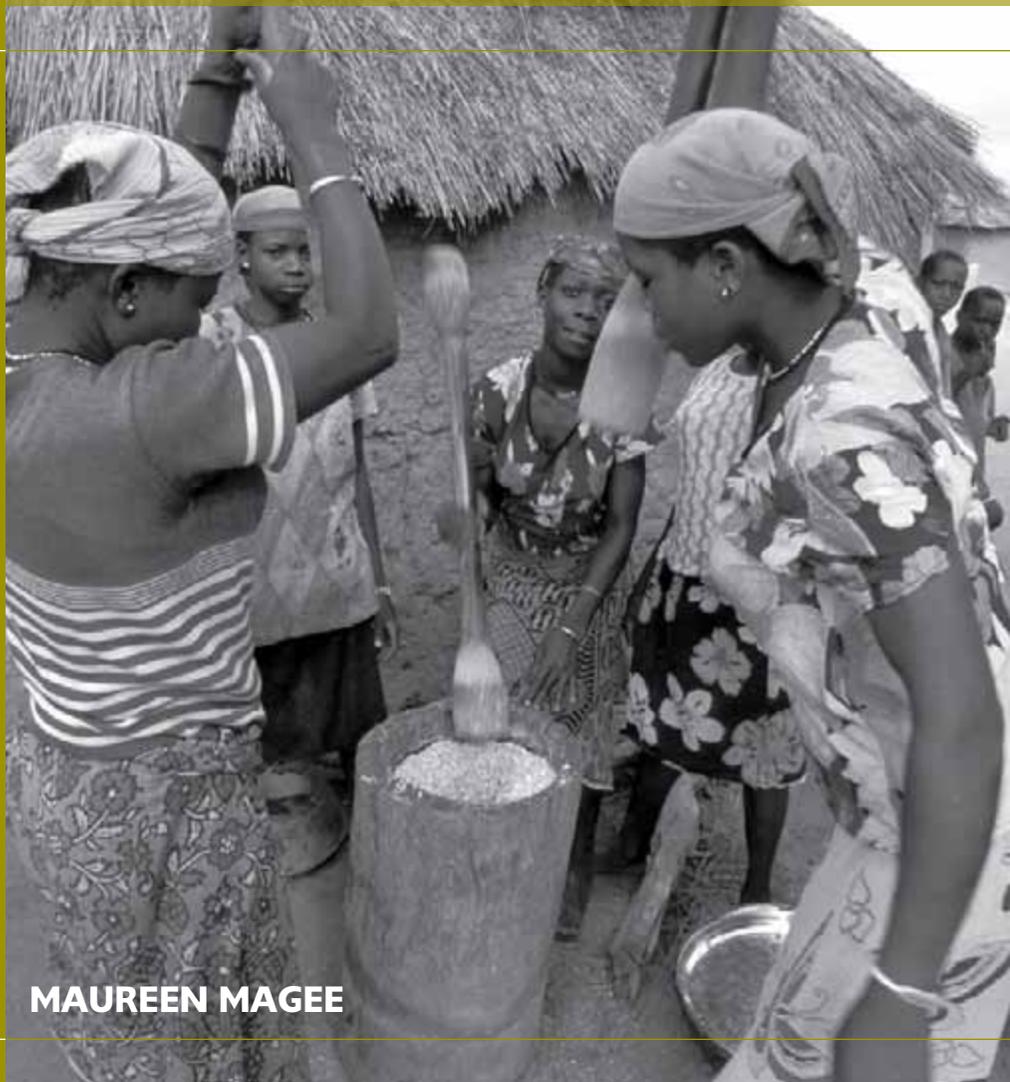


# School Canteens in Benin

Improving Student Enrollment and Retention  
in Partnership with Parents' Associations

PARTNERSHIP



MAUREEN MAGEE

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDIES NUMBER 1



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# PARTNERSHIP

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## **SOLIDARITY WILL TRANSFORM THE WORLD**

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Partnership is fundamental to how CRS sees itself in the world. We believe profoundly that change occurs through our Catholic Church and other local partners, that by sustaining and strengthening local institutions we enhance a community's ability to respond to its own problems. Catholic Relief Services puts its approach to development, emergency relief, and social change into practice through partnerships with a wide array of organizations: local churches and nonprofits, host governments, international agencies, and others.

