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# Evaluation of School Feeding Programme in South Sudan, 2018-2023

## CONTEXT

South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, after decades of fighting a liberation war; and continues to face a multifaceted crisis, including violent conflict, insecurity and a protracted humanitarian crisis. With an estimated population of 11,581,878 people South Sudan is a young, resource-rich, largely agricultural country with 63% of the population living below the nationally defined poverty line and around 85% engaged in subsistence agriculture. In much of South Sudan, conflict has halted agricultural production and other economic activities.

Due to high poverty levels, coupled with instability, parents prefer not to send their children to school, rather, they are kept at home to help with economic activities. This breeds an inter-generational cycle of not only poverty but also illiteracy. **Enrolment rates are some of the lowest in the world**, with girls, children with disabilities, those displaced by conflict, and refugees marginalized. The net enrolment is very low at 3.3%, 37.6% and 5.2% for pre-primary, primary and secondary schooling respectively. **The literacy rate was estimated in 2021 to be around 34%, with significant gender disparities** (only 29 percent of women were literate, compared to 40 percent of men). The World Food Programme (WFP)'s support of the School Feeding Programme (SFP) aligns with Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 2 – supporting countries to achieve Zero Hunger and SDG 17 – partnering to support implementation of the SDGs.

## THE PROGRAMME

The SFP was focused on two strategic outcomes: Strategic outcome (SO) 1 which consisted of Activities 1 and 2. Activity 1 sought to provide food and nutrition

assistance to vulnerable populations affected by crises; including providing school meals to vulnerable school children (especially girls) in rural and urban settings. Activity 2 ensured the provision of food and nutrition assistance to refugees in eight refugee camps across the country; including school meal assistance to school age girls and boys in refugee camps. Strategic outcome 3 aimed via activity 4 to ensure that food-insecure smallholders and communities in non-conflict zones had enhanced livelihoods and resilience to seasonal climate shocks.

## OBJECTIVES AND USERS OF THE EVALUATION

This decentralized evaluation commissioned by the WFP Country Office in South Sudan, serves the mutually reinforcing objectives of **accountability and learning**. For accountability purposes, the evaluation assessed the performance and results of the SFP, and long-term effects of the programme including intended, and unintended outcomes, and negative or positive outcomes for targeted (girls, boys, men, and women), communities and institutions.

The expected users of this evaluation are the WFP Country Office and its decision-making partners, Office of Evaluation (OEV), WFP Headquarters in Rome, WFP Executive Board, Ministries of Education, Agriculture, Health and Population; and Social Affairs; Directorate of School Feeding; key partners such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and other stakeholders.

## KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

### Relevance

There was evidence that the SFP (2018-2022) was highly relevant and had responded appropriately to protracted and frequent shocks (e.g. climate-related, conflict, economic instability) including the COVID-19 pandemic,

adjusting to the evolving needs in a gender-responsive manner and using an integrated approach. **The SFP targeted the most vulnerable high-risk communities facing food insecurity**, low access to education, high drop-out and absenteeism, including prioritizing schools in rural, remote and hard to reach areas, thereby reaching many vulnerable children. The SFP was well aligned with the policies, strategies, and priorities at the global, regional and national levels relating to school feeding and related issues, especially for girls. The evidence-based criteria used in the theory of change (ToC) proved relevant and appropriate. The logic of the ToC was proven to be structurally sound and plausible with linkages showing the pathway of achievement of outcomes. Though the programme had a gender and inclusive approach, an important gap is that it did not specifically target persons living with disabilities.

## Coherence

**The SFP 2018-2023 was highly coherent with internal and external interventions.** It was implemented alongside blanket deworming, hygiene education and WASH improvements in WFP-supported schools. UNICEF and WFP fostered UN Coherence through committed participation in the UN Country Team (UNCT) – their programme of cooperation contributed to all four agreed outcome areas of the United Nations Cooperation Framework 2019–2021. The SFP planning was embedded into the South Sudan education system and implemented within the parameters of the school calendar. The programme was also complementary to other interventions such as smallholder agricultural market support (SAMS) and nutrition. For instance, the home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programme benefited the smallholder farmers, communities, and local economies through local food purchases.

## Effectiveness

**The SFP displayed effectiveness in the achievement of its objectives though there were limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2020) and severe funding cuts (in 2022).** Several factors contributed to the achievement of the programme objectives including the commitment of the South Sudanese Government to the SFP; a supportive policy environment with school feeding integrated into the broader education and nutrition strategies; evidence of community engagement and ownership; and capacity building of various stakeholders including government, communities and smallholders by WFP. At output level, 2019 and 2021 were the best performing years, however, in 2022, severe funding gaps forced WFP to reprioritize and reduce the number of targeted beneficiaries, thereby affecting 178,000 school-going children in 21 counties where the SFP was suspended.

Proportionately more pupils and more girls were enrolled in the intervention schools compared to the comparison schools. There was an average of 752 pupils per intervention school compared to 536 pupils per non-intervention school. Overall, 1303 more girls than boys

were enrolled in the intervention schools while in the comparison schools there were 226 more boys than girls.

The results for **basic literacy** measured by correct responses on all the sub-tasks of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) (P2 and P3), indicated that the **intervention schools' performance was significantly higher (40.5%) than that of the comparison schools (33.8%)**  $p < .05$ . Though boys in intervention schools outperformed the girls, the girls in intervention schools significantly outperformed girls (37.5% vs 34.9%;  $p < .05$ ) and boys (37.5% vs 32.7%) in comparison schools. The significant difference in basic literacy performance between intervention and comparison schools persisted across rural and urban schools, highlighting the equity focus of the programme. Rural intervention schools also performed better in basic numeracy (48.5%) than rural comparison schools (41.2%),  $p < .0001$ .

