The Ghana School Feeding Programme
A practical exploration of the ‘behind the façade’ approach
Karen De Hauwere
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‘They discounted the socio-cultural system for too long. That’s why they are now so frustrated.’
Official of the Ghana School Feeding Programme

Summary

Reflections on aid effectiveness often reveal common challenges. This paper highlights one of those challenges: country-specific insights that can make or break development cooperation. A case study of the Ghana School Feeding Programme illustrates how a conscious ‘behind the façade’ approach can improve aid effectiveness. By switching perspectives between the language of poverty reduction used at the façade and the incentives operating behind the façade, it might be possible to limit unwelcome surprises to incidents.

Introduction

In the papers in this sourcebook, the processes ‘behind the façade’ are a recurring theme. Where Waltmans and Harth highlight the theoretical aspects of these processes, this paper focuses on the obstacles and opportunities for practitioners. Based on a case study of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP), it investigates how a conscious ‘behind the façade approach’ can assist practitioners to improve aid effectiveness.

The GSFP’s formal objective is to work on a long-term solution for poverty in Ghana. It addresses food security by aiming to provide one hot meal a day for children in public primary schools and kindergartens in the poorest areas of the country, using locally grown foodstuffs. The programme is being implemented by the Government of Ghana (GoG), with the support of the Netherlands and other partners.

When the GSFP started in 2005, it appeared to be a quick-win intervention. Building on the UN report ‘Halving hunger: It can be done’ (UN Millennium Project, 2005), it aimed to reduce hunger, get children into school and stimulate local production (Agenda for Growth Project, no date). It

1 Karen De Hauwere has a BA in Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies. This paper is the result of a research internship, commissioned by SNV in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The author would like to thank all persons involved in this research for allowing her to take a look at the processes behind the façade. Without their open and reflective attitude, this paper would not have been possible. The opinions and views presented in this article are not necessarily those of SNV or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2 See chapter 3 by Harth and Waltmans and chapter 15 by Waltmans.
was a highly applauded strategy, with clear goals and sufficient financial means. If shortcuts to achieve the MDGs exist, this was one. However, despite the enthusiasm and relevance of the initial idea, the programme first produced surprises and then controversy.

Like many other initiatives, the GSFP raises a fundamental question: does it take more than a poverty perspective to make poverty reduction work? After many decades of development cooperation, agreements between development organisations and partners might be expected to produce the intended results. However, we all know that — for many reasons — they not always do. Development organisations are increasingly aware that a formal approach does not sufficiently capture the informal processes that can have a far-reaching impact on policy outcomes (Waltmans, 2008). Debates on aid effectiveness show how country-specific insights are often decisive, a frequent observation in this Sourcebook. In a result-oriented context, looking ‘behind the façade' addresses core challenges in aid effectiveness.

This paper is based on a study of the GSFP conducted at the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation.3 Based on the findings of the study, the paper hopes to encourage the practical exploration of behind the façade processes. This is crucial since, although a lot has been written about these processes, detailed information about them is lacking (The Policy Practice, 2007).

**The behind the façade approach**

The ‘behind the façade' concept has two starting points: cooperation between internal and external actors, and the differences between its formal representation and the underlying processes. In this paper, internal actors are partners in development countries and external actors are (members of) international development organisations.

The following elements are crucial to a behind the façade analysis:
- The interaction between internal and external actors a formal representation (the façade) of underlying processes (behind the façade) takes place.
- While these underlying processes are often decisive, they are rarely acknowledged or addressed in formal cooperation.
- The gap between formal and underlying processes is inherent in the relationship between these actors. When internal and external actors cooperate, different histories, societal positions, customs and interests come together.
- These underlying processes can be both conscious and unconscious. Usually, debates about behind the façade processes focus on the conscious interplay between internal and external actors. These actors contribute to a formal representation of their cooperation in pursuit of their own objectives. Behind this conscious interplay, however, is a more intangible but highly influential reality of country-specific processes. Addressing these processes might be of much more relevance, as they challenge formal cooperation, where everyone is believed to work with the same mindset.

