



HATUTAN Baseline: School Feeding Program Brief

Timor-Leste

HATUTAN Education and Nutrition Program

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HATUTAN Baseline: School Feeding Program Brief

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Key Findings: School Feeding Program

The Government of Timor-Leste (GOTL) has a national School Feeding Program (SFP) for all basic education students (grade 1-9) as an incentive to increase school attendance, address nutritional needs and stimulate the local economy. Main findings in the baseline are the immense popularity of the program among parents and school personnel however criticism of the program's limited implementation. Respondents strongly perceive the school feeding program to improve student attendance, student attentiveness and participation in class and relieve short-term hunger with a nutritious meal. Practices at the school level often deviated from the school feeding implementation guidance with notably low parent participation. School feeding was mostly not functional during the data collection. In the few schools serving a meal, the nutritional value of the meal varied greatly with tendency to towards rice with leafy vegetable. School administrators spoke of limited budget and limited availability of food locally in type and quantity as constraints.

1. The HATUTAN Program

HATUTAN (*Hahán ne'ebé Atu Fó Tulun ho Nutrisaun no Edukasaun*, or Continue and Support Food for Nutrition and Education) is a program funded by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole Food for Education initiative in Timor-Leste. HATUTAN seeks to improve literacy outcomes for primary school children and increased use of improved health, nutrition and dietary practices in 440 schools and surrounding communities in the municipalities of Ainaro, Ermera, Liquica and Manatuto. The program is implemented by CARE International, Mercy Corps and Water Aid in partnership with the Ministries of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS), Health (MOH), Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) and KONSANTIL, between 2018 and 2023. HATUTAN uses a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of its intervention on education, health and nutrition outcomes in treatment schools, compared to the regular progress observed through time in a set of matching comparison schools not exposed to similar interventions. HATUTAN's baseline study, conducted in February-April 2019, collected data from 189 schools and respective communities, including 99 treatment and 90 comparison schools.

2. Background

The SFP provides budgetary support (25 cents per child per day) and distributes unfortified rice (75-100g/ child/ day) to all schools providing basic education classes in the country. School cooks prepare the rice and purchase other products locally to prepare a meal. While the program is established, funded, and enjoys substantial political commitment, it suffers from systemic inefficiencies, meaning funds and rice do not consistently reach all schools for all the planned school days. National government budgetary and school reporting delays at the start of each calendar year means that neither funds nor rice reach schools from January to March. This is a particular challenge since it coincides with Timor-Leste's 'hungry period' (November/ December to January/ February) when the previous year's subsistence staples have been consumed but the new season's produce is not yet ready. School administrators

further delay the process with late submission of data and financial reporting, which holds up the disbursement of the next funding tranche. That challenge is even greater at rural areas, where economy largely depends on subsistence agriculture and most households lack sufficient cash income to buy food during the ‘hungry season’.

The program’s implementation difficulties undercut the potential draw for student attendance. The government EMIS data show a sudden increase in student registration starting in 2007 with parents and teachers mentioning the SFP as a main incentive to register for school. Food distribution became irregular in 2010, however, and a survey conducted in 2011 indicated that 44% of the students at risk of dropout were too hungry to pay attention to class¹.

3. Key findings from baseline

Impact on Attendance: Given erratic delivery of SFP, there is not yet proof of its impact on student attendance,² however parents, school administrators and teachers strongly support the program and mentioned its many perceived benefits in terms of motivating students, increasing attendance and attentiveness, and helping the most vulnerable students to stay in school.

When there are school meals, the students attend regularly, but when they hear that there is no meal, they lack motivation to go to school. [Father, Manatuto]

While the school feeding was going on, it was very helpful for the parents, because it made children attend school regularly. [Father, Ainaro]

Caregivers reported very positively on aspects of the school feeding program during the household survey, reflecting back on when the SFP was operating. Most parents said the quantity of food is sufficient (89.7%), prepared in a hygienic manner (92.3%), available every day (91.6%), and tasty (90%). However, parents also described multiple issues with the current implementation of the school feeding program, mentioning long interruptions in the provision of meals, poor quality of the food, lack of variety and conflicts in the management of the school feeding program at the school.