Our belief that solidarity will transform the world inspires a commitment to right relationships with those we serve, in collaboration with the Catholic Church and other faith-based or secular organizations closest to those in need. We strive for partnerships founded on a long-term vision and a commitment to peace and justice. For more than sixty years CRS has worked side-by-side with our partners to alleviate human suffering, promote social justice, and assist people as they strive for their own development.

## **OUR PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLES**

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- 1.** Make decisions at a level as close as possible to the people who will be affected by them.
- 2.** Strive for mutuality, recognizing that each partner brings skills, resources, knowledge, and capacities in a spirit of autonomy.
- 3.** Foster equitable partnerships by mutually defining rights and responsibilities.
- 4.** Respect differences and commit to listen and learn from each other.
- 5.** Encourage transparency.
- 6.** Engage with civil society, to help transform unjust structures and systems.
- 7.** Commit to a long-term process of local organizational development.
- 8.** Identify, understand, and strengthen community capacities, which are the primary source of solutions to local problems.
- 9.** Promote sustainability by reinforcing partners' capacity to identify their vulnerabilities and build on their strengths.



# **School Canteens in Benin**

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# School Canteens in Benin

## Improving Student Enrollment and Retention in Partnership with Parents' Associations

**ACCESS TO EDUCATION IS A HUMAN RIGHT.** In Benin, however, obstacles to universal primary education persist. In rural areas, enrollment and attendance rates have remained low due to a number of factors. Families living in poverty may be unable to afford to send their children to school; although the government has eliminated primary school fees, parents must still buy uniforms and school supplies. There is also an opportunity cost associated with sending girls to school rather than keeping them at home where they can assist their mothers with household chores and take care of younger siblings. Cultural norms dictate that older children provide essential labor both in the household and on family farms. Particularly in the northern areas of Benin, where schools may be located up to 15 kilometers away from some of the villages they serve, students who walk home in search of a meal at midday often do not return in the afternoon.

In 2001, in support of the Government of Benin's stated priority of primary education for all and with funding from the United States Agency for International Development's Food for Peace program (USAID/FFP), CRS expanded its community-managed canteen initiative in Benin. The canteen program was designed not only to provide short-term food aid to 7,500 rural primary school students in the northern departments of Borgou and Alibori, but more importantly to increase participation in the education system, which in the long term improves livelihood security through increased productivity, higher incomes, better health, and lower fertility.

In contrast to the approach often taken by school feeding programs, which provide food rations but little or no training and technical assistance,



*Angaradebou school, a typical primary school in Benin*

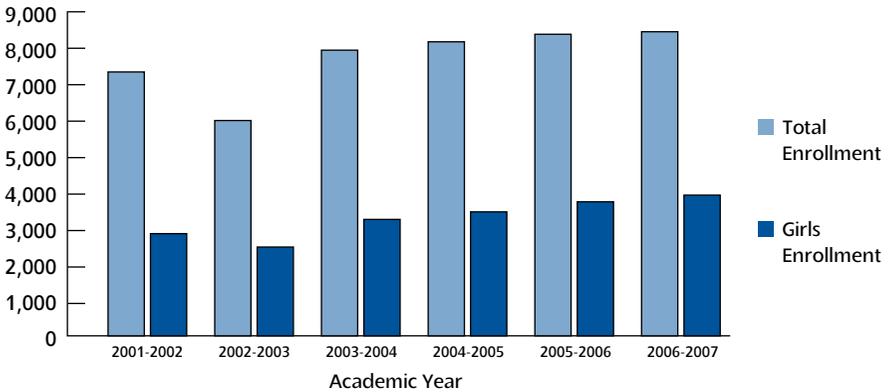
CRS worked in direct partnership with local parents’ associations to strengthen their capacity to sustainably manage school canteens. Each parents’ association established and oversaw a School Canteen Management Committee (SCMC). Self-management of canteen operations fostered greater parental involvement in children’s education. By requiring monetary and in-kind contributions to complement CRS rations, the initiative promoted sustainability, ensuring that the improvements in enrollment and attendance gained through the canteens would not be lost when external food assistance ended.

