

Insights on sustaining school feeding:

FULL REPORT: RESULTS OF AN EX-POST LEARNING STUDY IN BENIN

INTRODUCTION

Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) *Keun Faaba* school feeding project in Benin first began in 2014. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition (USDA's MGD FFE) program, the project supported 152 primary schools until its closure in 2023 when school feeding responsibility was handed over to the Government of Benin's Integrated National School Feeding Program (PNASI). In the same zone, CRS/Benin also led a 2017-2020 USDA-funded Local and Regional Procurement (LRP) project to pilot a local model linking local agricultural actors with the school feeding system. The 80 schools engaged in this pilot were also transitioned to PNASI at project closure for continued school feeding support.

As CRS continues to implement school programming in Benin, these past projects offer important learning on the sustainability of CRS' school feeding model and transition processes from CRS to local government.

ACRONYMS

- **ANAN:** *Agence Nationale de l'Alimentation et de la Nutrition* (National Feeding and Nutrition Agency charged with implementing PNASI)
- **CRS:** Catholic Relief Services
- **DDEMP:** *Direction Départementale des Enseignements Maternel et Primaire* (decentralized body in each of Benin's 12 Departments responsible for implementing MEMP policies)
- **GoB:** the Government of Benin
- **LRP:** local and regional procurement
- **MEMP:** *Ministère des Enseignements Maternel et Primaire* (Ministry of Primary and Preschool Education)
- **PNASI:** *Programme National d'Alimentation Scolaire Intégré* (Integrated National School Feeding Program)
- **SMC:** School Management Committee
- **USDA/MGD/FFE:** United States Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole Food for Education & Child Nutrition program
- **WFP:** World Food Programme

KEY TERMS

- **Handover:** referring to the specific process of formally transferring responsibility for school feeding from CRS to PNASI
- **Sustainability:** broader term referring to the continuation of CRS programming approaches or outcomes following project closure

STUDY

Objective

This ex-post learning study explored two high-level questions:

- **Learning Question #1:** What was the process to transition responsibility for school feeding to the Government of Benin? What worked well and what did not?
- **Learning Question #2:** Which components of school feeding have been sustained and how? Which have waned and why?

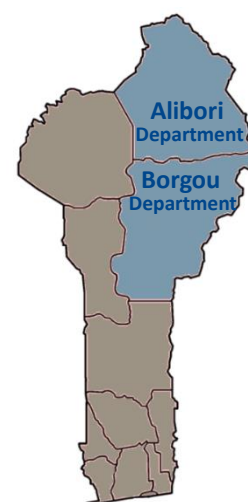
The study design leveraged a [conceptual framework for sustainability](#) developed by USAID which defines four factors as critical for sustaining development programming: resources, capacity, motivation, and linkages.

Methodology

To address learning question 1, CRS/Benin hosted an after action review (AAR) workshop on July 25, 2023. The 20 attendees included CRS leaders and staff, the Caritas Benin Director of Programs, representatives of the DDEMP, and representatives from WFP/Benin. The AAR workshop consisted of a milestone mapping exercise and group reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the two handover processes.

To address learning question 2, the study team 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. Qualitative data collection – focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) – included:

TOOL	TARGET	TOTAL	NOTES
KII	School Principal	16	8 <i>Keun Faaba I/II</i> schools in Alibori and 8 <i>LRP</i> schools in Borgou
FGD	Teachers	16	4 least & 4 most performing <i>LRP</i> and <i>Keun Faaba I/II</i> schools
FGD	SMC members	16	4 least & 4 most performing <i>LRP</i> and <i>Keun Faaba I/II</i> schools
KII	DDEMP	2	1 in Alibori Department and 1 in Borgou Department <i>Chargé de l'alimentation dans les écoles primaire</i> in Borgou Department
FGD	NGO staff currently implementing PNASI	2	1 Sian N'Son staff in Alibori Department 5 Caritas staff in Borgou Department
KII	Mayor (or representative)	4	Kandi Commune: Education Focal Point N'Dali Commune: Executive Secretary & WASH Focal Point Tchaourou Commune: Education Focal Point Perere Commune: Education Focal Point
FGD	<i>Union régionale des Producteurs</i> (URP)	1	2 staff from regional agricultural organization (former <i>LRP</i> partner) covering both Alibori and Borgou Departments
KII	National Monitoring Committee for PNASI	1	Mr. Oussou Elisé, <i>Chef Service de l'Alimentation Scolaire</i> , who supervised the two handover processes



