



WFP EVALUATION



World Food Programme

SAVING LIVES
CHANGING LIVES



Evaluation Brief - Midterm Evaluation of USDA's McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program in Cambodia from 2022 to 2027

CONTEXT

While Cambodia has made strides in reducing food insecurity, nutrition issues persist, marked by undernutrition, deficiencies, and obesity. School feeding programs play a crucial role in improving educational outcomes in areas facing elevated risks. Primary education access has increased significantly, with a 90 percent completion rate in 2021 and a considerable rise in lower secondary enrolment. However, challenges remain in education quality and school access, particularly affecting disabled and indigenous children.

The economy, after robust growth leading to lower-middle-income status in 2016, faced setbacks due to COVID-19, with poverty rates fluctuating regionally. Despite progress in greater attendance of girls and boys in schools, differences between woman and men in economic participation persist. Literacy improvements in early grades are noted, yet overall gains remain modest.

SUBJECT AND FOCUS OF THE EVALUATION

The project is the final award of USDA's support initiated in 2013 that has aimed to improve literacy among primary school children, specifically through improving the quality of teaching, a school meals component, and a school health and nutrition component that seeks to improving health and dietary practices in schools. In addition, the project includes a foundational results component that supports the Government's National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (NHGSFP) capacity for its long-term sustainability, and a Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) component with regional purchase of canned fish. The project operates in a total of 510 schools in the three provinces of Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, and Siem Reap.¹

This last award also prioritises the handover of McGovern-Dole-supported schools to the NHGSFP, under the terms of a Joint Transition Strategy (JTS) agreed between WFP and the Government which will see all schools being handed over by 2026. This Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) project is operational from October 2022 to September 2027, with a budget of US\$21 million provided by the USDA. The project has so far benefited 94,018 children, 49 percent of them girls.

OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

The midterm evaluation of the McGovern-Dole FY22 project aimed to measure achievements since the 2023 baseline study, focusing on performance indicators and offering recommendations for the two remaining years. The evaluation covered all McGovern-Dole-supported school feeding activities in the three target provinces, addressing learning and accountability objectives. Emphasis was placed on understanding the handover of the school feeding project to the NHGSFP, assessing sustainability and project performance, and ensuring beneficiaries receive expected services.

Key stakeholders include USDA, WFP Cambodia, partner ministries, and sub-recipients like World Education and World Vision. This evaluation series is crucial as the McGovern-Dole project represents the USDA support to school feeding in Cambodia, stressing capacity strengthening and sustainability.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

Project relevance and coherence

The project maintains high relevance post-2023 baseline, enhancing the NHGSFP's implementation and institutional capacities, aligning with the JTS and the new NSFP 2024-2035. It features a hybrid school feeding model, supported

¹ Out of total 510 schools, 341 schools are covered by all the project components (School feeding and literacy), and 169 schools are only covered by the literacy component.

by complementary donor funding, crucial for developing local procurement skills for the 2026 handover. While effective for school readiness, long-term maintenance assessment criteria need refinement. The project aligns with MoEYS (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) and integrates new NHGSFP systems but faces limited collaboration with other national institutions and United Nations agencies due to recent NHGSFP governance formalization.

Effectiveness

On literacy, the project has demonstrated positive performance in delivering planned activities that has resulted in modest outcomes with 48 percent of teachers reaching proficiency levels 2 or 3 based on teacher observations, and slight improvements in student literacy in Grades 2 (33.2 to 33.9 percent) and 3 (54.2 to 57.6 percent). These results show a need for continued improvement in classroom performance, although the slowing of student literacy progress compared to previous project phases was expected.

School attendance has seen slight progress (92.8 to 93 percent) aligned with project goals, aided by a successful school meal program which provides essential nutrition leading to decreased health-related absences and positive effects on child health. The project has surpassed targets in health and dietary practices, significantly improving children's dietary diversity. The school handover plan is proceeding, with considerable progress made in implementing the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) framework.

The targets for the school transfer to the NHGSFP are on track so far with 196 schools already transferred and 130 additional schools planned for the school year 2025-2026. The project has contributed to significant progress on the five pillars of the SABER framework, particularly on the regulatory and governance structure of the NHGSFP as well as implementation capacity and community participation. Most of these processes are ongoing and are expected to produce outcomes in the future.

Aspects to increase the participation of women are included more significantly in new NHGSFP documents, while overall project implementation benefits from adequate resources and support, despite challenges such as staff turnover affecting capacity strengthening.

Efficiency

The project exhibits overall efficiency, achieving most regional procurement objectives by midterm. Regionally purchased canned fish was about 19 percent cheaper than local fresh fish. Imported fortified rice (USD 1.16/kg) was slightly more cost-efficient than locally produced unfortified rice (USD 1.19/kg).

By the end of June 2025, overall project expenditures were at 52 percent, aligning with expectations but higher due to in-kind food procurement and full budget usage for indirect costs at midterm. Some activities reflected low expenditure, indicating initial cost overestimations, yet resources appeared sufficient for project goals. Activities were timely

and aligned with the direct implementation strategy before the school handover.

Sustainability

The NHGSFP exhibits strong government ownership, particularly from the MoEYS and NSPC (National Social Protection Council), as seen through increased national budget allocations and the Prime Minister's endorsement. However, engagement from other ministries is limited due to the program's recent formalization. Community contributions include resources like firewood and staffing costs. The procurement model for locally produced food is unclear, with the farmers' roles in school supply not well defined. Project achievements maintain positive continuity post-handover, with key sustainability factors including government commitment, expected to increase in 2026. Nevertheless, challenges such as capacity gaps and high staff turnover at sub-national levels require ongoing technical assistance from WFP.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall Assessment

The McGovern-Dole FY22 project aligns well with Cambodia's national objectives for the NHGSFP, strongly reflecting MoEYS priorities. It has contributed to significant advances in school handover, SABER pillars, and health services, but yields mixed results in literacy and limited focus on increasing the participation of women. Sustainability is bolstered by solid government support and rising budget allocations, despite challenges like uneven sub-national ownership, lack of funding for monitoring, and capacity gaps.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the support for national capacity for monitoring and evaluation by mapping and prioritizing non-resource-intensive improvements.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the NHGSFP's multi-sectoral governance by fostering sectoral linkages among member institutions.

Recommendation 3: Reinforce the objectives for increased participation of women by collaborating with relevant ministries to support initiatives for cooks and women's participation in local procurement.

Recommendation 4: Continue to support training materials for dietary diversity indicators to assess nutrition in school-aged children, complementing traditional weight measures.

Recommendation 5: Create a literacy monitoring plan to address follow-up needs.

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