This paper reflects on actors' incentives to engage in and support (or not) poverty reduction initiatives. It takes account of both formally expressed incentives and those behind the façade.

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3 The three-month study was conducted at SNV Accra and Tamale. Data was primarily collected through formal and informal interviews with GSFP-related government agencies and partners and by attending relevant meetings. The findings were complemented by monitoring of GSFP partners (the partners are shown in figure 1).
Addressing façade and behind the façade perspectives shows that certain processes (e.g. patronage) might be considered legitimate from one perspective and not from the other.

The Ghana School Feeding Programme

The plan

The Ghanaian government set up the GSFP in the context of NEPAD’s Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme. Its concept of home-grown school feeding addresses one of the UN’s three pillars to fight hunger. The government of Ghana stated that: ‘This programme, properly funded and implemented as designed, has the potential to change the hunger, education and ultimately the food security and poverty landscape in Ghana for good.’

The concept

To provide children in public primary schools and kindergartens in the poorest areas with one hot, nutritious meal per day, using locally-grown foodstuffs ... Local is defined in the following order of priority: the local community, the district and, lastly, national level’ (GoG, 2006:1, 16).

Three immediate objectives
1. Reduce hunger and malnutrition
2. Increase school enrolment, attendance and retention
3. Boost domestic food production

A pilot programme started at the end of 2005. In the first year, a broadly agreed programme document was drawn up for the period 2007-2010. By the end of 2010, around 1 million children are expected to have benefited from the programme and it will have injected US$147 million into the local economy. According to the plan, this should be achieved with a total budget of US$211.7 million over the four years. Most costs are met by the Ghanaian government. As the only donor, the Dutch embassy is reimbursing half the costs of purchasing food (with fixed maximum contributions from 2007). The GSFP is providing 0.30 new Ghanaian cedis a day (approximately US$0.3) for every child in the programme.

4 See UN Millennium Project, 2005, p. 18.
In order to serve as a model for community-based development, the GSFP has a decentralised structure. Figure 1 shows the formal relationships between the actors involved at the five operational levels.

**Figure 1: Organisational chart**

Moving from national to school level entails a gradual shift of focus from decision-making and coordination to implementation. Every level therefore has to be accountable to the levels below it, and vice versa.

The programme’s partners provide support through funding, technical assistance and direct school feeding. Table 1 highlights the contributions of the most active partners.

*Source: GoG (2007: 28)*
Table 1: Main contributions by the most active partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dutch embassy</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Technical support</th>
<th>School feeding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matching funds for meals provided and funds for technical assistance (e.g. formulation of annual plans and audits)</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNV</td>
<td>Capacity building at district level and monitoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEND Foundation (West African-based NGO)</td>
<td>Participatory monitoring at district and school level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Food Programme (WFP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Provision of WFP meals in northern GSFP schools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Feeding Initiative Ghana Netherlands (SIGN) (Dutch network)</td>
<td>Informing the Dutch public about GSFP and encouraging Dutch (public) support</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The reality
As of May 2008, the GSFP has not yet lived up to expectations. As there is no functional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, this analysis is based on recent inventories by SNV and the SEND Foundation, together with supplementary interviews.7

In terms of the GSFP’s objectives, the only positive development was the increase in enrolment (a 12.8% increase in primary school attendance and 23.1% in kindergartens). Unfortunately, this was not accompanied by additional steps to safeguard the quality of education (e.g. a proportional increase in school infrastructure and teachers). The objective of reducing hunger and malnutrition has only been partially achieved. Half of all GSFP schools have been served food daily during this school year. The nutritious value of the meals is, however, endangered by several factors, including late and/or limited release of funds by the GSFP units, and limited access to safe drinking water and other health measures. Finally, despite the programme’s ambition to use home-grown produce, there is no evidence of the government taking any initiative to boost domestic food production. Only a limited proportion of the food is bought from local communities.

