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School Meals and Regenerative Agriculture

Exploring the transformative potential in West Africa

Briefing Paper 2 of 2

Content

The Food Systems Transformation Through School Feeding project seeks to generate and apply country-specific, actionable evidence on the pathways for school meal programmes (SMPs) and regenerative agriculture (RA) interventions to drive food systems transformation. Research teams in West and East Africa are leading this work.

In Ghana and Nigeria, stakeholders involved in country SMP initiatives recently convened to discuss and analyse pathways through which SMP and RA interactions may open opportunities for influencing and transforming national food systems. This brief shares findings from the two workshops.

Key Results

- Ghana's SMP has strong potential to boost enrollment, empower local and women farmers, and strengthen local markets, but current weak regime-niche interactions limit their impact and sustainability.
- Regional differences in Nigeria's SMP governance highlights the need to strengthen the programme's regime-niche framework for improved coordination and effectiveness.



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Intervention and Impact

During participatory workshops in Ghana and Nigeria stakeholders from national and local government, civil society, NGOs, farmer groups, and research institutions convened with the objective of discussing and analysing SMP and RA interactions through a transition and transformation lens—applying a Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) (Box 1).

To achieve this objective, participants developed a set of scenarios, or narrative and visual constructs, that explored current and potential SMP-RA interventions (e.g. school farms), influencing factors

(e.g. procurement policies), and external pressures (e.g. climate shifts). Within each scenario, participants explored the enabling and disabling factors that would make transition pathways more or less achievable. They also discussed the role of local and national governance to identify potential opportunities and recommended actions for policy engagement. This included discussing current and potential policies that impact SMP-RA interventions. A random selection of participants were also interviewed on topics related to school food procurement, supply, production, and governance.

Box 1.

WHAT IS THE MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE FRAMEWORK?

The MLP framework is widely applied to conceptualize sustainability transitions in research and specifically recognizes transitions in energy, transport, housing, and agri-food systems. The MLP includes three analytical levels: niche-interventions, socio-political-economic regimes, and landscape pressures. These analytical levels simultaneously interact with one another, creating linkages that both enable and disable transitions. In the context of food systems transformations and transitions, the framework can be a useful tool in characterising transition pathways, understanding dynamics, path dependencies, lock-ins, and opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

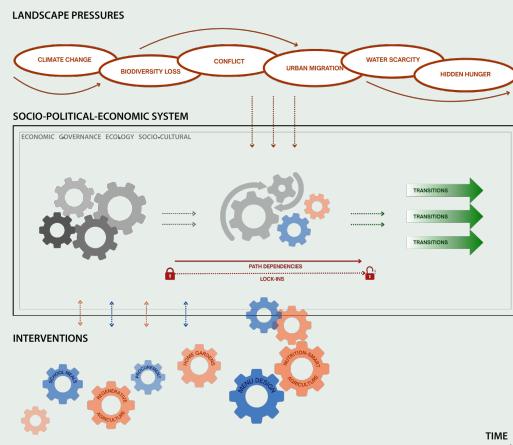


Fig. 1. Multi-level perspective on transitions related to school meal programs and regenerative agriculture (adapted from Geels and Schot 2007).

Ghana

In Ghana, the SMP started in 2005. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) manages the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) with the aim of providing daily school meals to all public, primary school children while boosting domestic food production. In this decentralised system, the MoGCSP provides funding (1.2 cedis (0.22USD) per meal) for school meals at the district level by allocating funds and food guidelines directly to local caterers via electronic procurement systems. Caterers use the money to purchase school food items from farmers, prepare meals, and deliver them to schools.



Workshop participants gathered at Ensign Global in Kpong, Ghana. Credit: Savannah Dysard



Main Findings: Current Scenario

There are several factors constraining SMP-RA interventions at the niche, regime, and landscape levels in Ghana. This situation has resulted in the inability of the SMP to consistently supply nutritious school meals. The constraining factors include:

- **Delayed disbursements of SMP funds**, which creates an unreliable school food market for local and smallholder farmers and disincentivises them from participating in the SMP.
- **Unreliable procurement systems** that cause caterers to establish credit-based systems with large, commercial farms, and crowds out smallholder, local farmers from the market.
- **Inability of the government to afford to pay for the SMP without community support and contribution.** prohibiting programme delivery and expansion.
- **Lack of available training on RA practices for local farmers**, which disables them from growing produce year-round and limits their ability to compete with commercial farmers in the market.