The quality is ok, but it was better before. Now it is not implemented well. It has stopped. The quality is good because they give yam, cassava, banana to the children. [Mother, Liquica]

Because the government implements the school feeding program like this, eating one day and not eating another day, this makes the children sick. For example, when they go to school, we keep some food for their lunch, but when they come home, they say that they have eaten already. Then we stop keeping their lunch, but they come back home and say that they haven’t eaten. This affects their health and is not right. Sometimes they eat, sometimes they don’t, this can make them sick. [Father, Liquica]

¹ Creative Associates International (2014) Timor-Leste Situational Analysis: Factors and Conditions that Affect Dropout, p. 36

² Initial draft findings from Ministry of Education commissioned Case Study on the School Feeding Program in Timor-Leste, January 2016, p. 3.

School officials indicated that school feeding was limited in the last few years, and usually not able to deliver meals in the first trimester due to delay in state budget approval and fund transfer. The government school feeding program was not operating during most of the data collection period due to lack of budget at the start of the fiscal year. Enumerators visited treatment schools first in February and March, then visited comparison schools with data collection extending into April. Some schools received the budget transfer for school feeding at the end of March and early April but no rice, allowing for one to two weeks of school feeding to occur in the first trimester using the 25 cents only.

The inconsistency in meals served made it difficult to identify any pre-existing relationships between school feeding programs and literacy scores based on survey data. School absences, however, were a statistically significant predictor of literacy.

Filling the short term hunger of students for attentiveness: As with attendance, parents and teachers credited the SFP with improving student attentiveness and participation in school when meals were available and how short-term hunger affects students' ability to pay attention and engage in class.

Most children live far from school and they have to wake up very early, they just go to school without having eaten breakfast because they are afraid that they will arrive late. If there is a school feeding program, it helps the school children a lot, responding to their needs. [Father, Ainaro]

Sometimes they are hungry, when it's time for the break they don't have time to rest. They don't want to study, they don't want to listen to the class. [Mother, Ermera]

Children's attentiveness is low and it makes teaching very difficult. [Coordinator, male, Liquica]

Teachers frequently noted the challenge of teaching disengaged and withdrawn students. As a result, teachers resort to focusing almost exclusively on classroom management in order to engage students. They have to work harder in order to compensate for student hunger, which takes away from effective literacy instruction and ultimately student learning.

Caregivers indicated that about four in ten students (36.7%) have at least some difficulty remembering things or concentrating. The results indicate that this is the most common type of disability (cognitive), and may be linked to working memory issues, potentially arising from a history of malnutrition and/or persistent illness. This is validated in a working memory³ test where those students who were reported as having difficulty remembering things were more likely to perform poorly on the working memory test and score lower on EGRA literacy tasks.

Partnerships in community and stimulation to the local economy: Nearly all respondents from treatment schools (96%) reported that their school buys local food from farmers for school feeding at least sometimes. During interviews, some coordinators remarked that they face issues buying nutritious, locally grown food in rural locations; the quantity and variety is limited in rural markets and access to larger markets is difficult. It is important to note that,

³ Research shows working memory as related to ability to retain information required for reading comprehension. See Cowan, N. Working Memory Underpins Cognitive Development, Learning and Education. Education Psychology Review. 2014 Jun 1; 26(2): 197–223.

despite recent years' improvements in road access from the capital to municipal capitals and administrative posts, access to rural and remote areas remains difficult, particularly during the rainy season. The main issue, however, is the cost of local food, which exceeds the \$0.25/day budget allocated for each child's meal. Some schools are asking parents to contribute vegetables to the school meal, as the funds are insufficient to buy produce from farmers.

The cooking menus [are a challenge]. Sometimes we want to buy meat but there is none available here, because this is a remote place. (...) The \$0.25 are not sufficient. [Coordinator, female, Manatuto]

It's difficult to buy locally grown food here because the food produced in the village is not enough for 100 children to eat. There isn't enough cassava or potato, so we have to go to the market. [Coordinator, male, Ainaro]

Several coordinators explained that schools do not procure directly from local farmers, but rather buy from the market.

We don't liaise with farmers, they don't sell directly to the school. We buy directly from the market, we have no contact with farmers. [Coordinator, male, Liquica]

Only a quarter of the 28 schools that served meals served high nutrient density local foods such as pumpkin, with less than 11% of those serving animal source protein.

