

Evolution of school feeding in Mali

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The context: low school enrolment, food insecurity and vulnerability

Mali is a low-income country located in the heart of West Africa with a population of over 14.5 million, of which nearly half are under the age of 15. Education is therefore a top priority for the country. Although significant achievements have been made in improving access to education, many rural children (especially girls) remain excluded from the school system. The net enrolment rate for the primary school cycle at a national level (around 60%¹) is below the average of that for Sub-Saharan Africa², and it is even lower in other parts of the country (e.g. Mopti and Kidal where rates are below 50%). Low school attendance is further exacerbated by frequent unfavorable climatic conditions in the country, food insecurity and vulnerability which affect nearly 40% of the population, and malnutrition which 43%³ of children suffer from. Thus, the Government of Mali is strongly promoting school feeding to tackle these challenges.

The 1960s and 1970s: the creation of a new education strategy

School feeding was institutionalized in Mali for the first time in 1962, two years after the country gained independence. Specifically, this was as part of decree No.235; an education reform on the organization of basic education⁴. At that time, there were almost no schools in the villages, but only in the capitals of the *Arrondissements* (districts). Children had to walk several miles from their villages to schools. It was very difficult for them to go back home at noon and come back to school in the afternoon, and furthermore, it was difficult for them to pay attention in class while they were hungry. Thus, the objective was to promote education through the provision of school meals to children. Additionally, school feeding was necessary in the northern and western parts of the country, the Sahelian zones and in areas where the nomadic population lives.

In 1970 decree No. 57 replaced that which had been previously passed in 1962 on the organization of basic education⁵. This emphasized once again the importance of school feeding as a way to promote child enrolment and retention at school. Rather than being implemented at a national level to oversee school feeding activities local authorities were responsible for implementing the programmes at regional and district levels. In addition, the authorities and communities actively contributed both in cash and kind. For example, women voluntarily organized themselves to manage the cooking activities⁶.

¹ Annuaire National des Statistiques Scolaires de l'Enseignement Fondamental 2009-2010 (2010).

² UNESCO (2009).

³ MICS (2010).

⁴ Personal interview with Mr. Adama M. Traoré, Deputy national director of basic education (2011).

⁵ Personal interview with Mr. Adama M. Traoré, Deputy national director of basic education (2011).

⁶ Personal interview with Mr. Mamadou Doumbia, National school feeding coordinator in Mali 2005-2011 (2011).

Fatigue and revitalization

It is important to highlight that in the 1960s and 1970s, the Government of Mali operated under a planned economy and state intervention system. The structural reforms of the 1980s pushed for a gradual decrease in state intervention in several areas in order to reduce deficits and pave the way for private participation in different domains. This change led to a form of "fatigue" in the public involvement in certain key sectors, primarily, in education. This could explain the decline in the government's commitments to school feeding in the 1980s and 1990s, however, some programmes – mainly supported by NGOs and the diaspora remained tentatively active in the more vulnerable areas of northern and western regions.

In the late 1990s, international development organizations - including the World Food Programme (WFP) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) - started focusing on school feeding as part of their strategies for poverty reduction, food security and education. WFP's 1998-2000 Quick Action Project (QAP) saw the launch of a pilot of school canteens⁷. At the time, through its 2002-2007 country programme it signed an operational agreement with the government, also creating a national coordinator position at the Ministry of Education – a post responsible for the monitoring of school feeding activities at the national level⁸. School canteen officer positions were later established at the *Académies d'Enseignement* and *Centres d'Animation Pédagogique* (regional and local departments of education). At a community level, the *Comités de Gestion Scolaires* (CGS), school management committees, are currently in charge of the daily management of the school canteen and they also make significant contributions to it.

The National School Feeding Policy

The net school enrolment rate in Mali has markedly increased since 1990, when it was only about 20%⁹. To enable progress towards meeting Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2; to achieve Education for All, the Government of Mali and its partner development organizations agreed that school feeding should be supported and strengthened through a national policy, which was to serve as a reference framework, ensuring the continuity of activities despite political changes and allowing better resource mobilization¹⁰. The process took about three years; from the WFP country programme evaluation in 2006 to the adoption of the policy document in November 2009. At the initial stage, the Global Child Nutrition Forum held in Chicago in 2007 produced an action plan. From this plan a number of different actions followed: the holding of a National Forum on school feeding in 2008, the establishment of a *Cadre de Concertation* (steering committee) to implement the recommendations as outcomes from the forum and to formulate the National School Feeding Policy, a technical validation workshop with key sectorial ministries chaired by the Prime Minister, a presentation of the policy draft and the action plan at the *Primature* (Prime Minister's office), an inter-ministerial meetings for approval, and finally, the approval by the Council of Ministers chaired by the President of the Republic¹¹.

