

# Insights on sustaining school feeding:

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: RESULTS OF AN EX-POST LEARNING STUDY

### INTRODUCTION

The Government of Benin (GoB) first launched school feeding efforts in 1975. Following the passing of national school feeding policy in 2014, financial investments in the government's Integrated National School Feeding Program (PNASI) have significantly increased in recent years with the aim of achieving universal coverage by 2026. The government has already achieved great strides toward scale with the program expanding from a 2015 primary school coverage rate of 31% to 75% by 2022.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has contributed to this scale-up through its school feeding programming and eventual handover of its targeted schools. After a decade of school feeding programming starting in 1999, CRS/Benin launched the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition-funded *Keun Faaba* project in 2014. The project supported 152 primary schools which were transitioned to PNASI in 2023. In 2017, CRS/Benin also led a USDA-funded Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) project to pilot a local model linking local agricultural actors with the school feeding system. The pilot targeted 80 additional schools which were also transitioned to PNASI at project closure in 2020.

As CRS continues to implement school feeding programming in Benin (and anticipates the handover of an additional 167 primary schools to PNASI from its current *Keun Faaba III* project), these past projects offer important learning on the sustainability of CRS' school feeding model and transition processes from CRS to local government. This document highlights key findings and recommendations from an ex-post learning study launched in 2023.

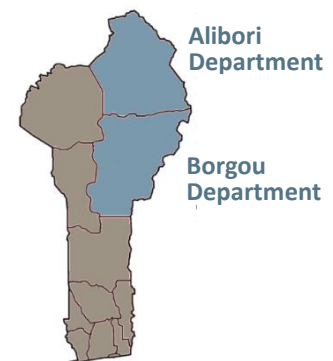
### STUDY

Leveraging USAID's [conceptual framework for sustainability](#) which defines four factors as critical for sustaining development programming – resources, capacity, motivation, and linkages – this ex-post study explored two learning questions:

- What was the process to transition responsibility for school feeding to the Government of Benin? What worked well and what did not?
- Which components of school feeding have been sustained and how? Which have waned and why?

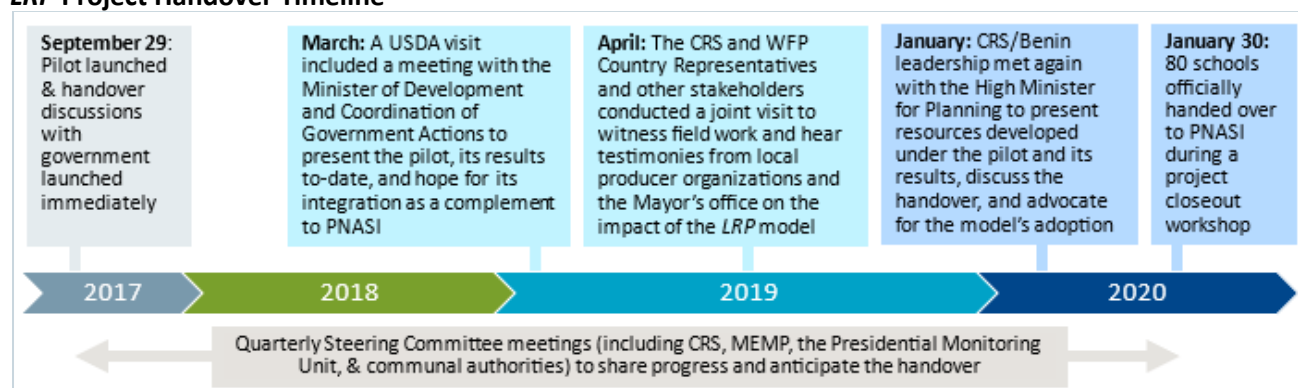
CRS hosted an after action review workshop on July 25, 2023 attended by 20 stakeholders including staff from CRS, Caritas Benin, representatives from the *Direction Départementale des Enseignements* (DDEMP) and the WFP (the GoB's PNASI implementing partner). Participants conducted a milestone mapping exercise and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the two handover processes. The study team then analyzed available data on school feeding frequency post-handover. This data was used to select a sample of 16 schools, 8 which excelled at and 8 which struggled to deliver daily meals following the handover. In addition to interviews with school directors and focus groups with teachers and school management committee (SMC) members at each school, qualitative data collection included interviews with 2 DDEMP staff, 6 PNASI local implementing partner staff, 4 communal authorities, and the *Chef de Service de l'Alimentation Scolaire* from the PNASI National Monitoring Committee.