We question the quality of the school meals, we see them preparing noodles and rice for lunch, sometimes egg and rice only. We see that this is not balanced for nutrition. We parents received information from the health staff that we should eat different types of food for good nutrition. They need to change the menu, it's the same every day. [Father, Ermera]

Parent oversight and role of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA): PTAs are intended to play a key role in the implementation of the school feeding program, however data from the school survey indicate very limited participation. The majority of the schools (95% treatment, 94% comparison) affirmed that they have a PTA, but in nearly half of those, the PTA reportedly has only one member. Only three in ten schools (30.7%) mentioned the PTA as responsible for oversight of the program.⁴ Some PTAs are clearly overseeing the SFP and local procurement of food for meals, while others have apparently no engagement in it at all.

The community itself decides who will prepare the meals. They hold the funds and manage them, taking some of it to compensate for their work [cooking]. It's their chief who manages their work, we just wait for the report. [Coordinator, male, Ainaro]

One problem with PTA oversight of school feeding is the limited frequency in which PTAs meet. Nearly six out of ten schools (59.3%) reported that the PTA had not met that year with few PTAs formed by five or more members. Household surveys revealed that most caregivers did not have a clear understanding of PTAs nor their role in the school.

⁴ School survey allowed for multiple answers of the SFP oversight with results of 74.6% stating the director or coordinator was responsible, 30.7% PTA, 22.8% teachers and 7.1% Deputy Directors.

According to the school feeding manual, schools should form a School Feeding Program Committee (KPME), parents should select the cooks and monitor the program's implementation. A minority of parents mentioned being active in the oversight of the SFP:

I'm a new member of the PTA, started a year ago, but can see that they are cooking properly and providing good food for the children. The rice is of poor quality though. [Father, Manatuto]

Hygiene and Infrastructure Issues: An effective school feeding program requires the necessary infrastructure to support it. School survey collected data on infrastructure including water, electricity, toilets, kitchen and storage space. Most schools (88.5%) had a kitchen at the school (though condition was not reported), but fewer had food storage (64.3%). Canteens were not common with only about one in ten schools (13.2%) having one available. About seven in ten schools (69.8%) had at least one toilet which could be used by the students, but fewer than half (47.8%) had a specific toilet available for girls. Water and electricity were available in a little more than half of schools (57.7% and 53.4%, respectively). Only about one third (37.2%) had a handwashing station available and less than half of schools (43.5%) reported using detergent often or every day to clean the kitchen. Qualitative data suggests that parents are concerned about hygiene standards in the preparation of school meals:

They have to tell the cook to change the food and wash the vegetables till they are clean. The rice sometimes is dirty, has not been washed, it comes mixed with insects. Have to tell them to wash it. [Mother, Ermera]

As 35% percent of the schools lack basic sanitation and 46% do not have access to improved water sources; it is estimated that 40% of the cases of diarrhea at school result from transmission at school⁵.

Once again, the scenario is worst in rural areas, also at the household level, with less than half of the rural households having access to an improved latrine (and the majority of these still practice open defecation) and access to water being often difficult, particularly during the dry season. A disparity exists also between rural and urban schools, particularly in relation to toilets and electricity. Urban schools were more likely to have at least one toilet (83.3%) compared to rural schools (67.9%), as well as electricity (83.3% for urban and 54.3% for rural). They were also more likely to have a kitchen and food storage. Rural schools were more likely to have water access than urban schools.

Parents often described school infrastructure as poor, noting a range of issues that affect teachers' ability to teach. Complaints include lack of facilities such as kitchens; damage caused by strong winds; lack of fences, resulting in animals roaming freely; limited number of classrooms, resulting in overcrowded classes; and poor maintenance of existing facilities.

The school is in very bad shape, we need to fix it. There is no water and because of that, children eat dry noodles [snack] with dirty hands. The toilets and the kitchen are also in poor shape. [Mother, Ainaro]

⁵ UNICEF (2014) Situation Analysis of the Children in Timor-Leste, p. 99-101

The problem is that the school is in very poor condition. Students' toilets were built but there is no maintenance. They defecate in the open and become ill. [Father, Ermera]

Some communities described their contribution to improve infrastructure, with PTAs building fences and kitchens. All schools had a wood stove for cooking with no schools reporting electric or gas stoves. Only about two-thirds (64.3%) had clean water available to prepare meals, and less than half had a scale in the kitchen (55.7%).