### Improvements in Enrollment, Retention, and Performance

A father in Tondikoaria described the canteen as a type of “lure” which attracts children to enroll in and remain in school. As figure 1 shows, school enrollments increased following the establishment of canteens, rising from 7,138 to 8,241 students, with more than 1,000 additional girls enrolling in participating primary schools.

**Enrollment Trends in Target Primary Schools from 2001 to 2007**

Title II / Food for Peace Program, CRS / Benin



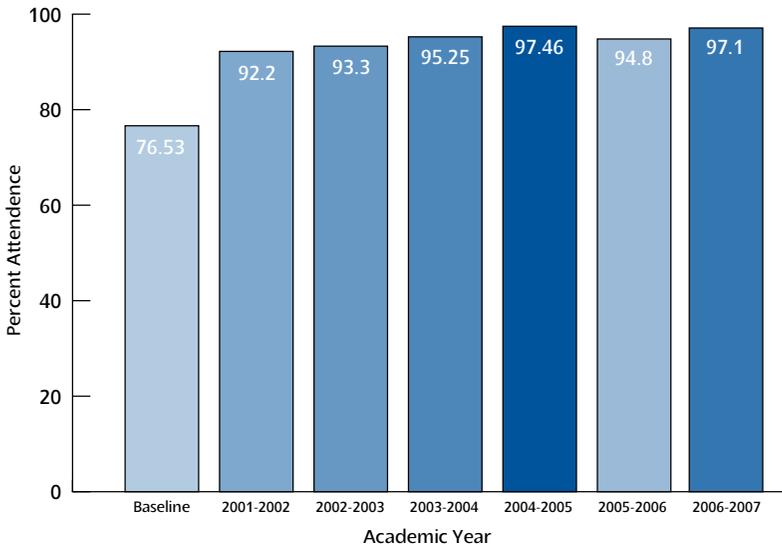
**FIG. 1** Source: CRS/Benin, Annual Results Report: Multi-Year Assistance Programs/Development Activity Programs, Fiscal Year 2007

Attendance rose as well, as shown in figure 2. Over the life of the FFP project, attendance increased by 20.47%, more than double the target of 10%.

School directors were ecstatic to find children coming to their offices to be enrolled on their own initiative. The school director at Mamassi-Peuhl explained how in the past parents would have to follow their children, who would try to hide in the woods when they heard they were soon to be enrolled in school. After the start of the canteen program, roles reversed, as even small children went to the farms seeking out their parents and requesting to go to school.

## Attendance Trends in Target Primary Schools, 2001–2007

Title II / Food for Peace Program, CRS / Benin



**FIG. 2** Source: CRS/Benin, Annual Results Report: Multi-Year Assistance Programs/Development Activity Programs, Fiscal Year 2007

**“A starving dog and a satisfied dog cannot play together with the same liveliness.”**

School performance progressed with the operation of the canteens as well. Students in Séréwondirou explained how their test scores improved. Previously, they would have to walk home to find something to eat during the mid-morning break, often returning late to class, and therefore forced to rush through their assignments or exams. With porridge provided each day on the school grounds, students are no longer tardy and have more time to complete their classwork. As a parent in Malanville put it, explaining the difference between a hungry child’s and a well-nourished child’s performance in school, “A starving dog and a satisfied dog cannot play together with the same liveliness.”

### Parental Involvement in Education

The canteens increased parents’ involvement in the schools. To fulfill their responsibilities in managing a canteen—collecting monetary and in-kind donations, storing food rations, keeping records, and so on—members of the parents’ association must regularly interact with school personnel and students. A teacher at Kantro Primary School commented, “The parents’ association is more motivated because of the canteen. Now their members come to school every day, not just when there’s a problem.” At a

minimum, the storeroom manager and cook must come to the school each morning to prepare the students' meal. Upon arrival, the storeroom manager greets the school director and teachers according to local customs. School personnel thereby gain a direct line of communication with the parents' association. School directors are grateful that they no longer have to track parents down in the village or fields to ask advice or make decisions regarding the school. According to one director, "Through the canteen, parents have become active partners with school staff in the education of their children." Another parent observed that "The canteen is like the branch of a thorn tree that pulls your shirt and hooks you in." He went on to note that parents now see many "branches" and realize other ways they can be involved in the school.