CONTEXT

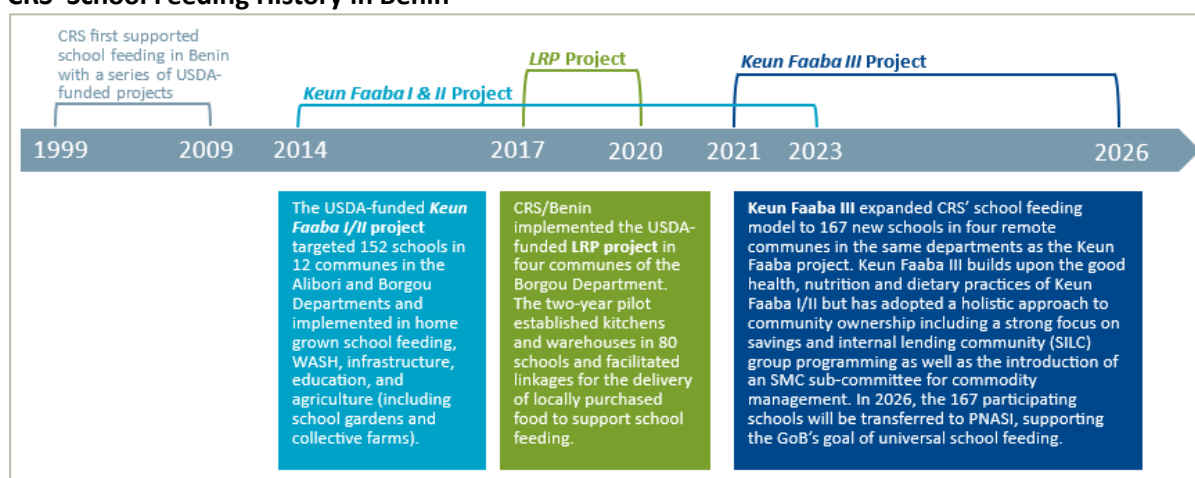
History of School Feeding in Benin

Since 2006, parents in Benin no longer have had to pay primary school fees, but they can continue to face difficult financial decisions when choosing to send their children to school or engagement them in household chores or income generating activities. The daily provision of school meals, therefore, has served as a significant incentive to parents to send their children to school while contributing to children's health and readiness to learn.

The Government of Benin (GoB) first launched school feeding efforts in 1975, which were formalized as a national program in 2000 and codified under national school feeding policy in 2014. National budget allocation began increasing significantly after the 2017 launch of the Integrated National School Feeding Program (PNASI) – the concrete application of the 2014 school feeding policy, which is directly implemented by WFP and national NGOs at the local level. In 2023, the GoB launched ANAN (*Agence Nationale de l'Alimentation et de la Nutrition*) as the national body responsible for the future of school feeding implementation. Seeking universal school feeding by 2026, the government

