

Nutrition Fuels Human Capital: Ghana's School Feeding Programme

Introduction

Half a century after Ghana became independent in 1957, the country had made substantial gains in economic growth and the development of its human capital. By 2005, it had in place an education system and a health system that were performing well compared to those of other Sub-Saharan African countries. There was still progress to be made, however, because indicators such as school enrollment lagged behind world averages.

From the mid-2000s through 2014, Ghana made significant gains in measures of human capital. The school enrollment rate rose and by 2011 had exceeded the world average.¹ The likelihood that a 15-year-old child would survive to age 60 increased as well.² A number of initiatives during this period contributed to these gains, including the introduction of a national health insurance scheme, improvements to water and sanitation, and new literacy programs.

One important step in Ghana's effort to develop its human capital was the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP). This multi-sectoral program, initiated in 2005, had multiple objectives: it was a nutrition program, an education program, and a social safety net. Ghana also linked the program to agricultural development, especially smallholder production, thus helping to create new markets for locally grown food.

A chief motivation for establishing the program was that several major external partners (most notably the World Food Programme and Catholic Relief Services) were phasing out their school feeding interventions. The program was also a response to two other imperatives: the African Union's declaration in 2003 of the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme, which presented locally sourced school feeding programs as a key intervention, and the UN's Millennium Development Goals, announced in 2000 (Blunch 2020).

The main goal of the GSFP was to provide primary school students in the most deprived communities with nutritionally adequate, locally prepared meals. The idea was that in-school meals would not only act as an incentive to school attendance but also make it unnecessary for learners to leave the school premises during lunch break in order to find food. Besides this main goal, the program also aimed to procure food from local smallholder farmers to improve the agricultural economy and the livelihoods of farming families. Funding for the GSFP came primarily from the government of Ghana, the Kingdom of the

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¹ Figures from World Bank data, available at:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.TENR?locations=GH-1W>

² Data from the Human Capital Project: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/human-capital>

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Netherlands, district assemblies and communities, and the World Food Programme (Government of Ghana 2015; Laar 2016).

The GSFP employed the “whole of government” approach that, according to the World Bank’s Human Capital Project, can overcome challenges countries face in developing their human capital. The three elements of this approach are: continuity (sustaining effort across political cycles), coordination (ensuring that sectoral programs and agencies work together), and evidence (expanding the evidence base and using it to improve and update human capital strategies) (Human Capital Project 2019a).

This delivery note focuses on the last two elements by examining how Ghana fostered coordination among institutions and stakeholders, and how it adapted the program over time in response to evidence.

Development Challenge

In 2005, when the program began, human capital indicators in Ghana were behind world averages, indicating that its people could not meet their full potential as healthy, productive members of society. In 2005, the net enrollment rate of children in primary school was 70.6 percent, significantly below the world average of 89.7 percent for 2007 (the most recent comparable year).³

Poor health indicators, such as the prevalence of stunting and the percentage of 15-year-olds who survived to age 60, pointed to a fundamental nutrition issue among children that was affecting every aspect of human development. Malnourished, unhealthy children everywhere are more likely to have poor school attendance. Additionally, children who do not have enough nutritious food often suffer from diminished cognitive abilities and sensory impairments that made them more likely to struggle in school, repeat grades, or drop out. Such hungry children grow into adults whose poor health and education prevent them from achieving their full potential (Government of Ghana 2006).

³ Figures taken from World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.TENR?locations=GH>

Delivery Challenges

Successful implementation of the GSFP required overcoming several delivery challenges.

Inter- and Intra-Governmental Coordination

Ensuring cooperation and communication from the national government down to local governments, including in remote rural areas, was a daunting task in Ghana. The school feeding program was vulnerable to coordination problems because it required multiple government institutions to work together to achieve its goals. The program’s complexity made it difficult to assess effectiveness and required the government to carefully craft program objectives. Political dynamics, resource shortages, and a lack of support from communities or project stakeholders threatened to stand in the way of sustained implementation.

Stakeholder Engagement

Program success required strong engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries, including schools, families, and farmers. This proved to be a challenge in Ghana, for example, in communicating food preparation standards to the caterers who prepared food for students, and ensuring that they adhered to those standards. The program required adaptation to improve communication and engagement among the bodies set up to oversee implementation and the people who delivered the final product on the ground.

Reporting and Supervision

Weaknesses that arose during program implementation demonstrated the need for a better monitoring and evaluation system and stronger performance incentives. The decentralized program, which relied on caterers and schools throughout the country to deliver meals to children, had to gather information about what was happening on the ground to ensure that the intended beneficiaries received nutritious meals that met program standards. The program also needed to properly incentivize caterers and schools to comply with program guidelines.

Beneficiary Targeting

During the early years of implementation, challenges arose in delivering meals to the children most in need of assistance, requiring a new approach to targeting to ensure more equitable distribution of the program's benefits.

Communication and Awareness Strategy

Ghanaian citizens came to question how the program operated and whether political factors played a role in choosing the stakeholders that benefitted from the program. It was vital for the government to find a way to communicate the program's value and increase transparency about its operations.