- **Lack of collaboration between government ministries working on issues related to food and farming systems**, which causes the development of separate school feeding and farming policies with disconnected implementation plans.
- **Little collaboration with national and district- level organisations** that hinders meaningful insights which could support sustainable SMP implementation.
- **Climate events such as prolonged dry spells and flooding, illegal mining, and water scarcity** that impact food production, cause crop losses, contribute to biodiversity loss, and pose significant challenges to SMP delivery.
- **Historic policies that limit women's land ownership** ability to participate in the farming sector and access the SMP market.
- **Low quality food** that results from large farmers prioritising quantity over quality.



Main Findings: Envisioned Scenario

In the envisioned scenario, SMP-RA interventions build on a 'One School, One Farm' approach. This approach was previously promoted by the Government of Ghana and aimed to link RA practices to the GSFP through the development of school farms and capacity-building for local farmers. This scenario includes:

- **Establishing district food banks** to enable a stable market for caterers to purchase school food directly from local sources.
- **Establishing school farms** which would be integrated into the community.
- **Stimulating community engagement and SMP ownership** by supporting local farmers to host training sessions for parents and community members at the school farms.

- **Coordinating regular, district-level farmer training sessions on RA practices**—such as precision farming methods, climate-smart irrigation, and crop rotation—to stimulate consistent food production.
- **Decentralising SMP funding to the district level and appointing district-level monitoring officers** to ensure funding is ring-fenced for the SMP and payments are transferred directly to stakeholders.
- **Developing food manuals for caterers** so they are informed by all relevant departments and can integrate consistent food-based dietary guidelines, with recommendations for nutrient-dense foods and utilisation of biodiverse species.



Policy Recommendations

There was an emphasis on the potential of SMPs to increase school enrollment, empower local farmers, develop thriving small and medium-sized business (SMB) farmer markets, support local and women-led farmers, and enhance community ownership and public health—if effectively implemented.

The current scenario reflects a sub-optimal SMP design and regime-niche interactions do not enable constructive engagement that would strengthen the quality of niche interventions and create responsive regime frameworks. In contrast, the envisioned scenario fosters regime-niche interactions that are mutually informed, creating a model that is grounded in and responsive to local systems. To strengthen the capacity for SMP-RA interventions to transform food systems, participants recommend the following considerations for policymaking.

- Apply subsidies to local farmers to incentivise smallholder food production and competition with large commercial farms;
- Ringfence SMP funding to require caterers to prioritise buying locally produced foods;
- Include biodiverse crops in food guidelines to support the inclusion of local, diverse, nutrient-rich crop production and utilisation.
- Strengthen capacity building for farmers by expanding RA practices and access to technology to improve sustainability and support food production in the face of climate challenges.
- Mandate monitoring for the SMP and RA practices at the district level to ensure timely and reliable government payments and stabilise the SMP market.

Nigeria

The national SMP in Nigeria is in a state of expansion and relaunch following a period of inactivity. The suspected relaunch of the programme will be in summer 2025, ahead of the new school year. Before the programme was suspended in 2023, funding was disbursed from the federal government directly to the beneficiaries' (cooks and aggregators) dedicated bank accounts two weeks ahead of the meal schedule. The cooks sourced some supplies for the meal preparation from the farmers' association, through aggregators,

and other ingredients from the open market. The new programme, referred to as the Renewed Hope National Home-Grown School Feeding Programme (RH-NHGSFP), aims to provide 20 million children in Nigerian public, primary schools with a nutritious meal daily by 2026. It is designed to boost educational outcomes, reduce the rate of out of school children, increase enrollment, increase academic performance, and strengthen Nigeria's agricultural value chain from local government upwards.



Workshop participants gathered in Abuja, Nigeria. Credit: Abimbola Adesanmi



Main Findings: Northern Region

The northern region makes up 70% of the total land mass. Despite having a strong ecological foundation to support the SMP, several factors still constrain SMP-RA interventions at the niche, regime, and landscape levels including:

- **Poor financial support for local farmers** that limits investment in farming equipment, technical training, and food storage required to overcome climate and infrastructure related constraints.
- **Centralised procurement systems** that cause delayed funding, forcing local and smallholder farmers to rely on school food aggregators to participate in the SMP market because they have stable cash flow and can support food transportation and storage.
- **Limited access to the SMP market for local and smallholder farmers** that causes low accountability—including by women and youth farmers.
- **Poor farmer support** in the region that leads to low farming activity and limited supply of food.