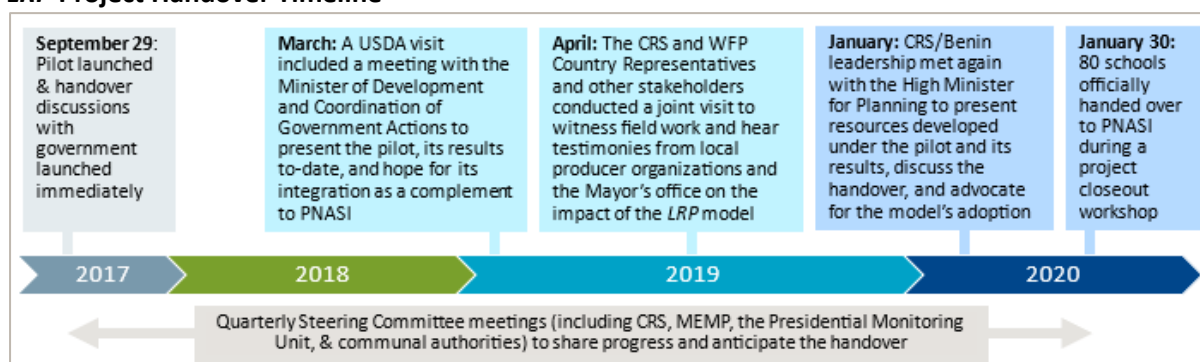
has already achieved great strides towards scale with the program expanding from a 2015 coverage rate of 31% of schools to 75% by 2022.¹

CRS' School Feeding History in Benin



HANDOVER PROCESSES

LRP Project Handover Timeline



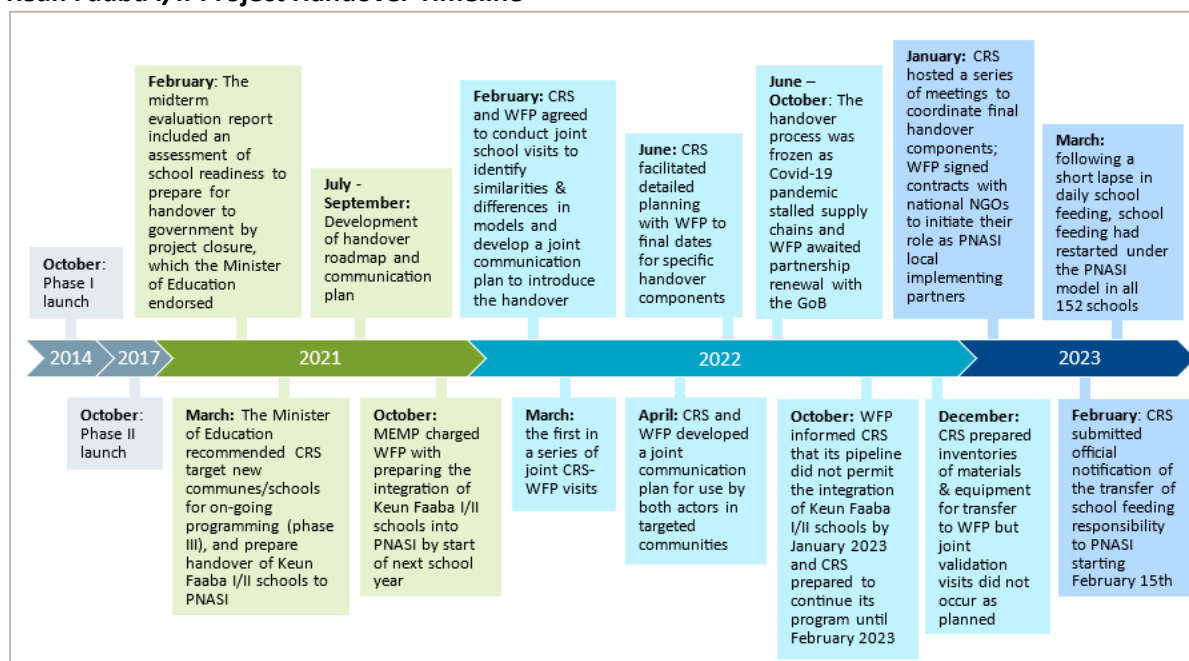
Lessons Learned:

- Planning the handover from project inception enabled CRS to convene the GoB and its implementing partner WFP early and consistently throughout the pilot timeline 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 the Benin context and shared learning with MEMP which informed their integration of LRP in subsequent strategies. 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:

¹ Akpoli, Mahunan Léocadie and Behanzin Gbèsohele Justin. *Historique et importance des cantines scolaires au Bénin*. International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Research. Vol 12. Jan/Feb 2024.