**"The canteen is like the branch of a thorn tree that pulls your shirt and hooks you in."**

The presence of parents' association members has also led to effective systems for monitoring students' attendance, and the associations have become key promoters of education. Communities have developed localized strategies for ensuring that students remain in school—particularly girls, who often leave school because of household chores, early marriage, and other factors. For example, in Nikki-Ouénou, the storeroom manager uses attendance lists to determine the amount of food needed for each day. He then reports the names of each absent student to the president of the parents' association,

who is responsible for visiting the family to determine why the child has missed school. In another community, the cook takes note of unused spoons, which signal absent students. She then speaks with teachers to determine if there are any students with excessive absenteeism. The parents' association follows up on each student and discusses the importance of education with his or her parents. These active detection systems, linked to the canteens, have continued after the FFP program closed out.



*Students at Séréwondirou Primary School.*

## **Capacity Strengthening and Sustainability**

By placing the management and operation of school canteens directly in the hands of the parents' associations, and providing training and technical assistance to ensure that these community-based groups had the capacity to be successful, CRS promoted sustainability from the outset. School directors and teachers are reassigned frequently. Therefore,

although their initiative and cooperation as members of the parents' association is often highly effective, permanent members of the community must lead the effort. Targeted training, exchange visits, on-the-job technical support, and continued monitoring by CRS field staff provided parents' associations with the knowledge and skills to establish and operate canteens after CRS' departure from the project.

Trainings focused on a variety of themes, including the role and importance of school canteens, roles and responsibilities of management committee members, storage and inventory techniques, and mobilization of resources. Key actors were often the target of training. For example, SCMC secretaries participated in bookkeeping and record-management training; records kept in local languages promoted ownership and sustainability. Literacy classes assured that non-literate members of the community could also effectively contribute in bookkeeping and other aspects of canteen management, rather than becoming overly dependent on the assistance of school personnel. Many parents cited the limited duration of the literacy classes as a weakness of the project. They felt that a greater emphasis on improving literacy would have increased self-management by the SCMCs and ultimately the sustainability of the canteens. One Kantro parent spoke for many in remarking that "The school canteen continues to function today because of the strong foundation parents and school staff were given through trainings and on-the-job support."

**"The school canteen continues to function today because of the strong foundation parents and school staff were given through trainings and on-the-job support."**

CRS also provided targeted trainings for canteen cooks on nutrition and hygiene. These trainings had multiple positive impacts. In Séréwondirou, the school director noticed an improvement in student health following the implementation of improved hygiene practices in the canteen. A cook in Ganrou took the information she learned about nutritionally balanced and varied meals and improved the food she prepares for her own family as well as for the students. In terms of sustainability, these trainings provided essential knowledge on how to replace food aid from FFP with local agricultural products and maintain a similar nutritional balance. Beyond the canteens, school directors noted an improvement in parental involvement in managing other school resources. The CRS financial management training promoted transparency and good governance in many of the parents' associations' activities.

Exchange visits between parents' associations created a sense of networking and fostered continued sharing and problem solving among committees. For example, the Séréwondirou SCMC faced challenges in collecting food donations from parents. Based on lessons learned through visiting other communities, the committee changed its approach: it began to go to each house in the community to collect the donations

directly, rather than having students bring them to school. This provided an opportunity to speak with reticent parents about the importance of the canteen and education. In addition to creating an effective means of sharing best practices, exchange visits also galvanized parents, fostering a spirit of friendly competition as associations sought to demonstrate their successes. This competitive spirit continues to motivate communities to sustain their canteens.

## Resource Mobilization

The design of the school canteen project ensured that locally managed and supplied canteens would continue to thrive following CRS' withdrawal. Each community incorporated sustainability strategies from the beginning. According to a teacher in Ganrou, CRS training and technical assistance built up the parents' association's capacity to self-manage over the life of the project.

