



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

GUINEA-BISSAU

McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Project

Final Evaluation

Project Background and Purpose

Guinea-Bissau is a small West African coastal nation situated between Senegal and Guinea and extending north to the Sahel. It is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked on the 2020 United Nations Human Development Index at 175 out of 189 countries and with over 70 percent of the population living below the poverty line.¹ Portuguese is the official language of Guinea-Bissau, but it is estimated that less than one-fifth of the population speaks Portuguese.² Approximately 60 percent of the population over the age of 15 can read and write.³

In 2019, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) awarded Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Guinea-Bissau a five-year, \$18.7 million project under the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition program. The MeREECE project—Promotion of Educational and Economic Performance in Educative Communities, or *Melhoria do Rendimento Escolar e Económico das Comunidades Educativas* (MeREECE)—has run from September 23, 2019, to August 31, 2024.⁴ The initial target number of schools for this project was 321, but now 350 schools are enrolled in the regions of Bafata, Cacheu, Gabu, Quinara, and Oio. Currently, the project implementation is in its final year and concluding its final evaluation.

Over the project's five-year implementation period, CRS used donated commodities and funds provided by the Foreign Agricultural Service to implement a school feeding project. The project is focusing on achieving the following objectives:

- Improve teachers' and school administrators' ability to deliver quality literacy instruction through training and recognizing teacher performance.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/people-share-priorities-first-ever-review-guinea-bissaus-sustainable-development>

² <https://pollylingu.al/pt/en/regions/55>

³ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/guinea-bissau/>

⁴ Originally scheduled to close in September 2023, the project received an extension to August 2024.

- Improve the Ministry of Education's (MoE's) capacity to monitor and support teachers' technical development through capacity strengthening training and joint monitoring visits.
- Increase learner attentiveness and attendance by reducing child hunger through nutritious school meals.
- Improve learner attendance by establishing child-friendly school environments, school libraries, and extracurricular learning opportunities and by providing take-home rations.
- Increase parents' and communities' involvement in education outcomes for their children.
- Increase knowledge and improve health, nutrition, and dietary practices of teachers, learners, and parents.

CRS initially worked with technical partners—Plan International⁵ and Caritas Guinea-Bissau—that have extensive experience in education and health sector in Guinea-Bissau. CRS aims to reach a total of 199,539 direct beneficiaries.

Evaluation Questions, Design, Methods, and Limitations

The MeREECE evaluation process involves three phases: a baseline, midterm, and final evaluation. This report summarizes the methodology and findings of the endline evaluation. The final evaluation was conducted in January 2024 to measure overall project performance, capture unintended outcomes, and reflect on the project's key evaluation questions. In addition to the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), questionnaires, and observation tools as deployed in the midterm evaluation, the endline included key informant interview (KII) and focus group discussion (FGD) tools in order to capture perspectives on the project from key stakeholders. Triangulation of this data provided more in-depth information to address the questions described below:

Relevance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent do the project's interventions meet the educational, socio-economic, cultural, and political needs of beneficiaries? 2. To what extent are project interventions aligned with the education strategy outlined in the Guinea-Bissau Education Sector Plan (2017-2025) 3. Are stakeholders satisfied with their participation in the project? Why or why not? 4. To what extent have students (boys and girls) increased their reading comprehension skills compared to baseline? 5. To what extent are teachers implementing literacy techniques acquired through the project? 6. Is the project theory of change relevant? Are the actions and approaches used by the project sufficient to improve students' reading and writing skills?
Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. To what extent has the project achieved its goals and targets (including increasing enrollment, retaining girls, reducing dropouts, reducing hunger in schools, improving teacher and student attendance)? 8. Which interventions contributed most significantly to the expected results or objectives?

⁵ Plan International exit the project on December 31, 2023, and Caritas exit the project on 30 April 2024.

