

Cambodia School Feeding Impact Evaluation

Context

Despite economic growth in recent decades, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. It has an estimated population of 13.4 million, of whom 30 percent still live below the national poverty line. Although Cambodia produces food surpluses, food insecurity affects an estimated 1.7 million people, particularly during lean seasons. The main causes of food insecurity are limited livelihood opportunities, recent economic shocks such as food price rises, which have reduced household purchasing power and access to sufficient and diverse food, low productivity among small-scale farmers and the lack of access to land for the poorest households. Floods and droughts have also added to the vulnerability of poor households.

Although Cambodia has made considerable progress in expanding basic education in recent years, major concerns remain with regard to deteriorating physical infrastructure, the quality of educational services, high drop-out and low retention rates and an acute shortage of trained teachers, especially in remote areas. Under the National Strategic Development Plan (2006–2010), the Government is committed to ensuring equitable access to basic education for all children and to reducing the financial burden for poor students.

Cambodia School Feeding (2000-2010)

Protracted relief and recovery programme 6038.01, which started in 2001, included the first WFP school feeding component in support of basic education. The number of beneficiaries in the school feeding programme rose from 291,593 in 2002 to 482,961 in 2009, peaking at 610,000 in 2006. The decrease after 2006 was a reflection of lack of funding for food and rising food prices. The programme reached a significant 20 percent of primary pupils in the 2009/10 school year in 1,624 of the 6,665 schools in the country.

During the period under evaluation, more vulnerable segments of the population were targeted as school feeding interventions were prioritized. On the basis of vulnerability assessments, coverage changed from a country-wide approach to a focus on the most food-insecure communities in 12 of the country's 24 provinces.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

This evaluation is the second school feeding impact evaluation commissioned by the Office of Evaluation. The objective of this evaluation was to provide evidence of intended and unintended effects of the WFP school feeding programme in Cambodia with a view to supporting programme design and informing school feeding policy. More specific objectives were:

- i) to evaluate the outcomes and impact achieved so far from the various modalities used in relation to educational and gender objectives;
- ii) to evaluate outcomes and impact achieved in relation to WFP's new social safety net policy objectives, even though they were not explicitly included in the school feeding programme and to assess the extent to which the programme met or could potentially meet them; and
- iii) to identify changes needed to enable the programme to contribute optimally to the objectives of the Government, the current WFP Strategic Plan and the 2009 school feeding policy.

The evaluation applied a mixed-methods approach using complementary quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and analysis

The evaluation covered the period 2000-2010 and was carried out between April and September 2010 by a team of independent evaluators.

The evaluation report is presented to the Executive Board in February 2011.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Education

The evaluation found a significant effect on enrolment in that school feeding was a strong incentive for parents to send their children to school – but the positive effect was only sustained while schools benefited from the programme. The evaluation also found that take-home rations had a significant positive effect on attendance; the school meals programme had a positive tendency. School feeding reduced drop-out rates, especially in grades 2, 3 and 4, but standard performance tests showed minimal benefits in terms of improved learning, which is probably attributable to contextual factors.

Nutrition

Anthropometric measurements among girls suggested that school meals enabled them to take advantage of the pre-puberty growth spurt. The evaluation also found an important correlation between the height of girls in the school meals programme and household sanitary conditions. The school feeding programme helped to reduce morbidity among pupils in general and absences from school as a result of illness among girls.

The school meals programme had no significant effect on haemoglobin levels and anaemia prevalence rates among pupils because the food basket contained no iron-fortified foods. Survey data, however, indicate improved vitamin-A status in pupils benefiting from school feeding.

The school meals programme had a robust and significant association with increased dietary diversity scores, which is a proxy for nutritional adequacy, for both sexes and across provinces and wealth groups; as expected, the take-home rations had no significant effect on the scores.

Value Transfer

The take-home ration was worth up to 26 percent of incomes in households with the fewest assets; among school meals beneficiaries the figure was 14 percent. The school meals modality had the effect of saving time in beneficiary families, especially for women. Beneficiary households will become more resilient to food shortages during lean periods, particularly because the take-home ration means that poor families can extend the period during which they do not have to buy rice, which in turn reduces their vulnerability and increases the options for investing in assets.