Addressing Delivery Challenges

Ghana worked with partners to craft a pilot school feeding program, learned from the first phase of implementation, and adapted the program in response to challenges.

Ensuring Coordination at All Levels

To design the program framework and develop an implementation strategy, the government consulted with national-, regional- and district-level strategic and technical partners involved in school feeding, as well as with donors and bilateral and multilateral agencies. One of the major issues that emerged was the importance of local-level engagement. Ghana prioritized seeking and ensuring the commitment of district assemblies to help sustain the program long-term.⁴ The program came to include community leaders in various areas of decision-making, including design and implementation, and secured community support for constructing or providing necessary infrastructure (such as kitchens, storerooms, communal toilets, and platforms for water tanks) as a precondition for program implementation. Community members cooked and served meals and provide ingredients, fuel, and water. A significant aspect of the program's structure was an emphasis on locally

grown food items, with a target to procure at least 80 percent of food from local providers (Government of Ghana 2006).

The government designated the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development as the program's oversight body, but created a management and implementation structure incorporating a variety of stakeholders. Program coordination was the responsibility of a secretariat that included representatives of the local government ministry, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and district assemblies. The national secretariat supported regional secretariats and desk officers working for the program at the district levels. Each school had an implementation committee made up of the head teacher (principal), parent and student representatives, and the school's health and education program coordinator. Members of multilateral development agencies served on a steering committee to offer program guidance (Laar 2016).

The program used a decentralized procurement process, recruiting caterers who were required to be residents of the local catchment area and who had the capacity to self-finance the procurement of food. Caterers were responsible for feeding up to three schools with a maximum enrollment of 400 students each, receiving a fixed amount of money for every meal provided to a child per school day. The program expected caterers to follow a weekly menu endorsed by the district and school implementation committees. The meals varied by region and from season to season, but the ingredients were similar across the program (Laar 2016). The government mandated participating schools to serve a cooked lunch on at least 195 days a year. The lunch had to consist of approximately 150 grams of cereal, with 40 grams of legumes and 10 grams of vegetable oil per child per day. This was expected to provide more than 30 percent of the recommended daily nutritional allowance for a young student (Goldsmith et al. 2019).

Improving Reporting and Supervision

While the program was able to track enrollment increases, verifying the quality of the meals children received was a more difficult matter. Independent evaluations found that the program had assessed the nutritional quality of meals only through anecdotal reports by observers who had no objective measures of that quality. Without better

⁴ As of 2005, Ghana was divided into 138 districts, each governed by a district assembly. Districts were an administrative subdivision below regions. The number of districts would increase in subsequent years.

verification of the level of nutrition provided, caterers had an incentive to lower their costs by, for instance, diluting a recipe with water. In general, the program did not collect strong data on the performance of caterers and schools, with a 2007 report by the World Food Programme concluding that the program’s monitoring and evaluation system was “very weak” and that “robust empirical evidence is limited” (Goldsmith et al. 2019; Laar 2016).

Beginning in 2009, the GSFP collaborated with stakeholders to develop a stronger monitoring and evaluation system. The new monitoring tools were simple and straightforward. Caterers and school head teachers were responsible for reporting on the meals provided to the students they served. Each day, a caterer entered the date and the number of pupils cooked for, and listed the types and quantities of protein sources, carbohydrate sources, fats and oils, and vegetables or legumes cooked and fruits provided. The head teacher in the school used a similar form to track the quantities served in a student’s meal that day. Each school term, caterers filled out a procurement form tracking the amount, cost, and source of food they procured.

Head teachers also completed a form each term tracking changes in student enrollment from the beginning to the end of the term, the number of students who had dropped out (and the reasons they did so), and a summary of health-related activities that took place that term. Regional monitoring personnel recorded the availability and maintenance of sanitation facilities, drinking water, and hand-washing stations in the beneficiary schools (Laar 2016).⁵ This reporting provided the program with stronger local-level data on performance and effectiveness.

Re-targeting the Program

Another challenge was targeting the program to the intended beneficiaries. The program’s original targeting failed to achieve the government’s goal of reaching the neediest communities. The Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare evaluated the program in 2010 and found that only 21 percent of the investment went to the poor. This was because the wealthier regions of the country were receiving a larger share of the program’s benefits than the poorer areas. In response, the government retargeted the

program in 2012 using information collected by the World Bank from national poverty statistics, a food security and vulnerability analysis, and spatial data. The retargeting meant that some schools in the wealthier areas no longer received school feeding as those allocations were shifted to poorer areas (Government of Ghana 2015).

Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement

A 2015 policy document identified a need to strengthen district-level ownership of the program and linkages among key local stakeholders such as schools, caterers, and farmers. The government directed district assemblies to cultivate relationships with local traditional authorities to promote school feeding, take advantage of local events and celebrations to educate the public about the program, and help local businesses create partnerships for food production, storage, processing, and marketing that would prepare them to participate in the program. The government also encouraged regional councils to reward districts that demonstrated innovative practices in involving the community in school feeding.