7 The SNV inventory visited almost all schools in eight of the ten regions in Ghana, making it a reliable source of information. The SEND exercise was based on 41 schools.
The programme reaches at least 991 schools and 400,000 children. While this process of scaling up has exceeded the targets, it has not achieved the objective of reaching the poorest areas. As graph 1 shows, regions with the highest level of poverty have the lowest number of GSFP schools.

Graph 1: Poverty targeting by regions

![Graph showing poverty targeting by regions](image)

Source: SNV (2008: 16)

At local level, implementation varies widely and it is difficult to obtain clear information. The inventories showed that the number of approved schools ranged from 2 to 85 per district (GSFP, September 2007). As graph 1 shows, they were not selected on the basis of poverty incidence. There was also considerable variation in the existence and functioning of GSFP committees. Furthermore, implementation of the programme has become more centralised, with caterers, for example, being hired and paid at national level. This contradicts the programme’s aim of being a model for community-based development. SNV has tried to counteract this trend by facilitating cooperation between stakeholders at district level.

What has happened with the GSFP?

With clear goals, funds and partners in place, what has happened with the GSFP seems surprising, to say the least. The following sections explore whether a look behind the façade might produce new insights. We look first, however, more closely at the façade itself, the formal setting for exchange between internal and external actors.

What happens at the façade?

At the façade of the GSFP, there is a tendency to stimulate a positive atmosphere, which hardly takes account of the complexity of the programme or of poverty reduction in general. All actors – internal and external – act as though they share the same ‘poverty approach’.

Based on the concept of home-grown school feeding, and with a strong focus on the GSFP’s goals, which are presented as both achievable and broadly supported, the façade creates the impression

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8 SNV (2008), p. 9
9 Graph 1 shows there is no poverty selection at regional level but it does not state how it works at district level.
that this is the ideal programme, just waiting to be implemented. This impression is enhanced by the Ghanaian government’s programme document, the lobby in the Netherlands and international institutions like NEPAD. How the actors concerned have to make this work gets only marginal attention. At the time of writing, the programme still has no operational manual or an adequate M&E system.

Once the programme was up and running, reality started deviating from the plan.\textsuperscript{10} The clearer the (lack of) results became, the more vigorously the GSFP organisation started to respond to criticism. The official magazine of the national secretariat and other documents continuously stress and applaud the efforts of President Kuffuor and the GSFP to fight hunger. ‘Fighting Hunger and Poverty – Total Commitment’ is the slogan. Criticisms have also often met with a defensive response, pointing the finger at other actors or factors: a new programme, the overseeing ministry, or bodies and individuals at other levels not fulfilling their responsibilities or delivering disappointing work. Given the concentration of programme support in the south of Ghana, the north was often blamed: ‘Despite so many investments, they did not show results’.\textsuperscript{11} The national media dismissed negative comments, shaming those who dared to criticise ‘such a successful programme’.\textsuperscript{12}

The programme’s external partners did not always respond to this positive spin, but nor did they conceal the fact that they found it disputable. In public they played a careful diplomatic game, trying to insert critical comments into the formal debate and exert influence without causing offence.\textsuperscript{13} The Dutch Embassy, for instance, clearly informed the programme’s national secretariat, in public, of the need for improvements. Despite these efforts and in the face of a disappointing reality, the ‘home bases’ of leading partners kept promoting the success story. WFP Rome made President Kuffuor Goodwill Ambassador for fighting hunger and poverty, and SIGN guaranteed the programme a positive image in the Netherlands.

**What happens behind the façade?**

For formal cooperation to run smoothly, the talk has to be positive and focused on poverty. Looking behind the façade, however, shows how political processes tend to overshadow the programme’s poverty orientation.

Interviews with strategic partners show that political processes have played a role from the very beginning of the GSFP. Although it started with the inspiration and commitment to fight hunger, strong political forces soon came into play. First, it is no surprise that the initiative was launched in 2005. This reflects a series of shifts within development cooperation, intended to make it more concrete, result-oriented, holistic, and locally owned, and to renew attention to agriculture. In this context, investing in this ‘modern’ and visible programme provided the Ghanaian government and its partners with the opportunity to promote their policy aims and enhance their international image.

