

STARS Final Evaluation External Learning Brief

A McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program



Djampil primary school, Dankpen prefecture, 21 May 2025, Photos: Agridigital

OVERVIEW OF THE STARS PROJECT

From 2020 to 2025, the \$22 million STARS project, funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), sought to enhance literacy and primary education in 138 schools in Togo's Savanes and Kara regions. The project reduced student hunger, increased and sustained enrollment, improved instructional quality, fostered parental involvement, and ensured safe learning environments.

These interventions supported two strategic objectives:

- Improved literacy of school-aged children (SO1)
- Increased adoption of health and dietary practices among school-aged children (SO2)

The STARS project improved literacy instruction through teacher training, literacy materials, and school supervision, while daily school lunches ensured regular attendance for 46,925 students. The STARS project built school kitchens, established school gardens, upgraded sanitation facilities, and promoted hygiene and nutritional practices in schools and surrounding communities. Community savings groups were formed to sustain school feeding activities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Schools supported by STARS are **beginning to see results of effective literacy instruction and use of reading materials in the classroom**. As a result, non-readers have moved to beginning and intermediate levels, from not reading a single word to identifying letters of the alphabet, letter sounds, and words. The majority of teachers are applying new literacy techniques learned through STARS training and effectively using teaching and learning materials. (SO1)

Schools' **sanitation facilities improved** during the project. Specifically, the project increased the number of schools with toilets and ensured that all schools had functional water sources. (SO2)

PROGRAM NAME: Santé, Transformation et Apprentissage pour une Réussite Scolaire (STARS)

EVALUATION LOCATION: Togo's Savanes and Kara regions



TIMELINE: 2020 – 2025

FUNDER: United States Department of Agriculture's McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program

IMPLEMENTER:
Catholic Relief Services – USCCB

EXTERNAL EVALUATOR:
School-to-School International

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

STS evaluated the impact of the school meal program on literacy outcomes and classroom attentiveness and the systems in place to sustain the interventions beyond the life of the project. STS used qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the progress of key program outcomes over the life of the project in 80 sampled schools. These methods assessed if the project was on track to meet its objectives and provided recommendations for improvements. Tools included an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA); surveys for students, head teachers, and parents; and tools for classroom observation, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.



Djampil primary school, Dankpen prefecture, 21 May 2025, Photos: Agridigital

SAMPLE

80	1,571	239	18	16
Schools	Third Graders	Parents	Focus Groups	Interviews

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDING: EVIDENCE FROM SURVEYS & CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS REVEALS SYSTEMIC LIMITATIONS IN BOTH THE AVAILABILITY OF FRENCH LANGUAGE AND MATERIALS.

Only 1.0% of students reported speaking French at home; the vast majority use languages like Konkomba, Ngam-gam, and Gourma. Similarly, just 0.9% of students say they speak French “very well,” while 95% said they could only say a few things. Less than 20% of classrooms had enough French textbooks for each student to have their own. In most classrooms (67%) three or more students had to share a single French textbook.

RECOMMENDATION: INCREASE FRENCH EXPOSURE IN ALL SETTINGS.

Increasing literacy needs should center on increasing the time devoted to reading in French during the day. This could include engaging parents to encourage reading at home, encouraging teachers to incorporate French into other lessons, or providing vocabulary-related materials in French.

FINDING: STUDENTS SHOWED IMPROVEMENTS IN LITERACY AND FLUENCY, ATTRIBUTED TO KEY STARS INITIATIVES. HOWEVER, LITERACY RATES ARE STILL LOW OVERALL.

Boys and girls showed literacy gains, with improved mean score on Initial and Letter Sound Identification subtasks and the share answering no items correctly decreasing on the same identification subtasks as well as on Oral Reading Fluency. However, less than 5% demonstrated reading comprehension skills. School principals and project partners identified four contributors: providing appropriate books, tying accountability to school ratings, reading competitions, and frequent teacher training.

RECOMMENDATION: CONSIDER BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS.

For students who are not fully proficient in the language of instruction, implementing bilingual education programs can bridge the gap. A bilingual approach would support students’ transition from a first language to the language of instruction and contribute to better learning outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

FINDING: GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN LITERACY OUTCOMES WERE PERVASIVE, AS BOYS DEMONSTRATED GREATER FOUNDATION SKILLS THAN GIRLS.