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. Early coordination enabled the collective team to overcome timeline challenges experienced in 2022 and adapt accordingly.
- This transition was strengthened by tripartite coordination between national government, CRS, and WFP under the leadership of representatives of both MEMP and the National Monitoring Committee.
- The early documentation of a handover roadmap helped clarify roles and responsibilities and harmonize expectations amongst the three parties – CRS, MEMP, and WFP, creating a foundation to collectively monitor progress and drive accountability.
- The longer handover process also 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 nuanced and captured in an updated communication plan for use by CRS and WFP to harmonize messaging on what differences communities could expect following the handover.
- CRS directly implemented the school feeding component of the *Keun Faaba I/II* project, so local NGOs who were contracted to implement PNASI model were not engaged until right before the handover occurred. Instead, as is practiced today, engaging local actors in direct implementation enables consistency in the relationship between school actors and those supporting school feeding before and after handover processes.
- 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. A representative of the National Monitoring Committee lauded CRS' efforts to coordinate the transfer at the highest levels but questioned the effectiveness of

“CRS sounded the alarm very early on the importance of this handover. If CRS had kept quiet there would have been a sudden and chaotic transfer. CRS took matters into its own hands and requested meetings with the government.”

– PNASI National Monitoring Committee Representative

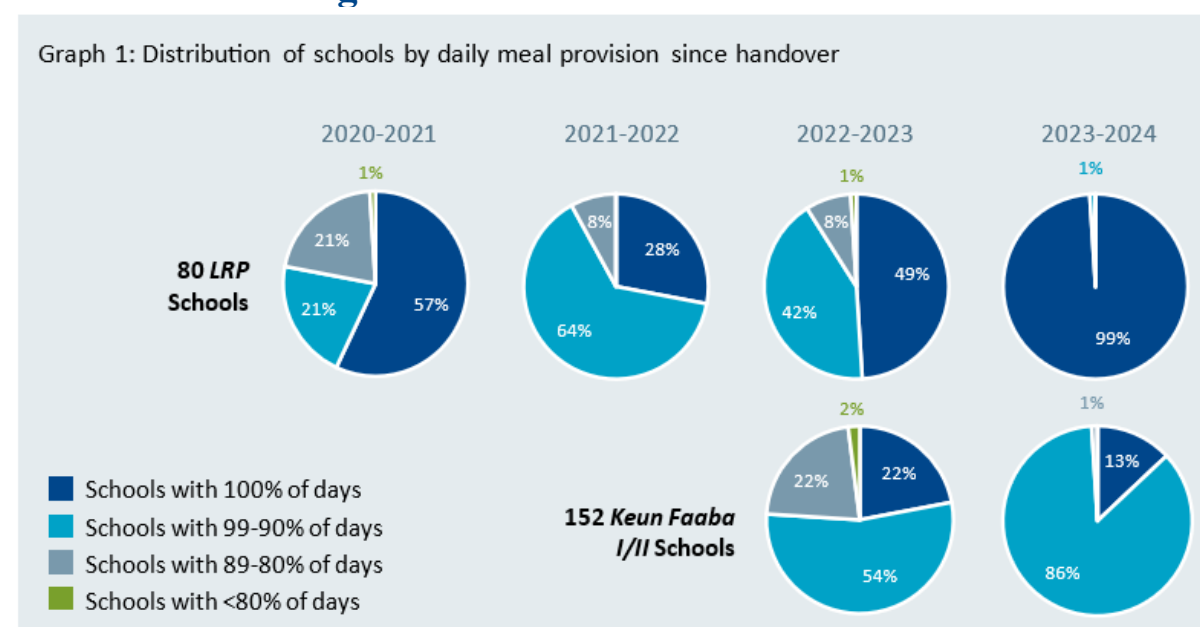
local preparation, noting that communities were reluctant to accept differences between the two models. Investing time to understand and minimize differences between project and government models is critical to sustainability.

