

Evaluation Brief



Bangladesh School Feeding Impact Evaluation

Context

Since the mid-1990s, Bangladesh has consistently experienced economic growth. Despite this progress, approximately 49 percent of the population lives on less than US\$1.25 per person per day, and 81.3 percent on less than US\$2 per person per day. Three-quarters of the population (76 percent) live in rural areas; 37 percent of the rural population is considered ultra-poor. Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Increased frequency of natural disasters disrupts lives and livelihoods and exacerbates food insecurity.

With Government initiatives such as free and compulsory primary education, food for education (FFE) and stipend programmes, the Government has improved access to primary education and virtually eliminated gender disparity in primary schools. Nevertheless, the quality of education and the educational environment remain very low and are a major focus of concern.

Bangladesh School Feeding

WFP has provided food assistance to Bangladesh since 1974 and initiated its School Feeding Programme using micronutrient fortified biscuits in 2001. School feeding activities have reached over 7,000,000 beneficiaries, 50 percent of which are girls. The WFP-assisted schools are mostly Government Primary School and Registered Non-Government Primary School, with some community and NGO schools. The number of school feeding beneficiaries has grown significantly from the start of activities in 2001, reaching 1.5 million in 2009 – half of WFP Bangladesh's total portfolio.

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

This is the fifth and final evaluation in the series of impact evaluations of WFP school feeding. Bangladesh was one of five countries selected for an impact evaluation of school feeding (SF) in 2010-2011. The objectives are to evaluate the outcomes and impact achieved in relation to intended education objectives; evaluate outcomes and impact in relation to WFP's new nutrition and value transfer policy objectives; evaluate unintended outcomes and impacts; and identify changes needed to WFP operations in order to contribute to development objectives and the WFP Strategic Plan and SFP 2009.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach that combined 1) a literature review of WFP school feeding policy and programs, and past evaluations and assessments; 2) a quantitative survey of 80 schools; 3) a quantitative survey of 1,890 households in the catchment areas of the sampled schools; and 4) an in-depth qualitative appraisal of 22 communities and schools. Both programme and control areas were surveyed.

The evaluation covers the period from 2001 to 2010 and includes observations during the field work in 2011.

The evaluation report was presented to the Executive Board in November 2011.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Livelihoods

The variability of household livelihoods affects the outcomes and impact of school feeding. Level of vulnerability is relative in Bangladesh, with even those classified as least vulnerable earning a monthly income of US\$45. The income of the more vulnerable households barely covers the minimum estimated costs of food.

Even the most vulnerable households invest in private tutoring as a way of addressing problems with the quality of education received in school. Given these additional investments, the share of household income required to cover the combined costs of food and education exceeds monthly income.

Educational Outcomes

Overall attendance rates in programme schools are higher than control schools. In the NW, attendance rates in programme schools are 6 to 8 percentage points higher than in control schools. In the southern coast, overall attendance in programme schools is nearly 10 percent higher than in control schools.

In the NW, class 1 enrolments have increased over the last ten years, in both programme and control schools, while class 4 and class 5 enrolments have decreased, and at higher rates in programme areas. The grade attrition rate is particularly marked in Class 4 and Class 5 in both programme and control schools over the last three years. In the Southern coastal schools, Class 1 enrolments have also increased, but in the programme schools, since 2008, the grade attrition rates have decreased relative to the control schools, especially in Class 2 and Class 4. It is quite possible that the presence of the biscuit has contributed to this reduction; however, the attrition rate at Class 5 is similar to that of the NW with no difference between programme and control schools. All in all, these findings indicate that the attrition rate is a major educational challenge and in every year, biscuit or not, fewer students are enrolled in the subsequent grade.

Overall, the gender patterns for educational outcomes suggest that the presence of the biscuit has contributed to female primary education. In 2010 in programme schools, the gender ratio (females to males) was 1.06 compared to 1.01 in the control areas. With respect to the grade attrition rate, however, it appears that girls are as likely as boys to cut short their education prior to finishing primary school, regardless of the presence of the biscuit.

The evaluation found that school feeding was a strong incentive for parents to keep children in school especially for those households concentrating in the most vulnerable categories.

Transition rates to secondary school for children who complete primary education are very high. Transition to and success in secondary school are strongly influenced by two factors: the education level of the household head, and the household's vulnerability status. Few of the most vulnerable households have a member who has completed secondary school; interviews suggest that the financial burden of secondary school is a serious obstacle.

