

## 34 HOME-GROWN SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES AND THE CHALLENGE OF EMBEDDEDNESS: THE CASE OF LOCAL FOOD NETWORKS AND THE GHANA SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMME

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### ABSTRACT

Home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programmes aim to “kill two birds with one stone” by using the power of public food procurement to stimulate local agricultural development. This chapter uses the Ghana school feeding programme as a case study to discuss the mixing of economic and non-economic activities under HGSF programmes. The chapter argues that HGSF programmes are embedded in sociocultural relationships, and that their outcomes are therefore the result of negotiation processes among various actors. The implementation of HGSF programmes should be flexible enough to take advantage of the lessons that are drawn from these embedded negotiation processes.

### 34.1 Introduction

Home-grown school feeding (HGSF) programmes are part of broader efforts to harness the power of public food procurement to impact positively on local economies by helping smallholders transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture (Morgan and Sonnino, 2013). The attention to smallholder development has heralded a new era in the history of school feeding programmes, which hitherto focused on education and nutrition outcomes (Fisher, 2007). HGSF is based on the

notion that social protection and smallholder agricultural development objectives can be pursued in a single intervention; it was identified as one of the win-win interventions towards achieving the then Millennium Development Goals (Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler, 2011).<sup>1</sup> This chapter uses the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) as a case study to discuss the mixing of economic and non-economic activities in HGSF programmes. The chapter argues that such programmes are embedded in sociocultural relationships, and that their outcomes are therefore the result of ongoing negotiation processes among various actors (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 for additional analysis of Ghana's experiences).

## 34.2 **Embeddedness: a theoretical exposition**

The term “embeddedness” is used by economic sociologists to describe the mixing of economic and non-economic activities, the latter influencing the process, cost, outcomes and available techniques of the former (Granovetter, 2005; Hinrichs, 2000). Thus, the extent to which economic action is influenced by non-economic factors is the defining feature of embeddedness as a concept (Granovetter, 2005). The notion of embeddedness has its roots in the work of Polanyi (2001), who argues that all economies are embedded and enmeshed in social relations and institutions. Granovetter (1985) uses the concept of economic embeddedness to extend Polanyi's argument and provide insights into the issue of social embeddedness. According to Granovetter, concrete interpersonal relations and networks that arise from these relations help generate trust and discourage malfeasance in economic transactions. Granovetter (2005) outlines three arguments about why and how social networks affect economic outcomes. First, social actors believe information from people they know more than information from people they do not know because of the difficulty of verifying subtle and nuanced information independently. Second, social rewards and punishments have the greatest impact among people who personally know each other, rather than among people who only know each other casually. And third, trust that may facilitate economic transactions is more likely to develop among people who know each other personally and interact at different levels and scales.

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<sup>1</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000) expired in 2015; they are now replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals.

Thus, the role of social relationships in economic transactions is crucial for the sharing of information, access to credit, the prevention and handling of breaches of contract and conflicts, the regularity of trade flows and risk mitigation (Fafchamps, 2004).

The literature on alternative food networks has focused its analysis on how territory is used to create an image of quality for agricultural products by producers who want to distinguish their products from those in more conventional and globalized agrifood chains (Sonnino, 2007); thus, they create a niche market for such products. The territorial embeddedness of food is generally seen as a distinguishing feature of different food systems, whereby some food systems are considered embedded, and others disembedded. Parrott, Wilson and Murdoch (2002) distinguishes between the food cultures of the Global North, which are considered disembedded because of their focus on economic efficiency, and those of the Global South, which are considered as embedded in place, culture and society. The quality label of embeddedness is created by emphasizing the link between production and territory, which “re-embed a product in the natural processes and social context of its territory” (Barham, 2003, p. 130). In this sense, embeddedness in the food sector has been associated with the notion of food quality, which competes with price.

### 34.3 Methodology

This chapter is based on a PhD thesis for Wageningen University and Research defended on 2 June 2016, entitled *Under the lens of embeddedness: a sociocultural perspective on home-grown school feeding in Ghana* (Sulemana, 2016). The study was conducted in the Northern Region of Ghana and included the Tamale metropolis and the then Tolon/Kumbungu district between 2011 and 2013.<sup>2</sup> The extended case study design guided the collection and analysis of data. Data collection methods included key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations (see Sulemana, 2016, for a detailed description of the methodology).

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<sup>2</sup> Tolon and Kumbungu are now two separate districts.