Key differences of the models implemented at the time of the handovers included:

Model Components	CRS	PNASI
Canteen Management	commodities are managed by the community (via the SMC)	commodities are managed by the school principal
Unit Targeted	one canteen per pedagogical group	one canteen per school
Cook Motivation	a food-for-work approach offered an in-kind incentive to offset cooks' time investment	cooks receive no incentive from the program to play their role
Commodities	rice, oil, semolina, and peas	rice, oil, maize, and cowpeas

FINDINGS

Was school feeding sustained?



Annual data shared by local implementing partners reveals that the daily provision of school meals has been largely sustained in both project zones following the handover. Provision of meals for 90% or more of school days was achieved by 78% of *LRP* schools following the handover. The small remaining gap continued to close over the past three years until achieved by all 80 schools during the 2023-2024 school year. A similar trend is seen amongst *Keun Faaba I/II* schools, 76% of which achieved school feeding for 90% or more of 2022-2023 school days following by 99% of schools last year. These results affirm that the handover of school feeding from CRS to PNASI was largely successful, with school feeding remaining highly functional in the majority of schools in year one followed by an upward trend towards greater daily coverage. 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.

School directors, teachers, and SMC members all affirmed the above quantitative results – the *frequency* of daily school feeding has been largely sustained. All actors, however, noted differences in the *quantity* and *quality* of food provided, both of which were detailed as a function of the level of community contributions. Under both the CRS and PNASI model, community contributions are

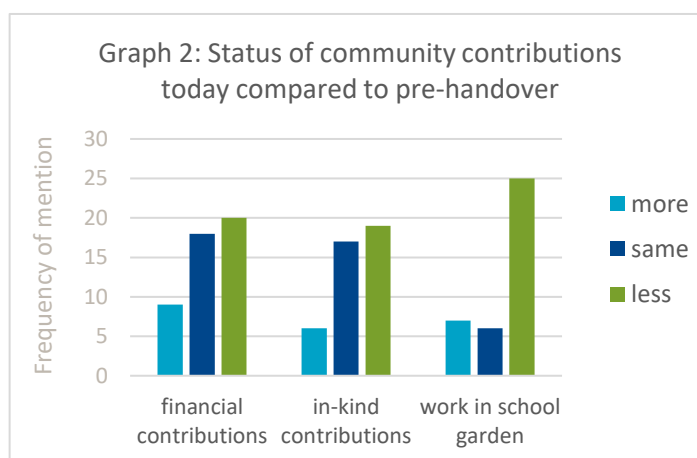
largely responsible for sourcing animal-source proteins. As a result, some respondents noted that an observed decline in community contributions risks reducing the nutritional value of school meals.

Which factors most contributed to or deterred sustainability?



Resources

Meals provided under CRS' model, leveraged both project-delivered commodities and ingredients provided by the community. Aggregating the responses of all school actors, graph 2 illustrates that community contributions to the school feeding program – financial, in-kind, or via work in the school garden – have declined in many schools since the handover. One PNASI implementing partner suggested that the absence of incentives provided under the CRS model may demotivate community actors who are typically engaged in organizing community contributions. Under the CRS model, cooks and warehouse managers received monthly take-home rations and SMC members received per diem following project trainings.