In addition, the community's capacity to supply sufficient quantities of local food and financing grew over time. During the first few years of the project, schools received food for the daily meals through the FFP project, which the community supplemented with vegetables and spices, firewood, and other local contributions. In 2004–2005 and 2005–2006, schools only called on the FFP supplies during traditional periods of food shortages. In 2006–2007, no external food assistance was given. This strategy of gradually reducing outside food aid enabled most of the participating communities to increase their own contributions over time, leaving them well prepared to sustain the canteens with local resources at the close of the project.

To complement food and cash donations by community members, CRS provided technical assistance to establish school farms. After consulting with the community and school personnel, parents' associations selected land, chose crops, and developed organizational structures tailored to specific local conditions. The associations shared best practices through exchange visits and made necessary adaptations to mobilize resources. One successful strategy was to place the farm directly on the school property, thus reinforcing the understanding among community members of the link between school farms and educating their children. Additionally, the proximity to the school made monitoring more feasible and permitted older students to help with the work on the farm.

A second key to the success of a school farm lies in its organization. In Monkassa, the parents' association decided to organize the school farm in the same manner as the village, dividing it into quartiers, or neighborhoods. Each chef du quartier, or neighborhood leader, is responsible for seeing that members of that neighborhood show up with the necessary tools for community workdays. This system has motivated community members by creating friendly competition among the neighborhoods; each seeks to demonstrate its level of commitment to school activities. Both the village chief

and the imam, who informs residents following prayer, communicate on workdays. Thus, in Monkassa, existing community structures for communication and organization underpin the success of the school farm.

As the project progressed, the importance of the school farm became increasingly apparent. Communities were required to draw on local resources for a greater share of the canteen's needs and were not able to collect sufficient food through donations alone. School farms provide corn, sorghum, millet, and other crops for consumption as well as for sale to raise cash to pay cooks and buy condiments. Communities with highly productive school farms, such as Monkassa and Angaradébou, have been able to continue to provide two meals each day to their students following the closing of the project. Many parents' associations suggested that more agricultural training would strengthen the functioning and sustainability of the canteens.

### Keys to Sustainability

- Target trainings according to specialized roles of parents' association members
- Promote record keeping in the local language
- Organize exchange visits among parents' associations
- Develop and implement localized sustainability strategies at the outset of the program
- Progressively decrease external food rations
- Establish school farms on the school grounds
- Train parents' associations on how to prepare nutritionally balanced meals with local agricultural products
- Involve community leaders and community structures
- Promote regular communication and collaboration with the community

### Leadership, Communication, and Collaboration

Mobilizing sufficient resources to provide a daily meal for every primary school student requires the participation of as many members of the community as possible. Community leaders and institutions can often inspire others' participation. For example, in Angaradébou, the traditional king gives regular cash contributions. Parents' associations have successfully approached local cotton farmers' organizations and other professional groups to support the canteens both financially and through in-kind donations, including livestock for plowing the fields at the school farms. In Mamassi-Peuhi, the members of the mothers' association pound millet harvested from the school farm free of charge. Women, underrepresented on the SCMCs, have taken initiative through mothers' associations to work with school personnel and parents' associations



*Grain storage at the Mamassi-Peuhi primary school.*

in promoting girls' education in many communities. Finally, the importance of the donations of the members of the parents' associations as an example to others cannot be overstated. Referring to their leadership, one parent from Mamassi-Peuhi explained, "When the head is sick, one cannot expect the body to function."

Continued collaboration between the parents' associations and the communities requires regular communication and transparent flows of information, including sharing donation and expense records, making decisions regarding canteen operations, and designing and implementing annual action plans. A parent in Monkassa asserted that their canteen functions effectively because every member of the community is informed and consulted.

"Before the village couldn't even come together to kill a rat, but now they have succeeded in cultivating a school farm and mobilizing their support to assure the continued functioning of the canteen," remarked another parent in Tondikoaria. Thus, the canteen is about much more than providing a daily meal for students. It has not only increased parental participation in education, but also contributed to a revitalization of community dynamics.

