacy gains were negligible, with boys improving from 10.7% to 54.3% and girls from 13.7% to 53.6%.

Stakeholders attributed programme success to integrated interventions, including teacher training, provision of educational resources, school meals, and strong community engagement. However, government officials and development partners identified the broader economic context and uncertainties in external funding as major risks to sustaining progress.

Overall, the project has largely met its planned intermediate outcomes, particularly in reducing hunger, improving school enrolment and attendance, and enhancing literacy competencies.

Efficiency

By midterm, the project demonstrated a moderate level of cost-effectiveness. Achievements included equitable resource distribution for girls and boys and adherence to planned operational days—particularly since 2023—which supported consistent service delivery. However, the average resource utilization ratio (31.6%) and gaps between planned and actual beneficiaries indicated inefficiencies in allocation and operations. In Year 1, resource utilization fluctuated significantly, with notable shortfalls between planned and actual distributions, largely due to supply chain disruptions. Year 2 showed improved alignment, reduced under- and over-utilization, and greater consistency, reflecting adaptive management and strengthened operational strategies. The project achieved an average total coverage ratio of 87%, slightly below the 90% benchmark. While parity among girls and boys was maintained (less than 1% difference, $p > 0.05$), district-level disparities remained. Higher costs per beneficiary in districts such as Korhogo pointed to logistical and operational inefficiencies, while consistent growth in Guiglo and Ferke reflected strong planning and distribution performance. Timeliness in resource utilization remained a challenge. Ratios for rice, oil, and beans were consistently below the 90%–110% benchmark, indicating underutilization. Schools with experienced staff achieved better alignment between planned and served populations, underscoring the importance of capacity building. Limited real-time monitoring and inconsistent data collection hindered timely identification and correction of inefficiencies.

Impact

The project had a positive and statistically significant impact on both girls and boys achieving the grade-appropriate minimum score. However, the effects weakened or became statistically insignificant when additional factors like region, class, and individual covariates

were considered. No significant effects were found on students' raw Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) scores² or on their chances of performing above the upper band of their grade-appropriate benchmarks' thresholds. Overall, the project did not significantly impact the Household Dietary Diversity Score, the Food Consumption Score, or the Reduced Coping Strategies Index. However, a significant reduction in the use of crisis coping strategies³ was observed, suggesting that the project helped households reduce reliance on extreme coping strategies to deal with food insecurity. In male-headed households, there was a reduction in crisis coping strategies, although this effect diminished in later statistical models.

Sustainability

The project demonstrated several sustainability elements, notably robust community engagement, ongoing capacity-building initiatives, and a gradual increase in government financial commitment. Nonetheless, significant challenges persist, particularly regarding the transition to government ownership, resource management, and dependence on external support, which may affect the project's long-term viability. The full integration of McGovern-Dole-supported schools into the national budget remains unachieved, and anticipated legislative support for securing long-term funding is pending, creating uncertainty regarding the project's financial sustainability beyond 2026.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

The FY20 project in Côte d'Ivoire is highly relevant, aligning closely with government priorities and the needs of target populations through a comprehensive approach. It has largely achieved its intermediate outcomes, notably in reducing mid-day hunger, improving school enrolment and attendance, and enhancing literacy competencies. The project demonstrates balanced learning outcomes between girls and boys and a moderate level of cost-effectiveness, indicating it is broadly on track to achieve its objectives of improving educational access and quality for girls and boys.

Effectiveness and efficiency, however, varied across regions and demographic groups, and comparison schools also recorded consistent progress, in some cases outperforming intervention schools. While the programme showed a positive impact on achieving grade-appropriate minimum scores and incorporated several sustainability measures, significant challenges remain—particularly in transitioning to full government ownership. Delays in implementing the handover process have affected planned operational days, posing a risk to meeting project targets and demonstrating programme impact by endline.

Several recommendations are made by the Evaluation Team based on the findings of this evaluation. They include the following:

Recommendation 1. Intensify advocacy to promote the realization and execution of the essential components outlined in the handover document, based on the findings from this midterm evaluation regarding its influence on the project's effectiveness and efficiency. WFP can support by raising awareness among stakeholders on addressing government-identified disparities, strengthening advocacy for Côte d'Ivoire's commitment to the School Meals Coalition, and aligning with its commitments once signed. Additionally, WFP can review and adjust the transition plan and government's planned number of feeding days to set realistic deadlines and generate initial momentum.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen the project's monitoring system to address data gaps in monitoring equitable outcomes for all population groups. Perspectives on balanced access and outcomes for girls, boys, women, and men should be explicitly outlined in the project's outputs or indicators.

Recommendation 3. Implement a systematic methodology that emphasizes intentional geographic alignment at district and potentially, regional levels to mitigate disparities in cost-effectiveness. This approach should encompass the enhancement of all relevant supply chain components.

Recommendation 4. Address the issue of absenteeism in boys due to household agricultural work and seasonal jobs; and the increase in health-related absenteeism for girls. Consider strategies like take-home rations for boys and girls to relieve the pressure to support their households which disproportionately affects boys.

Recommendation 5. Adopt a comprehensive approach that specifically addresses the needs of children with disabilities. This involves integrating indicators related to children with disabilities into the project's log frame, thereby ensuring their visibility and representation within the project.

Recommendation 6. Strengthen local / community structures - Continue to raise awareness on smallholder farmers among communities and advocate with village authorities concerning mutual insurance companies to encourage their commitment to supporting school canteens.

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² The ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) score is a measure used in India and some other countries to assess basic reading and arithmetic skills in children, typically in rural areas. ASER provides an insight into the learning levels of children in different grades, even in the absence of formalized, large-scale educational assessments.

³ Crisis coping strategies here is derived from the Livelihood Coping Strategies for Food Security (LCS-FS) which is an indicator used to measure the extent to which households need to employ coping strategies in response to a lack of food or money to purchase food (https://wfp-vam.github.io/RBD_FS_CH_guide/EN/livelihood-coping-strategies.html)