When asked what CRS did well to support the sustainability of school feeding, respondents from all groups noted infrastructural investments. Small infrastructure constructed during CRS programming has indeed been largely sustained, with few exceptions. The majority of school directors reported that critical school feeding facilities remain in good condition:

KITCHENS: 13/16 schools	SMALL WAREHOUSES: 12/16 schools	IMPROVED STOVES: 12/16 schools	LATRINES: 14/16 schools
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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

When asked if they felt ready to maintain daily school feeding after CRS programming closed, only 9 directors and the majority of respondents in 7 teacher and 5 SMC focus groups responded affirmatively across the 16 schools. SMC members admitted feeling unprepared to sustain community mobilization in particular. Nearly half of directors (7/16) and 5 of the SMC focus groups reported that their school communities' capacity to mobilize resources is worse today than at handover. Canteen management skills were widely reported as being sustained, with exceptions notably occurring in schools which struggled to maintain daily meals following the handover. Capacities were deemed worse by school directors in only five schools with regards to menu planning and three schools with regards to annual planning/budgeting.

7 of the 16 SMCs collectively reported that monitoring and reporting skills are worse, compared to only 3 directors (6 of whom instead reported the capacity is stronger today). 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. Only one director mentioned prioritizing time to conduct a refresher training himself for cooks since the handover.

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. Another described his SMC's lack of visibility into canteen functionality today. 6 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 describe sustained school feeding in former CRS-supported schools as determined by the level of SMC motivation to mobilize communities, associating weak school feeding performance with community demotivation following CRS' departure. This correlation was reinforced by school staff across the sample. 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. Directors, teachers, and SMC members reported that SMC meeting frequency has decreased following the handover of both projects.

“We have noticed positive changes because the community is aware of its situation. They understand that by adopting and putting into practice the trainings received [from CRS], it will positively impact their way of life.”

– Director of a former *Keun Faaba I/II* school where school feeding is **excelling**

“The community is demotivated. Since CRS left, it is difficult for parents to support us. We have not stood idly by, we hold community meetings, but we do not have results... Parents say to themselves that they do not have the means.”

– Director of a former *Keun Faaba I/II* school where school feeding is **challenging**

Under the CRS model, cooks and warehouse managers received monthly take-home rations. Additionally, while serving on an SMC was voluntary, training participation earned per diem and transport assistance. These incentives were not sustained, and the motivation they developed has waned according to school actors including SMC members themselves. As the frontline community

organizers, a disengaged SMC yields distance between communities and school feeding which respondents noted is resulting in less material contributions.

While the level of incentives provided under the CRS model may not be sustainable, 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, acknowledging the opportunity cost faced by school feeding community volunteers.

Under PNASI, school directors are formally responsible for canteen management, compared to CRS’ community-managed school feeding model in which SMCs manage canteens and include a teacher but not always the director. With this shift, directors described an uptick in administrative duties and feeling insufficiently trained to execute them. The National Monitoring Committee also expressed concern over school feeding monitoring and data management quality under directors’ responsibility.

The majority of 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 (and Roles)

The USAID sustainability conceptual framework describes linkages to government and/or other entities that can augment resources, refresh capacity, and motivate frontline service providers and participants to provide and make use of services and continue project-promoted practices as central to sustainability. The role played by different actors in the Benin school feeding ecosystem and the linkages between them appears to greatly impact the sustainability of quality canteen management.

A difficult transition experienced following the handover of these schools was the shift in canteen management responsibility from the community to the school director. 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. But both school and government actors also acknowledged challenges with this scalable model. Directors described the heavy challenge of keeping up with government expectations regarding school feeding monitoring and reporting. SMC members agreed, describing the responsibilities of canteen management as too many for any individual to carry, particularly the school director charged with upholding quality instruction as well. 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. He described the potential for PNASI responsibilities to overwhelm and send school directors into a panic. 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.

“For me, it’s better for both of us [community & director] to lead together. Together we are stronger.”

– School Director

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. On the other hand, representatives from each communal government described dedicated budget lines to support school feeding, yet how these budgets will be leveraged to support schools was unclear. One Mayor’s office described their effort to facilitate a communal committee of education stakeholders charged with coordinating and monitoring school feeding. They acknowledged that monitoring visits have reduced since CRS’ departure but they work to fill this gap.