**MAP:** CRS' *Keun Faaba I/II* and LRP projects collectively targeted 232 schools across the Alibori and Borgou Departments in northern Benin. The study sample of 16 schools was evenly split across the two departments.



## HANDOVER PROCESSES

### LRP Project Handover Timeline

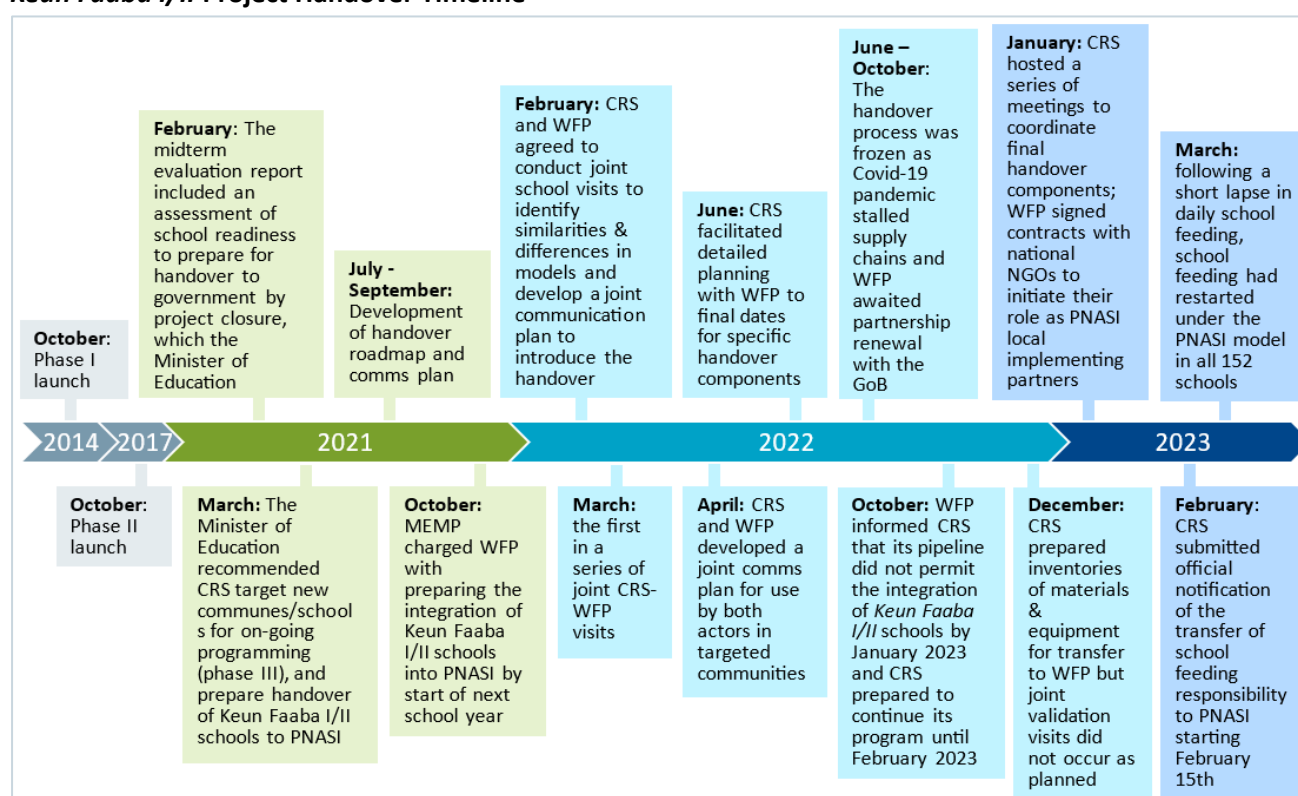


### Lessons Learned:

- Planning the handover from project inception enabled CRS to convene the GoB and its implementing partner WFP early and consistently to champion joint expectations for the handover date.
- Lack of a written transition plan resulted in handover preparation limited to verbal exchanges and infrequent joint field visits. Written plans are advised to bolster accountability, document obstacles and solutions, and ultimately contribute to knowledge management.
- During the ambitious two year pilot timeline, CRS developed a proof of concept for the LRP model in Benin shared with MEMP. The LRP model, however, was not employed as the source of commodities for the 80 pilot schools following the transfer to WFP under PNASI as this expectation was never formalized. Some components, such as school gardens and farms, were sustained by motivated school communities.

Initiated a year following the completed *LRP* handover process, the *Keun Faaba I/II* handover process built upon the above learning and entailed the following detailed process:

### Keun Faaba I/II Project Handover Timeline



## Lessons Learned

- Initiating the process two years in advance was fruitful for quality planning, implementation, and eventual finetuning of the handover, including overcoming challenges experienced in 2022.
- Coordination between the national government, CRS, and WFP under the leadership of representatives of both MEMP and the National Monitoring Committee strengthened the handover process.
- The early documentation of a handover roadmap helped clarify roles and responsibilities and harmonize expectations, creating a foundation to monitor progress and drive accountability.
- The longer handover process supported greater communication with communities. After a series of joint visits to both CRS- and PNASI-supported schools, differences in the two school feeding models were captured and expressed in an updated communication plan for use by all parties.
- CRS directly implemented the school feeding component of the *Keun Faaba I/II* project, so local NGOs which were contracted to implement the PNASI model were not engaged until the handover occurred. Instead, as is practiced today, engaging local actors in direct implementation enables consistency in the relationship between school communities and school feeding actors before and after the handover.