Most of the food storage spaces had cement floors (79.1%) and brick walls (57.8%). Nearly all of them (96.9%) had an aluminum roof, but about two in ten (18.6%) were leaking. About one quarter of the storage spaces (24.8%) did not have any method for raising food off the ground. Storage for fresh produce was not specifically assessed.

4. Exploring the Issue

School feeding programs worldwide have demonstrated benefits in reducing student absenteeism and improving student attentiveness. Mid-term and final evaluation data will provide more insight into the impact of the SFP on student attendance and attentiveness when related to a more consistent delivery of the school feeding program.

Teacher motivation may also increase as teachers observe changes in students' learning capacity and attentiveness. Teachers are likely to see more positive outcomes from engaging teaching practices when students are fed and ready to learn.

The caretaker survey found limited dietary diversity for themselves and their children at home, reflecting not only nutrition practices, but also the pattern of the 'hungry season' – the pre-harvest period when household stores of food have been depleted and families resort to coping strategies such as limiting the consumption of food. It also highlights the importance of the provision of quality school feeding, enabling children to eat at least once a day a balanced meal.

A functional SFP offers the opportunity for students and parents to learn about better nutrition – especially variety of foods and not as heavily reliant on carbohydrates as the home diet. However, the cooks' compliance with nutritional guidance needs to be improved.

The benefit to the local economy is undercut when a third up to two thirds of the SFP is not operational. Each day the school feeding operates, an estimated eighty thousand US dollars⁶ could enter the local markets near to the schools throughout the country. There is further opportunity lost for local farmers with many purchases made from kiosks or shops for manufactured products rather than fresh produce.

Parents voiced frustration over limited awareness of issues pertaining to the feeding program and need to be better informed to be part of the solution with active PTA involvement to improve the SFP consistency of delivery and quality. There are opportunities to strengthen the collaboration between parents and school staff to improve infrastructure, given parental

⁶ Using EMIS 2018 data the estimated amount of money required for school feeding is based on the number of pre-school students plus basic education students for the total number of students covered by the SFP (21,399 + 302,447 = 323,846). As per the SFP manual, the amount of money the program requires per day nationwide is 80,962 USD (323,846 x \$0.25 = \$80,961.50). The school calendar indicates the number of days intended for school feeding (effective days) as 191 per school year for a total amount of US 15, 463,647.

awareness of its value and the clear needs at school with attention to sanitation, water and food preparation spaces. This requires, however, a stronger, mutually accountable relationship between the school and the community, as many parents pointed out that the services offered by the school do not meet their expectations (due to teacher absenteeism, among other points).

5. What this means for HATUTAN (government/school/parents/community)

School feeding program – mechanism

The HATUTAN Program supports the Timorese government to implement the SFP as per plan starting on the first day of school with the expected result to improve student attendance and attentiveness. When students suffer from malnutrition and hunger, even the best instruction will not show results if students are absent physically or mentally. School meals consistently delivered contribute to both of these issues.

Opportunities for developing partnerships at the school level may look different in each local context, but one commonality across all communities is the need for a strong PTA to play a leading role in supporting the partnerships. The HATUTAN program has a strong emphasis on establishing and strengthening PTAs as central to developing a school feeding program that is sustainable, uses healthy food, and supports an infrastructure for safe preparation.

The national level will need to address the fund availability issue to allow school feeding on day one of school as an important factor to attract student attendance and supplement children's nutrition.

Infrastructure inputs are needed on a significant scale with parent involvement for smaller improvements, repairs and maintenance.

Effective partnerships with farmer groups and extension services will support access to healthy food while simultaneously spurring economic growth in the community. The worked planned under HATUTAN to support both production and access to markets in the surrounding school communities. Currently only 21% of the household respondents are part of a farmer groups. HATUTAN plans to work with 320 Farmer Groups an expected 6,400 individual farmers.