\textsuperscript{10} See the chapter by Ubels, Van Klinken and Visser, which also builds on experiences with the GSFP, focusing on the geographical distribution of support.

\textsuperscript{11} Interview with GSFP official.

\textsuperscript{12} Radio statement by GSFP official in February 2008.

\textsuperscript{13} Apparently a common challenge, related to the policy dialogue: ‘finding a balance between bringing up issues and putting your position as a dialogue partner at risk’ (De Hauswure & Van der Helm, 2008)
Secondly, although political interests evoke uncertainty about the poverty orientation, they also explain why certain partners did or did not join in, and the haste with which decisions seem to have been made. In this sense, SIGN is right in saying that halving hunger by 2015 is a ‘politician’s choice’ (SIGN, 2005). At first, external partners in the field were cautious about the GSFP, informally noting their fears of political abuse by the Ghanaian government. At the same time, however, political backing in head offices became very strong; the initiative was given priority on the agenda and a broad range of actors was soon mobilised. In the Netherlands, for instance, anticipating political abuse of the programme, its initiators promoted a partnership between Dutch and Ghanaian citizens and a joint selection of areas, identified as ‘hunger hotspots’. Ultimately, it was a strong affinity with the programme’s goals and, in some cases, the hope of benefiting themselves that persuaded partners to join in. WFP and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), for instance, were phasing out their own school-feeding programmes and saw the GSFP as a possible replacement. In any case, once a head office has publicly announced its support, there is no going back.

While political processes enabled the programme to be implemented, they also have severe implications for how it occurs in practice. The fact that the programme had to be implemented with such haste complicated the work of those who supported its poverty orientation. It seems likely that the absence of reliable checks and balances (e.g. clear guidelines and a strong M&E system) can be traced back to the haste with which decisions had to be made. Furthermore, as a Special Initiative of the President, the GSFP is not a regular government programme. Its funds are therefore not included in the national budget and are not subject to parliamentary control. These restricted accountability mechanisms not only decrease the opportunities to reduce poverty, but increase opportunities to use the programme for different aims.

From the start, because of the concrete and highly visible nature of the GSFP, Ghanaian decision-makers saw the programme as a tool to stimulate support for the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP). This has led to conscious attempts to allocate support to reward and/or increase NPP support. NPP members are also appointed to positions within the programme. Political patronage is crucial, with access to support being highly influenced by one’s position in political networks. As a result, even GSFP officials who are primarily concerned with reducing poverty are always under pressure to ignore the formal guidelines.

The distribution of GSFP schools also suggests political rather than poverty targeting. To increase school enrolment (the first GSFP goal), areas with a high percentage of children who never go to school would seem a crucial target. And to reduce hunger and malnutrition (the second goal), areas with the greatest food needs would seem a priority. However, a statistical analysis of these targets for GSFP schools shows the completely opposite picture (see graph 2 below). As already suggested in graph 1, as poverty increases, GSFP support goes down. The same analysis shows a positive relationship with NPP support, which would seem to confirm ‘political targeting’.

15 Care should be taken not to attribute commitment to poverty reduction only to strategic partners. Within the GSFP, this definitely misrepresents the continuous efforts of some individuals both within and outside the organisation. To prevent a misleading distinction between internal and external actors, the term ‘poverty-minded actors’ is also used.
16 This information comes from interviews with GSFP officials and members of district assemblies.
17 Due to the unavailability of data, the Western Region is not included in the analysis of the second goal.
Not all districts comply with this pattern. Some stand out because of their creative use of support. While a proactive attitude and relevant political networks explain the official allocation of support, the same attitude also stimulates creative use of it. Districts might inflate the number of pupils, for example, to get more funds. This can be economically or politically motivated. While in some districts funds have just ‘disappeared’, in others, District Chief Executives (DCEs) have used them to add other schools to the programme, to advance their personal political ambitions.