- WFP staff affirmed that the CRS model established important capacities and resources upon which PNASI could sustain school feeding without needing to launch their approach from scratch. Some significant differences in the two models, however, were noteworthy and required adjustments at the school level, including the number of canteens per pedagogical school especially for pedagogical groups and whether canteens are managed by directors or SMCs. Investing time to understand and minimize differences between project and government models is critical to sustainability.

## KEY FINDINGS

Annual data shared by local implementing partners reveals that the daily provision of school meals has been largely sustained following the handovers. Provision of meals for 90% or more of school days was achieved by 78% of *LRP* schools immediately following the handover and rose to 100% by 2023-2024. Similarly, 76% of *Keun Faaba I/II* schools achieved school feeding for 90% or more of 2022-2023 school days followed by 99% of schools in 2023-2024. These results affirm that the handover of school feeding from CRS to PNASI was largely successful and initial challenges to daily frequency improved overtime. An adjustment to the new program appears to have taken place more quickly amongst *Keun Faaba I/II* schools than *LRP* schools, which may be linked to the longer, more intentional handover process as described above. The primary source of commodities was sustained under PNASI, but community engagement (and subsequently community contributions) has waned since the handover which school actors associate with slight reductions in quantity and quality.



### Resources

Meals provided under CRS' model, leveraged both project-delivered commodities and ingredients provided by the community. Most school actors described community contributions to the school feeding program – financial, in-kind, or via work in the school garden – as having declined since the handover.

When asked what CRS did well to support the sustainability of school feeding, respondents from all groups noted infrastructural investments. School directors reported that critical school feeding facilities remain in good condition. Amongst *LRP* schools where CRS programming closed nearly five years ago, some deterioration in infrastructure status was noted, reflecting the challenge of infrastructural sustainability over time yet suggesting that daily school feeding can be maintained despite these challenges.

Several school directors celebrated the introduction of school gardens under the CRS model to engage communities in supplementing school meal ingredients. Second only to chronic water access challenges, however, respondents mentioned fencing as a critical missing resource as small animals and foot traffic have deteriorated many gardens.