**"Before the village couldn't even come together to kill a rat, but now they have succeeded in cultivating a school farm and mobilizing their support to assure the continued functioning of the canteen."**

As members of the parents' associations and leaders of the schools, school directors and teachers are integral figures in ensuring the sustainability of the canteen. Although their role varies from vocal catalyst to behind-the-scenes support, the establishment of school canteens strengthened communication and built a foundation for further collaboration between school staff and parents.

## **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

As an agency, CRS faced challenges in the implementation of the school feeding program and recognizes areas for improvement. High turnover among the leadership

of certain parents' associations impaired their organization and performance; promoting group cohesion would assure smooth transitioning when a new member joins the committee. CRS also recommends setting criteria to monitor and measure SCMC performance on an annual basis, with trainings tailored to meet their specific needs.



*Monkassa parents' association president, at the school farm*

Lack of self-confidence among parents was another challenge. For example, during the final year of the project the Monkassa school canteen served two meals each day without any external food assistance. Despite this outstanding success, parents felt that they needed continued visits from CRS staff to maintain their achievements. Promoting confidence among parents' associations takes time and should be integrated into the program from the outset. Local language literacy classes are one mechanism to develop skills and increase confidence. Community-managed school feeding programs should incorporate adult literacy promotion throughout their duration.

Many parents' associations requested agricultural training and equipment to build on their achievements. By increasing the output of the school farm as well as individual farms, parents will be able to secure an adequate supply of food for the canteen as well as enough funds from the sale of surplus crops to buy condiments and pay cooks. CRS is currently in discussions with partner organizations to develop a follow-on project, which will provide agricultural technical assistance to these communities. To promote sustainability in school feeding programs, there is a need for complementary agricultural assistance projects.

### Challenges and Lessons Learned

- Encourage group cohesion to avoid high turnover among parents' association members
- Assist new members smoothly transition into their roles
- Establish performance criteria to evaluate parents' associations and provide tailored training in response to their needs
- Promote self-confidence
- Provide local language literacy training
- Seek complementary agricultural programming



*School canteen cooking pots.*

## Conclusion

By working in partnership, CRS strengthened the capacity of parents' associations to mobilize resources and manage school canteens. These efforts resulted in improved enrollment and retention of students, notably girls. The canteens also fostered an increase in parents' involvement and support for the education of their children. At varying levels, nearly all targeted communities have been able to continue to provide meals for students after the conclusion of the project.

The development and implementation of localized strategies from the beginning, as well as strong leadership, communication, and collaboration, helped to ensure the sustainability of school canteens and their beneficial effects on education at the community level.



Since 1943, Catholic Relief Services has had the privilege of serving the poor and disadvantaged overseas. Without regard to race, creed, or nationality, CRS provides emergency relief in the wake of natural and manmade disasters. Through development projects in fields such as education, peace and justice, agriculture, microfinance, health, and HIV/AIDS, CRS works to uphold human dignity and promote better standards of living. CRS also works throughout the United States to expand the knowledge and action of Catholics and others interested in issues of international peace and justice. Our programs and resources respond to the U.S. bishops' call to live in solidarity—as one human family—across borders, over oceans, and through differences in language, culture and economic condition.

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This study, the first in the Catholic Relief Services Partnership Case Studies series, documents improvements in school enrollment and attendance achieved through a program developed by CRS/Benin to help local parents' associations establish and operate school canteens. Over the life of the project, which was funded by USAID's Food for Peace program, rural primary school attendance in the northern departments of Borgou and Alibori increased by slightly more than 20 percent. Enrollment rose from 7,138 to 8,241 students, with more than 1,000 additional girls enrolling in participating primary schools. Parents learned new skills needed to manage the canteens, and also benefited personally from literacy and nutrition training. And working through the parents' associations to create local ownership of the program helped ensure that the benefits of increased school attendance, improved nutrition, and greater participation by girls in school will be sustainable over the long term.

The Catholic Relief Services Partnership Case Studies series highlights the work of CRS and its partners, working in solidarity to increase local ownership, strengthen organizational capacity, and combat poverty, hunger, and injustice.

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