Factors Influencing Results

Certain factors limited the positive effects, however: i) poverty, vulnerability and the need for extra household income, which affected school attendance when children were old enough to work; ii) low education among parents; iii) low quality of education because of poor teacher training and absenteeism; and iv) access factors such as insufficient schools offering all nine primary grades and inadequate infrastructure.

Successful school feeding programmes are based on community involvement and government commitment. The Cambodia programme functioned effectively and was well organized, but the following factors could be reinforced to make interventions more effective and sustainable: i) programme design, in terms of objectives and food fortification; ii) community involvement and support for government ownership and commitment; and iii) strategic capacity development.

Conclusions

The school feeding programme was aligned with the Government's education goals and strategy. In the past ten years it has achieved its aim of supporting primary education by contributing to increased enrolment, attendance and promotion and to reduced drop-out rates. The school feeding programme had marked effects on nutrition and value transfers to households, but the school meals programme and take-home rations affected education, nutrition and value transfer in different ways.

The National Social Protection Strategy is the most appropriate framework for future school feeding, and take-home rations are the preferred approach because they target those most in need and have a higher value for beneficiaries than the school meals programme, thus functioning as a more effective social-protection scheme.

The school meals programme was an incentive for families to enrol their children, complementing other efforts in the country to increase enrolment and attendance. The modality had a stronger effect on nutrition than take-home rations did. Government commitment is fundamental if such programmes are to be effective across the education sector. As a large-scale programme with targeting at the school rather than household level, value transfer to the poorest households within a targeted community was limited.

The positive effects of the school feeding programme could be significantly increased through mutually reinforcing partnerships with agencies working to improve the quality of education.

Schoolchildren in Cambodia suffer from high levels of chronic undernutrition, underweight and anaemia, which will affect child health, economic productivity and maternal mortality.

Tackling childhood undernutrition is vital in Cambodia, and different approaches need to be explored. The use of fortified rice in the school feeding programme could be effective in this context if evidence can be provided to show that it reduces the prevalence of iron-deficiency anaemia in both sexes. The school feeding policy emphasizes that WFP will ensure that school meals are nutritious and that it will fortify them where necessary.

More precise targeting of household-level vulnerability criteria would increase the effects and impacts of the take-home rations modality, especially with regard to value transfers and retention of children from poorer families.

School feeding monitoring measurements change over time for some indicators, but they do not provide for comparisons with non-programme areas. To improve monitoring, prospective analysis must be improved and smaller control groups should be used as part of regular monitoring.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The country office should consider the differentiated effects of modalities in future programming.

Recommendation 2: A higher proportion of resources should be allocated to take-home rations.

Recommendation 3: The country office should focus on supporting the development of a sustainable, nationally owned school meals programme. The core of WFP's involvement should be support for the development of capacities in national institutions and development of a sustainable procurement modality. On the basis of current experience WFP and the Ministry of Education should identify a pilot modality for later roll-out.

Recommendation 4: Future interventions should be part of comprehensive packages; the collaboration with UNICEF should be broadened to include other partners.

Recommendation 5: The country office should continue its participation in multi-sectoral initiatives such as technical working groups, which are required to combat childhood undernutrition in an efficacious and cost-effective manner.

Recommendation 6: The country office should design and implement modalities for including fortified food in its school feeding programme.

Recommendation 7: Targeting should be improved to better ensure a focus on the most vulnerable populations.

Recommendation 8: WFP should use control groups and longitudinal indicators for future monitoring to improve results-based programming and produce evidence of the effects of school feeding programmes on education, nutrition (including anaemia) and value transfer as set out in the school feeding policy.

Reference: Full and summary reports of the Evaluation and the Management Response are available at: <http://www.wfp.org/about/evaluation>
For more information, please contact the WFP Office of Evaluation at: WFP.Evaluation@wfp.org