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed that the provision of daily hot meals to students at former *LRP* and *Keun Faaba I/II* schools has been largely sustained following the handover of school feeding responsibility to the national government’s program, PNASI. Some initial challenges to daily frequency improved overtime. The primary source of commodities was sustained under PNASI, but community engagement (and subsequently community contributions) has waned since the handover. While capacities developed during CRS programming appear to have been mostly sustained, the motivation of all actors has not. As a result of the transition from CRS’ model to the government’s, the formal responsibility for canteen management has shifted from communities to school directors. This streamlined model is seen as contributing to the government’s ability to scale PNASI, nearing its goal of universal school feeding by 2030. The engagement of SMCs in former CRS-supported schools has diminished following the introduction of the director-led model, challenging community engagement overall. 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. Recommendations to pursue this goal are described below.

Actions to bolster sustainability under current *Keun Faaba III* project:

Some challenges documented during this study were experienced early by the CRS/Benin programming team and informed the design of the country program’s current 2021-2026 USDA MGD/FFE project, *Keun Faaba III*. Key actions to strengthen sustainability under the current model include:

- **Harmonizing approaches to establish the number of school canteens per school.** To mitigate post-handover efforts to expand the number of canteens in each school to meet the government standard of one per each pedagogical group, CRS adopted the PNASI approach at the beginning of *Keun Faaba III*. The infrastructure and human resources necessary to support the number of canteens supported by the government is already established to enable a smoother transition after project closure.
- **Working with a PNASI implementing partner.** Upholding CRS’ commitment to local leadership, responsibility for *Keun Faaba III* programming is directly implemented by Caritas Benin. Also 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. This consistent relationship will be pivotal to drive community expectations pre-handover and encourage sustained community engagement post-handover.

- **Strengthening systems for sustained community engagement.** CRS launched 500 new savings and internal lending community (SILC) groups in the *Keun Faaba III* zone through which its Child-Optimized Financial Education (COFE) curriculum is introduced to support families to establish and pursue financial goals. Coupled with school feeding, this intervention is intended to support parents in overcoming the financial barriers that incentivize them to keep children at home; overtime, 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.

Additional Recommendations:

As the 2026 closure of CRS's current MGD/FFE award approaches, the following recommendations based on this study's findings may strengthen the country program's contributions to sustainable quality school feeding in Benin:

- **Launch *Keun Faaba III* handover process as soon as possible.** The longer handover process for *Keun Faaba I/II* than LRP proved necessary to execute complex coordination which appears to have readied communities to transition to PNASI more smoothly. As such, planning of the 2026 phase III handover should commence as soon as possible. Ideally, MEMP will lead this process and formalize a small handover monitoring committee (comprised of GoB, Caritas Benin, CRS and ANAN representatives) to assess progress monthly and organize field visits to execute a jointly delivered communication plan. This effort should focus on the practical handover from CRS to ANAN while fostering a space for learning exchange.
- **Develop an early pathway to harmonize CRS and PNASI incentive models.** While the GoB seeks to enhance the role of community incentives under PNASI (i.e., fixing an incentive rate for cooks), CRS must also critically reflect on the sustainability of its various community-level incentives. An early priority in the abovementioned handover process must include 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. Therefore, a model that empowers the two lines of leadership could offer both sets of advantages. Within *Keun Faaba III* communities, CRS and Caritas Benin could adapt the current SMC-led model to engage school directors as the SMC president. This would enable directors to maintain their role as the school focal point in the government hierarchy while tightening their relationships within the community-facing body. A community member serving as vice-president could coordinate canteen management responsibilities distributed amongst the SMC, including monitoring/documentation and regular community engagement efforts. 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 has [extensive experience](#) supporting the GoB Ministry of Health to digitize health campaigns. This learning 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. In the final years of *Keun Faaba III* implementation, CRS could engage MEMP, ANAN, and commune-level authorities in delivering these refresher trainings to SMCs or other school community actors to develop facilitation capacities. Additional advocacy could be made to earmark communal budget lines to sustain refresher trainings following CRS' departure.