## 34.4 The Ghana School Feeding Programme in perspective

The Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) began in September 2005 in ten pilot schools, one in each of the then ten administrative regions of the country.<sup>3</sup> The basic aim of the GSFP is to provide each kindergarten and primary schoolchild with one hot, nutritious meal per day, using locally grown foodstuffs. One of the immediate objectives of the GSFP is to boost domestic food production by helping farmers increase productivity and reduce postharvest losses, and thus improve national food security. It was expected that greater demand for food crops, efficient procurement and marketing practices and improved storage of food crops, all considered fundamental to the programme, would greatly benefit smallholders. Eighty percent of the feeding costs of the programme were targeted to enter the local economy (Ghana, 2006). The inclusion of multiple beneficiaries – and especially farmers – in GSFP's third objective of boosting domestic food production is what differentiates the programme from similar programmes implemented earlier in the country. To ensure that GSFP benefits smallholders, the programme was designed to purchase food from local farmers and facilitate the access to credit from rural banks and other financial institutions for farmers involved in the programme (Ghana, 2006).

Food procurement under GSFP does not follow strict tendering procedures, and school food caterers procure food from individual farmers, traders and on the spot market. The literature on HGSF considers the decentralization of food procurement as strategic, since it avoids tendering requirements that most smallholders would find difficult to meet; as such, decentralized procurement in communities can boost local food production (Espejo, Burbano and Galliano, 2009). Under GSFP, food is procured at the level of individual schools, which means that the quantities required are considerably smaller than those that would have been required at the district or national level – and can therefore be supplied by smallholders or groups of smallholders. Decentralized procurement was also chosen to empower actors at the level of schools, who would work to bring local food into school kitchens (Morgan and Sonnino, 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> Ghana now has sixteen administrative regions.

### 34.5 Embeddedness in food procurement under the Ghana School Feeding Programme

The interviews carried out in the Northern Region of the country between 2011 and 2013 demonstrated that the outsourcing of procurement to individual schools under GFSP brought on board different dynamics of local food procurement. School food caterers were obliged to pay for purchases themselves when government funding was not forthcoming. This created a disconnection between the profit-seeking behaviour of private caterers and the objective of supporting smallholders, as the latter were not always the most profitable option for sourcing products. Tight school feeding budgets and delays in payments to school food caterers forced the latter to adopt a least-cost approach to procurement and purchase food on credit, using their social networks. This allowed them to secure regular supplies of food in relatively large quantities, thus reaping economies of scale.

School food caterers dealt with people they could trust, so that they were assured of regular supplies and were not harassed for unpaid debts while waiting to be paid by the government. The social networks that caterers relied on comprised largely of family members and friends. The relationships of trust in these networks meant that caterers could rely on their suppliers even under unfavourable business conditions. The use of the networks enabled caterers to procure cheaper food; however, it also constrained efforts to procure school food from smallholders, since the latter largely fell outside of caterers' social networks. As such, the arrangement – while ensuring the smooth running of the programme in the face of the irregular releasing of funds by the government – did not contribute towards the local food procurement objectives of the programme. Indeed, school food caterers preferred to work with local food traders, in spite of the popular view that those traders give both farmers and consumers a bad deal (Sitko and Jayne, 2014).

Smallholders participating in the school feeding market sold their surplus output piecemeal, which afforded them flexibility. While this flexibility reinforced their autonomy, it also constrained the practical execution of the notion of structured demand (Sumberg and Sabates-Wheeler, 2011), proposed as one of the mechanisms of change of HGSF. The notion of structured demand requires that smallholders produce

and sell their products according to the demands of the programme. However, under GSFP, farmers produced and sold their produce according to their own needs. This meant farmers only sold small quantities of products at a time, which did not correspond with the procurement arrangements of school food caterers. However, the long-standing relationships of trust that existed between smallholders and local food traders enabled farmers' piecemeal selling approach to work. Indeed, due to the social relationships between farmers and traders, and the latter's continuous presence in farming communities, the farmers trusted the traders. The social relationships gave smallholders the confidence that they would get money for their surplus farm products anytime they needed it; they also made it possible for traders to advance money to smallholders when they needed it.