### Capacity

Only 9 directors and less than half of teacher and SMC focus groups in the 16 schools responded affirmatively to feeling ready to maintain daily school feeding after CRS project closure. SMC members admitted feeling unprepared to sustain community mobilization which 7 of the 16 directors reported is a capacity that has weakened. 7 of the 16 SMCs collectively reported that monitoring and reporting skills are worse, compared to only 3 directors. This disparity is likely driven by a shift in responsibility wherein reporting was largely the responsibility of SMC leadership under CRS' model but is part of the director's role under PNASI. The representative of the National Monitoring Committee noted that CRS' model did not focus on preparing school directors' contributions to PNASI monitoring and expressed a need for institutional support to improve and digitize data management and monitoring.

When asked why certain school feeding capacities have declined, school actors cited a lack of refresher trainings and accompaniment, particularly for SMCs. An additional explanation for weakened capacities included SMCs' reduced role under the PNASI model. A school director from a *Keun Faaba I/II* school noted that the consolidation of canteen management responsibility under the director has resulted in the overall absence of his SMC with another describing the SMC's lack of visibility into canteen management today. Six of the 16 SMCs self-reported an overall reduction in their capacity; notably, 5 of these 6 are from schools which struggled to maintain daily feeding following the handover, suggesting a link between weak SMC engagement and challenges to sustain school feeding frequency. A director from a former *Keun Faaba I/II* school where school feeding is thriving mentioned that his SMC has experienced no turnover since the handover occurred, so the skills acquired have continued to be practiced and the SMC continues to support canteen management. Conversely, two directors from schools which struggled to deliver daily meals lamented the level of responsibility they bear to sustain school feeding in the absence of engaged SMCs.



### Motivation

Staff from local NGOs and school actors described the sustainability of school feeding as largely determined by the level of SMC motivation to mobilize communities. Actors in schools which struggled to sustain school feeding partially attributed a decline in community engagement to the absence of project staff. The shift in resource intensity between the CRS and government model has resulted in less monitoring visits, rendering community mobilization largely the responsibility of SMC members who themselves admit to feeling less motivated today. All school actors reported that SMC meeting frequency has decreased following the handover of both projects.

Under the CRS model, cooks and warehouse managers received monthly take-home rations while SMC members earned per diem and transportation assistance following trainings. These incentives were not sustained, and the motivation they developed has waned according to school actors. As the frontline community organizers, a disengaged SMC yields distance between communities and school feeding which respondents noted is resulting in less material contributions to school canteens. The GoB recognizes the critical role of community members to canteen management as PNASI comes to greater scale. The representative of the National Monitoring Committee admitted that "management committees under PNASI are not as motivated. It is only now that the State wants to do something in favor of the mothers who cook" school meals.

Most teachers reported feeling less motivated to support school feeding today than under the CRS model but reported continuing to play their role because of its importance to their students. Like SMC members, they miss training opportunities experienced under the CRS model but also feel demotivated due to the burden of increased responsibility. Some teachers specifically mentioned becoming responsible to ensure that children eat, reducing their time to prepare instruction.



### Linkages/Roles

Post-handover, the shift in canteen management responsibility from the community to the school director was challenging. Many school actors noted the merits of the new model, including clear leadership and accountability of the director and streamlined coordination between the government and individual schools, an advantage which is critical to pursuing national scale. On the other hand, directors described the heavy challenge of meeting government reporting expectations. The National Monitoring Committee representative noted that the perceived pressure of accountability to government can dissuade community engagement, increasing the responsibility that falls to directors alone. An SMC member also described the risk associated with consolidating responsibility under the director: "a task that a number of people join together to carry out compared to the same task that is carried out by only one person now – it is not good. One person can make a mistake but not the whole group. At least there will be someone who will say that there is a mistake." An SMC member summarized the advantage of community-led canteen management as empowering "parents to understand that... school is for everyone. School belongs more to parents than to the State." One director summarized the polarizing challenges of the two models: school feeding is difficult to sustain under CRS' model if community mobilization wanes, but the PNASI model runs the risk of being unsustainable due to the turnover of school directors who are "foreigners" within the school communities they serve.