	<p>9. To what extent does the project coordinate and collaborate with other stakeholders?</p> <p>10. To what extent were the baseline and midterm recommendations implemented?</p> <p>11. Do the literacy promotion activities help improve the reading and comprehension abilities of students?</p> <p>12. Which strategies have been put in place to effectively monitor and address the teachers' attendance? Has project implementation been effectively monitored? How well has the M&E mechanism helped project implementation, and what improvements could be made, if any?</p> <p>13. To what extent has the implementation of SILC strengthened the economic capacity of parents to support their children's schooling and contribute to the life of the school?</p> <p>14. How have teachers' and students' attendance affected the reading and understanding capacity of students?</p>
Efficiency	<p>15. To what extent have project resources (inputs) achieved the results achieved?</p> <p>16. Can the same results be achieved with fewer resources or alternative approaches?</p> <p>17. Were objectives achieved on time?</p> <p>18. How did the project improve the efficiency of its partners? Was the project efficient at taking into account beneficiaries' feedback?</p>
Sustainability	<p>19. What progress has been made to reach the sustainability milestones presented in the graduation and sustainability plan document?</p> <p>20. Is there evidence of community capacity to take ownership of project activities and are they meeting their commitments outlined in their MOUs (providing wood, cooks, complementary foods for meals, staple foods for 2-4 days coverage per month, etc.)? Are there any spontaneous actions that APEs/COGES have taken to maintain/improve school infrastructures?</p> <p>21. To what extent can the project best practices can be replicated and adopted by Guinea-Bissau Ministry of Education?</p> <p>22. What policies favor the sustainability of school canteen projects?</p> <p>23. Have inclusive or gender sensitive strategies been implemented in view of sustainability among identified specific groups, if there are any?</p> <p>24. To what extent does the SILC approach contribute to the project's sustainability?</p>
Impact	<p>25. What were the expected and unintended positive and negative effects of the intervention on children, communities and institutions? How does the intervention affect the well-being of different groups of stakeholders, including the most vulnerable and at-risk children?</p> <p>26. What do beneficiaries and other stakeholders involved in the project perceive as the effects of the intervention on themselves?</p> <p>27. To what extent did project objectives and activities reduce gender disparities in education in target zones, and what activities were most effective in leading to said reductions?</p>

CRS explored evaluation approaches used in similar programs and identified the most rigorous evaluation plan possible—subject to time, quality, resources, and country context constraints. For ethical reasons, a randomized experimental approach is inappropriate to apply to primary schools in Guinea-Bissau, given that school-age children throughout the country require food assistance. For logistical reasons, an experimental or quasi-experimental approach is also not feasible given the country context in which multiple actors (UNICEF, World Bank, WFP, etc.) are implementing education assistance projects throughout all regions of Guinea-Bissau. Therefore, CRS decided that a non-experimental performance evaluation is the most feasible and appropriate approach. CRS then subcontracted the assessment to an external evaluation team, School-to-School International (STS). STS utilized a two-stage cluster sampling approach to select schools and then students at the schools randomly in the five MeREECE intervention regions of Bafata, Cacheu, Gabu, Quinara, and Oio. In the first stage, schools were selected at random, proportionally to the population of schools by region. In the second stage, enumerators selected 20 Grade 3 learners in the same class at random within each school. To achieve the necessary sample size for comparable, statistically significant findings, STS included the same 90 schools in the endline sample as visited at baseline and midterm with a target of 20 Grade 3 learners per school.⁶

After completing a five-day training, 35 enumerators collected data from January 29–February 9, 2024. STS maintained detailed documentation of all issues encountered during data collection in a tracker, which was used as part of the data cleaning process. Additionally, enumerators' use of electronic data capture via tablets contributed to data quality, consistency, and collection efficiency by streamlining fieldwork as well as reducing measurement and data entry errors.

The endline study collected quantitative data in the form of surveys with learners and school directors, school and classroom observations, and learner EGRAs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the baseline data collection and evaluation was postponed from the end of the 2019-20 academic year to the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year. Under the new timeline, students were assessed at the start of Grade 3 rather than at the end of Grade 2. These Grade 3 students serve as a proxy for end-of-Grade 2 students as their exposure to Grade 3 instruction was minimal at the time of the evaluation. To collect comparable data, the same approach was followed both at midterm and endline. At each sampled school, enumerators administered an EGRA to 20 learners in Grade 3 to measure their core reading skills. In addition, enumerators administered one survey to the school director, completed one school observation, and conducted one observation of a Grade 2 classroom.

Qualitative data was also collected at endline. KIIs were conducted with local leaders and parents, while FGDs were conducted with school management committees (SMCs), students, community groups, and MeREECE project staff. The FGD with girls was designed to gain insight and understanding of girls' experiences and views on primary education and the food for education program, as well as current practices, expectations and obstacles related to girls' education within their community. The group and individual interviews with other respondents were intended to gain insight regarding perceptions of the quality and access to education in their community,

⁶ McConnell and Vera-Hernandez (2015) was used to calculate sample sizes for a binary outcome, with the standard 80 percent and 5 percent significance level, an ICC of 0.22, and a minimum sample size of 1,800 learners for the beneficiary group in 90 target schools (twenty learners per school).

parental/community involvement in schools, perceptions of the MeREECE program, and the project's sustainability. The interview guides also included questions to understand how community involvement through the SMCs contributed to the improvement of the learning and teaching conditions in the schools targeted by the MeREECE project in Guinea-Bissau.