The reasons behind disappointing results

The local context
Although these results may seem alarming from a poverty perspective, looking at them in their local context makes them less surprising. First of all, the GSFP reflects broader processes in Ghana. One of them is the north-south divide. Political power is concentrated in the south of the country and there is a strong tendency to base policies on the interests of the south. Poverty, on the other hand, is mostly found in the north. Poor citizens are discriminated against because they are not part of the political power base, and the GSFP is no exception. A similar process is reflected in, for instance, the distribution of funds provided under the Heavily Indebted poor Countries (HIPC) initiative (SEND Foundation, 2006). While it is largely the poverty status of northern Ghana that makes the country eligible for aid, that aid does not primarily benefit the poor. ‘It is as if the north is not part of the agenda’, argue SNV and SEND.

Secondly, the GSFP faces general challenges relating to decentralisation. Districts often seem to have limited financial and human resources to fulfil their mandate, with no authority to change the situation.

Thirdly, limited capacity also plays a decisive role. When employees are low-paid, responsible for large sums of money, and often under financial and social pressures, it is very difficult to make judgments about money ‘disappearing’. This does not mean that every employee misappropriated funds from the programme or that this should be accepted. It does, however, identify a precondition for aid effectiveness: even the most committed individuals need adequate resources and structures to fulfil their tasks. In a programme founded on local ownership, they are the ones to make it work.

18 Klinken & Zan (2008)
Lastly, the limited scope and quality of the M&E system has made it possible for the programme to be implemented on the basis of political considerations, by keeping all ‘poverty-minded’ actors uninformed about deviations from the plan. Remarkably, while this limitation would seem to favour the GSFP’s top-level leadership, it also weakened their capacity to manage the programme. The limited accountability made different forms of implementation possible at district level.\(^{19}\)

**Internal – external cooperation**

The cooperation between internal and external actors has already been identified as a key factor. There is a clear gap between the way these actors interact at the façade and the underlying processes behind the façade.

Different normative frameworks govern the formal cooperation and the underlying processes. Every actor involved seemed aware that, in the context of formal cooperation, it was not acceptable that political processes should be allowed to overshadow poverty considerations. Behind the façade, however, the responsible actors consider these processes legitimate, or even desirable. The problem is not that one approach is right while the other is not. Rather, the problem is the assumption that all parties share a common approach. This relates to the second finding. Actors make conscious choices, but these are based on different normative frameworks. A behind the façade perspective, however, reveals the logic behind decisions that may at first sight seem ‘surprising’. If a District Chief Executive for instance uses the GSFP to pursue his own political aims, this is seen from a poverty perspective as being untenable. Reflecting on his incentives, however, shows that it is a rational decision. Whatever his ambitions, a DCE depends on political support to sustain or improve his position. In this context, the GSFP offers access to funds without strong M&E, a visible intervention which addresses the basic needs of many families, and opportunities to influence the image of the initiative. Bearing these factors in mind, it is not so surprising if the programme is used for political ends. The same applies to GSFP officials allocating support to NPP districts. This too is a clear rational process. Although they know it is not permitted according to the formal guidelines, behind the façade, political interests make it a legitimate action.

Unconscious normative differences further complicate the cooperation. Since the GSFP is a government programme, different views on the role of the state are likely to have an impact. While the formal cooperation presents the programme as a state initiative for the common good, this contrasts with the widespread belief in Ghana that citizens must care for their ‘own group’. Internal actors might, for example, relate to the programme’s poverty orientation and yet recruit friends for the programme, being unaware that their external partners disapprove of such a ‘normal’ thing. Caring and taking responsibility for your own group is a way of surviving in Ghana in situations where the state falls short.

External partners may be more appalled by this situation than those who are the local ‘victims’. While they may find the geographical distribution of the GSFP support a disaster, northern Ghanaians are hardly surprised. They know that the southern richer areas get more assistance, despite the fact that their own poverty levels are higher. But they also realise this is probably a direct consequence of the fact that they do not support the government. Acceptable or not, the cooperation between internal and external actors does not result in an effective approach to poverty reduction.