It was **evident that the SFP was not complemented with sufficient infrastructural development to meet the demands of the expected results** of the programme in terms of increased enrolment and retention of pupils in schools. The intervention schools had an average of 82 pupils per class compared to 75 pupils per class in the comparison schools. In terms of outcomes related to SO3, the household beneficiary survey revealed perceptions of severe food deprivation, as **almost 91% of households reported periods where there was no food of any kind available due to an inability to purchase food**. The findings at household level highlighted the critical gap being filled for the schoolgoing children and their families by the on-site school meals and the take-home rations (THRs).

## Efficiency

Overall, during the programme years, WFP faced exceptional challenges with expanding humanitarian needs, the COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorating funding, all of which limited the efficiency of the SFP. Not all the activities of the SFP could be implemented as planned. Nevertheless, there was evidence of **maximizing the use of limited resources**, implementing activities at a reduced level under a resource-based prioritisation plan based on expected funding availability - which **enabled the coverage of a large proportion of beneficiaries during most of the programme years**. Measures to improve cost-effectiveness include local procurement using the decentralized approach under the HGSF strategy, utilisation of cheaper alternatives and the communities' contribution of time, labour, and firewood.

## Impact

**The SFP displayed promising effects and contributions to impact on learning outcomes of its beneficiaries.** There was a pronounced effect on girls' education, with an observed surge in girls' enrolment which suggested a positive shift in community attitudes towards the importance of girls' education. This was

accompanied by a reported shifting of views by community members regarding traditional harmful practices, such as early marriage. This positive effect was enhanced by awareness-raising efforts on girls' education during training sessions with parent teacher associations (PTAs) and school management committees (SMCs), as well as through collaborative actions with UNICEF and government-led initiatives, particularly cash transfers.

## Sustainability

**The SFP 2018-2023 showed potential for sustainability limited by fiscal gaps.** The programme demonstrated strong alignment with government policies and strategies, particularly evident in the selection of schools and the integration of the SFP with broader educational objectives. **There was political commitment to the programme** with evidence of buy-in and national ownership. **However, an important threat to the sustainability of the programme was the poor financial commitment** by the Government. Government coordination and capacity to manage the SFP at national and state levels was inadequate and a weakness for sustainability. However, there was evidence of community ownership of the programme - the high involvement of PTA and the strengthening of SMC created a robust support system with an extensive network built around the SFP. **The HGSF strategy, and multi-sectoral approach to service delivery held potential for sustainability.** Additionally, initiatives such as school gardens and decentralized local procurement of produce have the positive influence of fostering self-reliance and meaningful community engagement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Overall assessment

The overall conclusions on the SFP (2018-2023) in South Sudan is that the programme was highly relevant and coherent; effective in achieving its objectives with many positive features relating to its outputs and outcomes; with positive effects and contribution to impact on pupils' learning outcomes with evidence of transformational shift in the mindset of intervention communities.

However, the programme was limited in both efficiency and effectiveness by severe funding cuts in the face of escalating humanitarian and programme needs. These fiscal gaps which were compounded by poor financial commitment by the Government to the programme are major hindrances to sustainability of the positive outcomes and effects seen in this evaluation.

Nevertheless, an important potential for the sustainability of the programme is the move to strengthen the domestication of the programme through the home-grown school feeding initiative.

**It is important to point out the contributory role of the SFP on literacy outcomes.** There are many factors relating to the school environment, including teachers, pupils and factors outside the school such as the overall governance of the education system and the national budget for education - that are outside the control of WFP but are needed to support sustainable learning outcomes.

## Recommendations

Several recommendations are made by the evaluation team based on the findings of this evaluation. They include but are not limited to the following:

**Recommendation 1.** Prioritize fundraising for school feeding given the evidence in this evaluation of severe food deprivation in beneficiary households and the better learning outcomes in the intervention schools.

**Recommendation 2.** Generate evidence from the HGSF programme (in view of the evolving funding climate) through research/evaluation in 2025-2026 to gain insight into its effectiveness in strengthening local food systems within the context.

**Recommendation 3.** Strengthen the programme monitoring system. Address data gaps relating to routine enrolment, attendance and drop-out data. Include tracking of school kitchen functionality in the indicators and clearly outline gender equality perspectives in the project's outputs or indicators.

**Recommendation 4.** Incorporate a more inclusive approach to target persons living with disabilities (PLWD). As a start, data should be collected on PLWD among the programme's target beneficiaries to prevent their exclusion from the interventions.

**Recommendation 5.** Improve community participation in the design and implementation of the programme by collection of community feedback, involvement in decision making, and empowering them more for programme ownership. Develop a Community Engagement Strategy to ensure continued community-led support and advocacy.

**Recommendation 6.** Intensify investment in government technical capacity for the logistical management of school feeding at national and state levels in all future school feeding support by WFP in South Sudan.

**Recommendation 7.** Ensure the retention of boys in schools to avoid creating a disparity since they may be more susceptible to engaging in criminal and gang-related activities, particularly in a post-conflict setting. Closing the gender gap in education should be achieved by increasing girls' education without sacrificing boys' retention.