STS cleaned and prepared for analysis the quantitative data collected through the EGRA, surveys, and observation tools. Cleaning was completed using R and Stata statistical packages and included a comprehensive outlier analysis of quantitative results to establish data consistency. Qualitative data were transcribed, translated, and reviewed for accuracy and quality as fully as possible upon the completion of data collection. Data were cleaned and anonymized, with participant information remaining confidential. Translated transcriptions were imported into NVivo 12, a data analysis software package, to systematically code and analyze the data. The qualitative data analysis methodology incorporated an iterative approach and included content analysis and constant comparison of narrative data to identify and validate emerging themes.

Secondary project monitoring data was provided by CRS and incorporated into this report, including school enrollment data, details from semi-annual project reports, and the project's indicator data.

The following limitations should be considered when reviewing the findings of the MeREECE final evaluation:

- **Language of the EGRA tool.** The instructions for the EGRA were in Portuguese. Based on the learner survey results, it is likely that many learners struggle with understanding Portuguese, so learners may not have understood instructions for individual subtasks. To ensure the validity and comparability of results across timepoints, this limitation could not be addressed at endline, but it should be considered for future evaluations.
- **Inherent bias in sampling children present on the day of assessment.** Learners' EGRA results may be biased towards the types of learners who attend school regularly and may exclude those learners who are enrolled but do not attend regularly.
- **Reduced sample size.** The target learner sample was 1,800 learners. At midterm, 1,655 observations were collected. After endline data cleaning, only 1,682 learners are included in the analysis. The difference between the target sample of 1,800, and the final total of 1,682 was due to some of the sampled schools having less than 20 learners available at school the day of interviews.
- **Time span between midterm and endline.** The midterm evaluation data collection was initially scheduled for March and April 2022, but it was postponed until January and February 2023, leaving only one year between the midterm and endline evaluations. This shortened time span limits the dosage of project intervention and may therefore result in seeing limited impact.
- **Purposive sampling for qualitative data collection.** The purposive sampling for qualitative data collection, especially for parents, community members, and SMC members, may have resulted in sampled schools selecting individuals who were more actively engaged in the project and therefore inclined to speak of project activities in a certain, more positive light.

Findings and Conclusions

To view the updated indicator performance tracking table (IPTT), please see Annex 8.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE ONE:

The first Strategic Objective of the MeREECE project is the improved literacy of school-aged children in the Cacheu, Oio, Bafata, Gabu and Quinara regions. Achievement of this SO is measured through the percentage of learners who, at the end of second grade, demonstrate that they can read and understand the meaning of grade-level text (McGovern-Dole Indicator #1). For this evaluation, the EGRA was conducted in Portuguese.

INDICATOR 1: IMPROVED QUALITY OF LITERACY INSTRUCTION (IR 1.1)

The specified threshold used in this analysis is that a learner can correctly answer at least four of the five reading comprehension questions correctly. Values for this indicator were captured by administering the EGRA tool to boys and girls at the start of Grade 3. At baseline, the proportion of learners who met this threshold was 0.67 percent, or 11 out of 1,649 learners, and this proportion slightly increased at midterm to 0.91 percent (weighted)—or 21 out of 1,642 learners. This increase from baseline to midterm was statistically significant. At endline, the proportion of learners was 0.90 percent—or 15 out of 1,682 learners.⁷ By year four, the project had set a target that 55 percent of learners would, by the end of two grades of primary schooling, demonstrate that they can read and understand the meaning of grade level text. Endline results fall well below the target.

The proportion of learners who did not answer a single item correctly for each subtask—known as a zero score—at endline was lowest on the letter name identification subtask (4.29 percent) and highest on the reading comprehension subtask (79.28 percent). ***Across all subtasks, boys had a lower proportion of zero scores than did girls.***

Zero scores generally decreased overall from baseline to endline on all subtasks except for initial sound identification, with two of the four decreases statistically significant. For instance, while 40.54 percent of learners were not able to read a single word of the reading passage at baseline, 27.77 percent of learners were unable to do so at endline. The likelihood of observing a zero score decreased from baseline to endline for two subtasks—letter name identification and the reading passage. The decreases in zero scores for familiar word reading and reading comprehension from baseline to endline were not statistically significant, as well as the increase in zero scores for initial sound identification.

LITERACY SKILLS AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS

The relationship between EGRA performance and key language-related learner survey responses was examined. The three key learner survey questions which were examined in relation to EGRA performance were:

1. “What languages does your family use most at home?”
2. “Do your parents or caregivers speak Portuguese?”
3. “What languages does your teacher use most in the classroom?”