\(^{19}\) This was intensified by the tense relationship between the GSFP leadership and the Ministry of Local Governance, which oversees the districts.
The façade as obstacle

Despite the fact that the GSFP has not evolved in line with the programme document, all actors opt for a positive façade. This especially applies to actors who support the ‘political’ implementation of the programme. Poverty-minded actors, however, are faced with a dilemma. They feel they should address the disappointing results of the programme, but also realise that a positive atmosphere is crucial. For GSFP officials, too much criticism would jeopardise their positions. For external partners, concerned to continue with the cooperation, it was a case of not throwing out the baby with the bath water. Deviations from the plan do not invalidate the potential of home-grown school feeding. Besides, as mentioned above, some partners hoped the GSFP would take over their own school-feeding programmes.

Despite the conscious choice (and need) for a positive façade, it remains an obstacle to effective poverty reduction. Even when controversies did reach the public domain and all actors became aware of each others’ ideologies, the façade continued to present an obstacle to addressing the problems. When the press for instance got hold of audit data on the programme, which revealed serious mismanagement, the executive director managed to divert attention by laying the blame elsewhere. External partners, who hardly share a common approach or cooperate in a structured way, and who often lack reliable information, are unable to raise these issues. Moreover, since all actors contribute to the formal façade for different reasons, if one of them tried to ‘open it up’, others would be quick to resist. Criticism is even anticipated, as illustrated by interpretations of the dismissal of the first executive director after the public controversy. In May 2008, the SIGN newsletter presented the dismissal as a local solution and as evidence that the government was taking the programme seriously. The GSFP magazine stated: ‘The school feeding programme, whether overtly or otherwise, is not politically motivated. Its implementation was well thought through to factor in the long-term implications for the general policy direction of the nation. Its objectives are clearly stated and have no ambiguous undertones… We have become a showpiece for other nations and have been rated number one in Africa.’

Lessons learned

Poverty reduction always takes place within a political context. There is therefore always a need to look behind the façade. Only if this intangible reality is accepted in formal debates as a legitimate factor in improving aid effectiveness, can progress be made. While from a poverty perspective, many things went wrong with GSFP, practitioners still have the opportunity to put things right. An adequate M&E system, for instance, would make the programme more attractive to support and would reduce opportunities for using the programme for different aims. If information on the approved schools and the programme’s broad range of activities were available, the same result would be achieved without offending political sensitivities.

While preparing for this paper, the open and reflective attitudes of internal and external actors offered valuable insights into processes that are not accepted in formal exchanges. This presents opportunities to improve aid effectiveness. Real progress will depend on the willingness of other practitioners to reflect on the broader lessons and implications of accounts like this. Some of the lessons learned are summarised below.
1. Four elements that emerged from the case study are critical for the further development of a behind the façade approach:
   · there were two levels of interaction: formal cooperation (the façade) and underlying processes (behind the façade)
   · the formal cooperation did not capture the underlying processes
   · all actors contributed to this gap
   · some underlying processes were conscious, while others seem unconscious

2. Systematic use of a behind the façade approach can generate better insight into underlying processes. This paper started by asking whether poverty reduction needs more than a poverty perspective. It now seems clear that effective poverty reduction in fact depends on the ability to engage different perspectives. That means asking what happens at the façade as well as behind it. If a programme deviates from its original plan, the way one looks at those deviations will influence the solutions considered. For a systematic use of the behind the façade approach, it is crucial that individual inquiry based on specific access to information is continuously incorporated into the wider organisation and at the level of cooperation. Only in this way can surprises in implementation be limited to incidents.

3. When applied from the early stages of initiatives to reduce poverty, this approach enables practitioners to anticipate underlying processes. Considering the incentives of all actors involved and how to bring them together right from the beginning, will reveal crucial information about the feasibility of the initiative. Ownership, for example, is an excellent objective as long as it does not obstruct mechanisms to ensure that the recipient maintains a poverty orientation.

4. Many organisations do not systematically apply this approach. Although the organisations considered in this paper cannot be considered alike, they do share a focus on formal cooperation. As a result, little attention was paid to processes behind the façade. It was limited to inquisitive individual members or was primarily put forward as an explanation of disappointing results. The main challenge is to develop a common and continuous approach to ensure effective strategies.
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