During *LRP* and *Keun Faaba I/II* programming, the Mayor's office was formally engaged in infrastructure interventions and high-level events. These resource-intensive activities were not sustained post-project, and thus the linkage between communal authorities and on-going school feeding has diminished with communal actors admitting to conducting fewer monitoring visits today. On the other hand, representatives from each communal government described dedicated budget lines to support school feeding. How these budgets will be leveraged to support schools was unclear.

These findings suggest that CRS' holistic yet more resource-intensive model was successful at preparing school communities to sustain school feeding under PNASI, but refinements can be made to hone a model that both empowers and sustains community ownership of school feeding while contributing to the scale of high quality school feeding in Benin.

### CRS' COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY UNDER CURRENT *KEUN FAABA III* PROJECT:

- **Harmonizing approaches to establish the number of school canteens per school.** At project launch, CRS adopted the PNASI approach to canteen targeting to enable a smoother transition after project closure.
- **Working with a PNASI implementing partner.** Upholding CRS' commitment to local leadership, local NGO Caritas Benin is directly implementing *Keun Faaba III*. A PNASI implementing partner, Caritas Benin is uniquely placed to accompany school communities to develop and sustain school feeding systems and practices during and after CRS' support.
- **Strengthening systems for sustained community engagement.** CRS will introduce its Child-Optimized Financial Education (COFE) curriculum to the 500 project SILC groups to support families to establish and pursue financial goals. Greater financial resilience is intended to ease parents' contributions to school feeding – either financial, in-kind, or through time spent tending school gardens. To bolster communities' engagement via school gardens, local NGO DEDRAS supports parents to produce highly nutritious vegetable crops and teachers are engaged in incorporating the gardens as a learning tool, driving community-wide support to sustain gardens without project assistance. CRS is also reinforcing school committees' internal governance through trainings on management tools and resource mobilization.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO BOLSTER SCHOOL FEEDING SUSTAINABILITY IN BENIN:

- **Develop an early pathway to harmonize CRS and PNASI incentive models.** An early handover process should prioritize a joint reflection on the current and future incentive models. In addition to harmonizing them as much as possible, a gradual transition which is actively communicated to communities is advised to avoid resentment towards PNASI following an abrupt end to *Keun Faaba III* incentives. CRS and Caritas Benin could train SMC leaders to lead sustainable incentive delivery such as provision of school garden produce to offset the time invested by community volunteers. Early efforts to sustain community engagement should be well documented and packaged for continued delivery under PNASI.
- **Collaborate with ANAN to pilot a hybrid school feeding management model that leverages the strengths of school directors and communities.** Director-led school feeding supports scale of a centralized approach but SMC-led canteen management fosters greater community engagement, which is critical for a thriving school environment and the GoB's decentralization priorities. A model that empowers both lines of leadership could offer both sets of advantages. CRS could adapt its current SMC-led model to engage school directors as the SMC president and a community member as vice-president, maintaining the director's role within the government hierarchy while focusing on SMC contributions to canteen management such as monitoring and community engagement. Such a model would mitigate the severity of adjustments during the 2026 CRS handover to PNASI, but more importantly it could sustainably bolster the role of SMCs under PNASI as the model is further scaled.
- **Extend CRS/Benin's digitization technical assistance to the GoB to strengthen PNASI monitoring systems.** CRS' [expertise](#) supporting the GoB to digitize health campaigns can be leveraged to deepen recent collaboration with ANAN and support their efforts to strengthen school feeding monitoring and data management. In addition to technical assistance to determine appropriate technological solutions, CRS can support ANAN in developing training resources that extend to and ensure quality implementation at the school level.
- **Support national capacity strengthening focused on community engagement approaches.** In response to MEMP's invitation for CRS to invest in institutional strengthening and to address challenges related to SMC motivation and community engagement, CRS/Benin could support the development of a community engagement strategy for integration in PNASI, including but not limited to approaches to mobilize community contributions. CRS can also package light refresher training modules specific to *Keun Faaba III* community engagement approaches of most interest to ANAN. CRS could engage MEMP, ANAN, and commune-level authorities in delivering these refresher trainings to SMCs or other school community actors during *Keun Faaba III* to develop facilitation capacities. Additional advocacy could be made to earmark communal budget lines to sustain refresher trainings following CRS' departure.