Nutrition

The evaluation collected evidence about the diets of school-age children and found that the diets of most primary school-age children in the programme areas were deficient in energy, vitamins A, B1 and B2, and iron. The evaluation also found that micronutrient, protein and energy contents of school biscuits contributed substantially to improving the nutrition of participating children.

There was a general consensus from schools, School Management Committees and mothers in the NW that the biscuit reduces hunger for children at school. They reported that the biscuits reduce hunger, lessen the incidence of skin diseases and alleviate weakness and dizziness in children, which parents believe improves the children's ability to learn. They made the link that if children are attentive and cheerful, the quality of learning improves. Parents and teachers all considered the biscuits to be nutritious and good for their children, some describing them as a helpful substitute to fish and meat that they were unable to provide for them.

Value Transfer

The biscuits contribute about 4 percent of annual stated household income, and reduce the daily food bill by 4.4% for the most vulnerable households. When the values of school biscuits is combined with the annual education stipend provided by the Government, the financial incentive for the most vulnerable families rises to 10 percent of annual income in the northwest and 8 percent in the southern coast. Certainly, while the benefit would be marginal in economic terms, it is critical to emphasize that these households live on the edge of marginality where a small sum of money saved indeed does make a difference in the lives of both children and parents. The vulnerable households face daily challenges, and the assurance that a child will receive a nutritious bit of food in school is highly important.

The school biscuit has been integrated as a resource into the household economy. As such, it becomes one of the many strategies that vulnerable households juggle to survive. For these households, minimal amounts of cash have a significant impact, and the biscuit does reduce the overall food bill of households.

Conclusions

The achievement of learning outcomes arises from a complex set of interrelated factors, of which school biscuits are one input. While the evaluation showed some positive impacts on attendance and drop-out rates, there is no consistent pattern of the effect on overall performance in programme schools relative to control schools. This limited impact on critical education outcomes reflects shortcomings in the education system – limited contact hours, high student-to-teacher ratios, large class sizes, poor infrastructure, etc. – and economic pressures on households.

Parents and teachers perceive school biscuits as an important input; in addition, they help attract children in lower grades to school, and provide a critical supplement to a nutritionally inadequate diet. In spite of the commitment to education expressed by most households, children drop out because they are needed to contribute to the precarious household economy especially for the most poor and vulnerable families. Thus, the value of the biscuit is diminished as the child grows and becomes a more important economic asset to the household. This livelihood reality presents a major challenge because while the biscuit attracts students to school, it does not keep them there.

School biscuits also provide an important value transfer, although this is insufficient for the poorest and most marginal households to offset the cost of keeping a child in school as compared to having them work. There is need to examine the school feeding programme strategy and alternative modalities to help offset these factors for older children.

Value transfer and other impacts are reduced if pipeline breaks mean that planned school biscuits are not actually delivered and consumed. Actual delivery ranged between 74.2 percent and 91.8 percent of planned from 2007–2010.

The major problem identified in this evaluation has been the lack of impact of school feeding on dropout in the higher grades, completion rates and transition to secondary school.

Given the success of the primary school enrolment effort, the evaluation suggests that a priority for Bangladesh is to create the environment for enhancing completion of primary school and transition to secondary school, so that children are able to acquire the skills needed to improve their livelihoods.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Continue to develop integrated and complementary programmes that target the poorest households in the school feeding areas, in alignment with WFP's country programme

Recommendation 2: Use policy dialogue to support a strategy designed by the Government and other education bodies to address the issue of quality in schools.

Recommendation 3: Develop a hand-over strategy for school feeding, in cooperation with the Government.

Recommendation 4: Adopt a comprehensive approach to school feeding in primary education, with targeted goals for different age groups, including pre-primary, primary and older students in classes 4 and 5.

Recommendation 5: Support the Government's design of a specific strategy to assist children in the transition to secondary school; it should include a food-for-education component.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that the micronutrient content of the biscuit meets the WFP objective that 70 percent of the recommended nutrient intake be provided.

Recommendation 7: Work with the Government to give full consideration to expanding the provision of school biscuits to schools outside the current coverage area, including to religious schools (primarily *madrasahs*) and ethnic-minority schools.

Recommendation 8: Expand its monitoring and evaluation system to focus on grade attrition in primary school and the reasons for low primary completion rate.



wfp.org

Reference:

Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation

For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@WFP.org