Gendered differences in literacy outcomes persisted from baseline and midterm and were pervasive, as boys demonstrated more skills than girls. Boys' mean scores on the Oral Reading Fluency subtask were above the overall average and improved more from baseline to endline. Additionally, boys' accuracy scores were higher than girls' on the Initial Sound Identification, Letter Sound Identification, and Oral Reading Fluency subtasks. Finally, a lower proportion of boys were unable to answer at least one question correctly on each of the five reading subtasks.

RECOMMENDATION: EXAMINE GENDER CONSTRAINTS WITHIN TARGET COMMUNITIES.

Girls' underperformance deserves further exploration and intentional interventions to equalize performance. Gender-responsive approaches might include adopting an inclusive and differentiated approach. Future interventions should foster girls' literacy skills while continuing to improve boys' literacy, given that a vast majority of all students missed benchmarks.

FINDING: THE PROJECT SUCCESSFULLY IMPROVED SCHOOL SANITATION FACILITIES.

The number of schools with no toilets available decreased from 29 at baseline to 15 at endline. Meanwhile, the number of schools with composting toilets increased from 10 to 26.

FINDING: THE FUNCTIONALITY OF WATER SOURCES IMPROVED FROM BASELINE TO ENDLINE; HOWEVER, MORE WORK IS POSSIBLE FOR THEIR ONGOING DEVELOPMENT.

Of the 54 schools with water sources observed at the endline, 100 percent were functioning. This represents continued improvement from the baseline and midterm. Additionally, school officials and project partners reported that the project successfully promoted the habit of washing hands, especially once latrines were introduced in schools that previously lacked them. However, respondents felt that handwashing remained insufficient because some schools still lacked access to clean, running water.

RECOMMENDATION: CHAMPION FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN SCHOOL WATER AND SANITATION SOURCES.

Although notable improvements in school facilities were observed at endline, upgrades to water facilities remain necessary. Future project interventions could have a significant impact by increasing the number of handwashing facilities equipped with clean, running water.



Djampil primary school, Dankpen prefecture, 21 May 2025. Photos: Agridigital

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

FINDING: NO CLEAR RELATIONSHIP COULD BE FOUND BETWEEN BMI AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE.

Body mass index scores show that 88.8% of students were not considered underweight, with only 12.2% classified as malnourished. Additionally, body mass index scores did not correlate with literacy outcomes for the students sampled.

RECOMMENDATION: FOCUS ON THE MINIMUM ACCEPTABLE DIET FOR CHILDREN 6–23 MONTHS OLD.

Future interventions should investigate why minimum dietary diversity and meal frequency have fallen since baseline. Educational and food provision components should target these dynamics.

FINDING: STAKEHOLDERS' AND VOLUNTEERS' WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE WITHOUT FINANCIAL EXPECTATIONS WAS A KEY STRENGTH.

Community members and STAR volunteers remained engaged without incentives, demonstrating their commitment to collective progress. Respondents noted this approach aligned with the government's vision for unpaid committees as essential for schools, emphasizing the alignment helps sustain efforts beyond the project.

FINDING: THE CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS HIGHLIGHTS THE PROJECT'S CAPACITY TO GENERATE LASTING IMPACT BEYOND ITS LIFESPAN.

Groups have adopted many project activities. Care-group lead mothers continue promotion of nutrition, hygiene, and child-feeding. Saving-and-credit groups strengthened financial resilience, supporting education and health costs through peer-to-peer lending. Durable infrastructure—hygienic kitchens and storage—reinforced sanitation and feeding, with committees actively maintaining them. Engagement with state structures ensured sustainability, exemplified by pledges to continue hot-meal provision in schools through 2028.

RECOMMENDATION: COLLABORATE MORE DEEPLY WITH DECENTRALIZED STATE STRUCTURES.

Multiple respondents called for deeper collaboration with decentralized state structures to avoid “repetition of past mistakes” and to secure national recognition of successes. One manager observed: “Given the lessons learned [...] intensify collaboration with the decentralized structures of the State and even see the State involve them more [...] for the success of the project.”

A detailed explanation of the technical design, the findings, and recommendations is provided in the full report, which is available upon request.



Djampil primary school, Dankpen prefecture, 21 May 2025, Photos: Agridigital



Djampil primary school, Dankpen prefecture, 21 May 2025, Photos: Agridigital