The program improved local social accountability by engaging civil society organizations in the formation of sub-district forums where citizens could interact with other program stakeholders to discuss issues related to resources, processes, and constraints to delivery.

Implementing a New Communication Strategy

Communication was especially important because of public perceptions that the program was politically influenced. Local political leaders were thought to dominate the caterer-selection process. The government attributed this to a lack of public understanding of how the program worked, local conflicts between schools and caterers, a lack of cooperation among institutions in the program, and delays in caterer payments that gave the program negative publicity. In 2015, the government instituted a new communication strategy that disseminated information about school feeding to the public through engagement with the news media and email and social media campaigns, as well as direct engagement with local government officials and other influential figures (Government of Ghana 2015).

⁵ For examples of the monitoring forms, see: <https://anh-academy.org/sites/default/files/2.%20Matilda%20Laar.pdf>

Outcomes

Program implementation began in late 2005 with 10 pilot schools drawn from different parts of the country. By August 2006, it had expanded to 200 schools covering 69,000 students in 138 districts, with a plan to reach a total of 500 schools and 155,000 children by the end of that year. The program quickly showed positive results. A review of the pilot conducted in May and June 2006 found that, in a little more than six months of implementation, enrollment in the pilot schools had risen by 20.3 percent, compared to 2.8 percent in schools in the same districts that were not part of the pilot. By December 2010, the program had grown to cover 1 million children, or more than 25 percent of total enrolled primary school students (Government of Ghana 2006; Government of Ghana 2011; Government of Ghana 2015). As of 2017, the program served nearly 1.7 million students in 5,682 schools every school day, or approximately 30 percent of public-school students, and employed roughly 24,000 caterers (Dunaev and Corona 2019).

The school feeding program had positive effects on learning outcomes in Ghana. Studies suggested these accomplishments resulted from the program's positive impact on enrollment rates, grade attainment, and students devoting more time to their schooling (Goldsmith et al. 2019). A 2018 cost-benefit analysis reported that each USD1 invested in school feeding could be expected to generate an economic return for Ghana of USD3.3 over the lifetime of a beneficiary (Dunaev and Corona 2019). The initiative also had a positive impact on local smallholder agricultural production across Ghana (Blunch 2020).

From the earliest years of the program, stakeholders had felt that the money caterers received was not enough for them to deliver adequate meals and still make a profit. The program initially provided caterers with GHS 0.80 (USD0.18) per child per school day, but stakeholders believed that this should be increased to between GHS 1.50 and GHS 2.00 (USD0.34 and USD0.45). In 2017, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning partially responded to these demands and approved an increased payment of GHS 1.00 (USD 0.22) per child per school day.⁶

⁶ Currency conversions are based on an exchange rate during December 2017. The rates are taken from <https://www.xe.com/currencytables/?from=GHS&date=2017-12-05>.

Lessons Learned

Ghana's strategy for its school feeding program demonstrates how countries can overcome frequently encountered delivery challenges that arise when they are implementing measures to enhance human capital. In particular, the GSFP offers lessons about coordination and evidence-gathering, two key aspects of the whole-of-government approach to human capital development.

Inclusive Oversight and Management Structures Helped Address Coordination and Commitment Challenges

The Ghana School Feeding Programme benefited from an oversight structure featuring ministry-level representation from across the government, donor representation, and close coordination with local governments. While coordination challenges did emerge during implementation, this structure helped minimize potential coordination and commitment challenges commonly found in multi-sector development projects.

Good Data Collection and Accountability Mechanisms Were Necessary to Ensure Nutrition Levels

The program initially struggled to track progress because of poor monitoring and evaluation structures that relied on anecdotal evidence of implementation on the ground rather than data that could be tracked and evaluated. This raised concerns about whether children were indeed receiving the level of nutrition the government intended. Ghana addressed this by putting into place new data-collection tools for caterers and schools to report on their activities, providing more data to use in setting goals and tracking progress.

Sustained Political Support Contributed to Success

Even as elections brought in new governments, Ghana saw value in the program and sustained it across political cycles. The incorporation of a wide range of stakeholders, including external donors, into the steering committee and coordination structures may have helped sustain political buy-in because the program was always tied to a diverse coalition, not a single political party or institution.

Learning from Evidence Allowed the Program to Adapt and Expand

The government demonstrated a willingness to adapt the program as evidence came in regarding its impact. This

included fundamental changes such as re-targeting the program after realizing it was not reaching the intended beneficiaries, and revamping the monitoring and evaluation system. This adaptability allowed the program to increase its impact and effectiveness over time.

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The Human Capital Project is a global effort to accelerate more and better investments in people for greater equity and economic growth. The Project is helping create the political space for national leaders to prioritize transformational investments in health, education, and social protection. The objective is rapid progress toward a world in which all children are wellnourished and ready to learn, can attain real learning in the classroom, and can enter the job market as healthy, skilled, and productive adults.

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