⁷ Personal interview with Mr. Aboubacar Guindo, Education programme officer at WFP (2012).

⁸ Personal interview with Mr. Mamadou Doumbia, National school feeding coordinator in Mali 2005-2011 (2012).

⁹ UNESCO Statistics (2009).

¹⁰ Personal interview with Mr. Bonaventure Maïga, Technical advisor at the Ministry of Education (2011).

¹¹ Personal interview with Mr. Aboubacar Guindo, Education programme officer at WFP (2011).

The *Politique Nationale de l'Alimentation Scolaire* (National School Feeding Policy) aims to “provide support to school feeding in a sustainable way so that hunger does not become a barrier to educational access, retention in school and the development of the pupil.” Its objectives include the coordination of various interventions and approaches so as to help meet MDG 2; to achieve universal primary education as well as the objective of aiding development in the school canteens’ surrounding communities¹². In addition, the national policy emphasizes the fact that school feeding is multi-sectorial, as it takes into account other sectorial policies. These policies include health (fighting HIV/AIDS and malaria, working towards good nutrition practices and hygiene etc.), agriculture (local procurement from smallholder farmers in order to support smallholder farmers and boost the local economy), and the environment (such as reforestation and purification etc.).

Following the adoption of the national policy in 2009, a national (government-run) school feeding programme was launched by the Ministry of Education in 2011 which saw the *Centre National des Cantines Scolaires* (National Centers for School Canteens), take over as the only national coordinator for the entire country. It is important to note that the *Collectivités* (local governments), according to the decentralization law, are primarily responsible for the schools as part of the national programme. Funds are directly channeled to them through the department of Finance and they then have to make these funds available to the CGS for the management of school canteens¹³. School feeding programmes are currently being implemented both by the government and the relevant partners in more than 1,500 schools¹⁴. And these are carried out in areas identified as having the most vulnerable communities and with the greatest food insecurity (these have become known as “assisted” school canteens). In addition to these assisted canteens, there are also a few “integrated school canteens” in which the communities fully support all the activities following on from an initial three-year assistance from the Government¹⁵. The long term vision of the national policy is to make all school canteens integrated.

The following chapter: national policy implementation and creating a favorable environment

The main school feeding programmes in Mali generally provide hot meals (consisting of cereals, beans, peas and legumes) at noon to school children during school days. In addition to canteen meals and as part of the greater school feeding programme package, some programmes also have complementary interventions such as take-home rations for girls (to encourage parents to send and keep girls in schools), deworming, school gardens, or the provision of mills for grain processing. Various progress reports on the programmes have indicated a strong increase in enrolment and attendance in schools with a canteen.

Over recent years school feeding in Mali has undoubtedly made major achievements thanks to the remarkable effort made by the government and its partners. However, there remain several gaps and constraints. In the first instance, there is a low level of coverage, with only 15.4% of all schools and

¹² *Politique Nationale de l'Alimentation Scolaire*, République du Mali, p. 19-20 (2009).

¹³ Arrêté Interministériel N° 2012 0367/MEALN-MATCL-MEF-SG du 2 Février 2012 (2012).

¹⁴ Estimated from the latest school canteen data of the government and partners (2011).

¹⁵ Personal interview with Mr. Bonaventure Maïga, Technical advisor at the Ministry of Education (2012).

26.1% of schools in food insecure areas benefitting from the assisted school canteen programme¹⁶. There are also weaknesses in the coordination of activities, the synergy between sectorial ministries, the participation of local smallholder farmers in procurement, the mobilization of financial resources, and the management capability at a community level. In addition, some schools in the national programme have no defined food basket and experience an irregular and insufficient food supply. Developing information sharing mechanisms and clearly defining and implementing a national monitoring and evaluation system would better ensure the programmes' efficiency and sustainability.

Addressing these different challenges will be the next chapter of school feeding in Mali. The government and its partners should focus their efforts on a transition to a sustainable and nationally-owned school feeding programme in Mali. These actions can be undertaken and structured around the five standards of good practice as identified in "Rethinking School Feeding"¹⁷, namely: a strong policy framework – which already exists in Mali and which should be strengthened through law to establish its directions and objectives, a strong institutional structure and coordination, stable funding and planning, a programme sound in design and implementation and one which ensures the active participation of the community. An important prerequisite for any medium or long term transition strategy definition will be to facilitate mapping and a thorough evaluation of current interventions. Lastly, the steering committees at national and regional levels composed of different actors and stakeholders, including local governments, should be optimized for greater collaboration, as well as efforts and initiatives in favor of the sustainability of school feeding in Mali.

¹⁶ Estimated from the database of the Ministry of Education's statistical and planning unit (2011).

¹⁷ Bundy et al., p. 83-84 (2009).