



## ***An innovative approach helps smallholder farmers and supports children's education at the same time***

What does it take to get a child to attend school regularly and then learn effectively when there?

Common responses to this question would probably include things like no school fees, well-trained teachers and high-quality textbooks. Others would likely argue the need to combat [discrimination](#) faced by certain marginalised groups (e.g. girls, orphans and children with disabilities) both inside and outside of the classroom. Indeed, all of these are essential for building strong [education systems](#) and ensuring that every child enjoys their [right to education](#).

I doubt that many answers would highlight the role that smallholder farmers can play in educational participation and achievement. Yet a new [policy paper](#) from Imperial College London's [Partnership for Child Development](#) shows how food grown by some of the world's 500 million smallholder farmers is being used in school meals to feed children – with some impressive results.

These government-led interventions, known as Home Grown School Feeding (HGSF), may be described as a 'win-win' for children and smallholder farmers alike.

Nutritious snacks and meals can provide an incentive for the poorest children to attend school.

Considering that [57 million](#) children are still not going to primary school, school feeding can be a crucial form of encouragement. Moreover, it's hard to concentrate if you're hungry. Children also struggle to study – and develop cognitively – even if they're getting enough food in terms of calorie intake but not satisfying their [nutritional requirements](#) .

The smallholder farmers benefit by having a ready-made market for their produce. School feeding programmes are predictable as they run for a fixed number of days per year and can elect a pre-determined food basket. Serving this school feeding market can reduce risks for vulnerable farmers as they seek to build their livelihoods and pull their families out of poverty.

HGSF works best when smallholder farmers, particularly women, are [empowered](#) through the provision of training, credit on reasonable terms and appropriate technology, and also when there is political commitment to protect farmers' land rights. Complementary investments in physical infrastructure, education, health, and water, sanitation and hygiene are also necessary to maximise the impact of HGSF.

The paper stresses that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' HGSF model. Examples from [Kenya](#) , [Nigeria](#) and [Mali](#) illustrate how every country that implements HGSF programmes requires different approaches suitable to its specific context.

However it is important for official donors to recognise the value of HGSF, and support the many African (and other) governments who desire to transition from externally-supported school feeding programmes to fully government-led sustainable school feeding programmes. This support should include research, training and peer-to-peer learning activities.

Some official donors, such as the [World Food Programme](#) and the [World Bank](#) are involved with HGSF initiatives. Others, most notably the [UK government](#) and the [European Commission](#) , are not. The latter group should urgently rethink their approach and join the HGSF movement.

Donor support is vital to respond to growing demand from developing country governments. Since the turn of the millennium, interest in HGSF has grown rapidly, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2003, the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) launched a pilot HGSF programme, and later in the year African governments included locally-sourced school feeding programmes in NEPAD's [Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme](#)

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Yet, there is a wider story here. HGSF is a powerful example of coherent collaboration across agriculture, education and health sectors. As many development challenges are interrelated and can affect families across [multiple generations](#), ensuring that different sectors combine their strengths to achieve key goals enhances the chances for success. Working in silos doesn't.

This is vital to remember as world leaders continue to debate the nature of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDG framework, which expires next year, has failed to establish strong links between its goals and targets. No wonder that progress in the MDG era, including on education and hunger, has been [highly uneven](#)

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Initiatives such as HGSF that break down barriers point towards the way forward: whole communities working together and sharing in the benefits of development. Now that's food for thought.

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- Download the Policy Paper [Home Grown School Feeding Time for Donors to Deepen Engagement](#)