While the practices of both farmers and school food caterers constrained local food procurement under GSFP, local food traders played a more enabling role by connecting school food caterers and smallholders. Indeed, both school food caterers and smallholders worked with local food traders in an effort to deal with their problematic situations (Long, 2001). Thus, the role played by local food traders, i.e. to connect smallholders to markets, served GSFP's objective of procuring food locally well. This was especially true for sub-collectors, who bought small quantities of food from smallholders, to sell them on in larger volumes to wholesalers. Subcollectors represented a major opportunity to obtain surplus products from smallholders to school kitchens. Field interviews indicated that this bulking function was needed to link smallholders to school food procurement. A key informant stated that:

*With a volunteer, somebody within the community taking up the role of trying to aggregate, working directly with the farmers and also with the caterer, to aggregate produce towards the school feeding programme, it will be a more sustainable method. Where the matron is just left alone (...) once he/she doesn't have a good working relationship with farmers, it will be difficult, but the volunteer is going to be within the community and would be a pivot on which all these facilitations would be hinged (Sanyare, 2011).*

The historical focus on the nutrition and education objectives of school feeding has affected actors' perspectives on school food procurement: it does not matter where



the food comes from, as long as the schoolchildren are well fed. School food caterers thought that their only mandate was to feed schoolchildren, even though they were required to procure from smallholders. As noted by Quaye (2012, p. 108):

*It is apparent that the way the caterers view their roles in the GSFP contributes to the limited involvement of local farmers. Although most caterers are aware of the poverty reduction objective of the programme, they see themselves solely as food providers for the school children rather than partners responsible for achieving GSFP-smallholder farmers' linkages. Consequently, caterers look for the most economical and efficient way to provide the meals, with the practical benefits of buying food from the market and suppliers largely explaining the way food is purchased.*

Of course, stimulating local agriculture through local procurement should not take precedence over providing adequate, safe and nutritious food to schoolchildren. However, if caterers had a more positive view of local food procurement, they would procure more products locally.

The Ghanaian Government and its local authorities had the objective of leveraging the purchasing power of GSPF to stimulate smallholder agriculture. Thus, they aimed to engage in procurement activities that were situated towards the embeddedness extreme of Block's embeddedness-marketness continuum (Block, 1990). Ideally, under the circumstances in Ghana, school food purchasing would focus on supporting smallholders, more than on economic instrumentalism (Block, 1990). However, private caterers wanted to make a profit, which disembedded their procurement activities from the objective of providing support to farmers. Indeed, only caterers with some level of consideration for local farmers or the local food system would make the extra effort required for local procurement. In other words, for such caterers, the decision to buy locally grown food was "more than a business decision" (Izumi *et al.*, 2010, p. 89). Most other school food caterers only procured local food if the price was cheaper than that of food procured elsewhere.

## 34.6 Conclusion

The practices of the actors involved in GSFP were determined by their sociocultural relationships; these practices in turn affected the realization of the local food procurement objective of GSFP. Smallholders used their sociocultural networks to relate with markets in a flexible way, reinforcing their autonomy. Meanwhile, school food caterers used their social networks to secure cheap, regular and convenient supplies of food for their school kitchens. Local food procurement only happened if and when the social networks of smallholders intersected with those of school food caterers. Local food traders played an enabling role in the provision of local food to school kitchens; however, they often came into the picture only because of their social relationships with school food caterers. The role of local food traders was not recognized in the design of GSFP, as their activities were seen as contrary to the objectives of the programme – when in fact, they were doing exactly what the programme set out to do. Thus, the outcome of the implementation of the GSFP – namely that food is largely procured *outside* school feeding communities – is the result of the negotiation between conflicting interests, based on the sociocultural relationships of the actors involved.

The caterer model, also described as the decentralized third-party model (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO] and World Food Programme [WFP], 2018), is, in theory, conducive to the procurement of food from smallholder farmers because of the lack of formal tendering procedures. However, the caterers contracted under GSFP were not embedded in local sociocultural and economic relationships. As a result, they found it difficult to tap into the trade relationships that existed between smallholders and local food traders in beneficiary communities to bring local food into school kitchens. This situation was made worse by the tight budget for school feeding and the late release of funds by the Government.

To realize the objective of HGSP programmes, of enhancing the livelihoods of smallholders by improving their market access opportunities (FAO and WFP, 2018), programme planners and implementers must consciously involve local food traders who are already working with smallholder farmers, to benefit from these existing embedded relationships. To do this, the Ghanaian Government must find ways to better involve local beneficiary communities in the selection of food caterers, for



example through school committees responsible for the implementation of school feeding programmes. This would enhance community ownership of HGSF programmes and help realize their local food procurement objective. The Government should also create a fund dedicated exclusively to school feeding, to ease the financial barriers that prevent caterers from procuring food locally.

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