○ **Lack of state-level ownership and ministerial collaboration** which limits investment in farming and value chain infrastructure, creating unreliable SMP markets.

○ **Insecurity due to farmers-herders' conflict and Islamic insurgent groups** that causes a lack of will-power to farm and results in rural/urban migration and poor harvest outputs.

○ **Socio-cultural beliefs** that enable community resistance to planting vital vegetable crops.

○ **Insufficient water supply** due to climate change that limits farm capabilities and crop selection.

Given these constraints, participants recommend that States own the SMP to enable effective sustainability planning, encourage community-based practices, and increase cross-departmental collaboration. National governments could provide RA and SMP training to state and local stakeholders. State and local officials could then provide monitoring and support to ensure successful and sustainable implementation of the SMP.



Main Findings: Southern Region

The smaller southern region of Nigeria offers less land for agriculture but longer rains to support crop growth. There is high political support for sustainable SMP interventions in the region, but several factors still constrain SMP-RA interactions at the niche, regime, and landscape levels. These factors include:

- **Isolated federal SMP funding and oversight** that causes programme disruptions and destabilised SMP markets, disincentivising farmers from participating in the SMP and investing in agricultural production.
- **Clashes between farmers and herdsmen** that create insecurity and low agricultural activity.
- **Lack of available land for farming**, which limits agricultural activity and leads to large farms dominating regional food production—crowding smallholder farmers out of the market.
- **Poor infrastructure**—such as good road system, irrigation system, food storage facilities—that causes lower agricultural productivity.

○ **Climate challenges**—including severe drought during dry seasons and intense rainfall during rainy seasons, which impacts the ability of farmers to farm all year round and limits the already scarce availability of fertile land.

○ **Gender disparity issues**—such as land ownership—that prohibit women from contributing to the SMP market.

In response to these barriers, participants recommended the federal government transfer SMP funding to the state level where a multi-sectoral steering committee would manage SMP implementation.

State-level ministries could develop national training, monitoring, and coordination systems for local and smallholder farmers involved in the SMP. They could also establish district-level farmers associations to oversee the development of school gardens and delivery of RA farmer trainings. States could also support the training of local, women farmers in school garden maintenance.



Policy Recommendations

Participants made it clear that state-level ownership is critical to the success of the SMP in both the northern and southern regions of Nigeria. The current regime-niche interactions disable niche interventions and make it impossible for them to respond to the unique landscape pressures.

In the Northern region, a top-down regime-niche approach was discussed, where the federal government owns and directs SMP with state and local governments implementing and monitoring niche interventions. In contrast, in the Southern region, a more decentralised regime-niche approach was recommended, where federal government provides funding and state governments have full control and autonomy over the niche interventions.

Based on these findings, the upcoming RH-NHGSFP may consider strengthening its regime-niche approach. To strengthen the capacity for SMP-RA interventions that transform food systems, the following policies were recommended.

- Provide women the ability to own property on their own recognisance to open a pathway of access to the SMP market for smallholder farmers and encourage women to farm.
- Establish zero taxation on agricultural produce, adopting the Kaduna State policy on dedicating a day a week for farming to encourage more farmers to participate in the SMP market.
- Simplify the SMP procurement system at the state level to avoid fraud, including allocating funds directly to farms via an online procurement platform so farmers can get paid for the SMP directly with no third-party involvement.
- Require local government to provide farmer's markets for each L.G.A to decrease reliance on school food farm aggregators.
- Ban the importation of agricultural consumables to promote change in social and cultural attitudes towards locally grown food crops.

Conclusion

This work highlights the need for developed, structured national learning platforms around school meals, nutrition and food systems, for researchers and practitioners. It also identifies path dependencies and policy issues that must be addressed to enable intervention success in the long term. Building on this experience, the MLP frame-

work should be fine-tuned for a more granular understanding of the transition process. This will also help identify and prioritise policy actions to address persistent lock-ins. This analysis will contribute to wider project evidence on food systems transformation grounded in SMP and RA evidence.

About this policy brief

This project brief is part of a series aiming to convey the results and progress of the Food Systems Transformation Through School Feeding Project, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation under the Catalyzing Change for Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems (CCHeFS) initiative. The full series can be found at www.regenerativefoodsystemsalliance.org.

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