STS analyzed these variables alone and in groupings of exposure to Portuguese: “high” (3), “medium” (1-2), “low” (0). Using the index score, across all the groupings, ***learners with “high” exposure to Portuguese had, on average, higher scores on the oral reading fluency passage*** than “medium” and “low” exposure learners at midterm and endline. At endline, students categorized as

⁷ This is a significant increase as measured by the Pearson Chi Squared test (p=.003).

having medium exposure to Portuguese scored significantly higher on the oral reading fluency test compared to those with low proficiency, with an average increase of 6.75 points. Those in the high exposure category demonstrated an even more pronounced improvement, scoring on average 10.9 points higher than low exposure to Portuguese students. Additionally, the interactions between language exposure and gender did not demonstrate significant differences, indicating that the effect of language exposure on oral reading fluency is consistent across genders.

During school observations, enumerators recorded the presence of educational materials in the offices of school directors across 90 schools. Findings show that 61 schools possessed visual aids and 80 had didactic materials. Notably, schools with visual aids in the director's office demonstrated significantly higher performance across all literacy subtasks compared to those lacking such aids. Furthermore, schools where directors had didactic materials in their offices noted students achieving significantly better results in reading comprehension than those without these materials.

INDICATOR 2: IMPROVED LEARNER ATTENDANCE (IR 1.3)

At baseline,⁸ midterm, and endline, school observations and director surveys were used to estimate learner attendance and enrollment.

School enrollment and attendance rate stayed the same from baseline to midterm but increased at endline. To calculate the average attendance rate, enrollment responses from the director survey and attendance responses from the school observation were merged and aggregated by gender across both pre-primary and primary (1-6) grades. These numbers were averaged over all schools and divided (attendance/enrollment) to calculate an attendance rate. Project targets set at baseline wanted to see a 75 percent average student attendance rate in USDA supported classrooms/schools by year four of the project. Although the endline results do not meet this threshold, progress was made, with the average attendance rate increasing from 62.49 percent at midterm to 73.61 percent at endline, as shown in Table 12. In addition, attendance rates by gender were similar at endline, with girls' attendance slightly higher than boys' (73.87 percent to 73.34 percent, respectively).

INDICATOR 3: MORE CONSISTENT TEACHER ATTENDANCE (SUB-IR 1.1.1)

Teacher attendance rates increased from baseline to midterm among sampled schools but remained unchanged at endline. At baseline, midterm, and endline, school directors were asked a series of questions about teacher attendance and documentation of teacher attendance at the school level. At baseline on the day of the interviews, 400 of 806 employed (49.63 percent) teachers were present. Overall, 54.42 percent of women teachers and 47.88 percent for men teachers were present on the day their school was visited. Attendance rates increased at midterm, with 63.60 percent of men teachers and 63.45 percent of women teachers present, and remained relatively unchanged at endline, with 64.92 percent of men teachers and 61.76 percent of women teachers present. Despite the increase from baseline to endline, attendance rates did not meet the project targets of 70 percent teacher attendance by year four of the project.

INDICATOR 4: INCREASED SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHERS (SUB-IR 1.1.4)

⁸ At baseline only 79 project schools—or 87.78 percent of the baseline EGRA sample—on the day of data collection.

At endline, skills and knowledge composite scores among teachers increased. At endline, 88 classroom teachers were observed to gain an understanding of their knowledge of good instructional practices and teaching techniques. Enumerators were asked to observe classrooms looking for 12 specific teaching behaviors. Composite scores were then created, with each activity receiving up to one point per teaching behavior based on the quality and time spent utilizing the behavior.⁹ At midterm, most teachers (95.37 percent) demonstrated between one and six of the teaching behaviors, while only 4.45 percent of teachers demonstrated more than six of the teaching behaviors. At endline, teachers' skills and knowledge scores improved, with 20.5 percent demonstrating more than six of the teaching behaviors.

INDICATOR 5: INCREASED SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS (SUB-IR 1.1.5)

From baseline to endline, school directors' skills and knowledge composite scores increased. At baseline, more than half (52.22 percent) of school directors demonstrated skills and knowledge in only one to four techniques or tools, while at endline, only 15.55 percent did so. Further, the proportion of school directors demonstrating knowledge in at least five techniques or tools increased from 47.77 percent at baseline to 84.44 percent at endline, which is well above the target level of 50 percent by year four of the project.

INDICATOR 6: REDUCED HEALTH-RELATED ABSENCES (SUB-IR 1.3.2)

Enrollment data for all 350 project schools provided by CRS shows an increase in enrollment over the life of the project. Girls' enrollment increased from 37,404 at baseline to 45,615 at endline, while boys' enrollment grew from 41,384 at baseline to 48,106 at endline. The total enrollment of 93,721 is greater than the project's target of 82,889 learners enrolled by the end of year four.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE TWO

DIETARY PRACTICES

Like at midterm, most learners at endline said they were not hungry at school. At endline, 71.91 percent of boys and 72.19 percent of girls said that they were rarely hungry in the last five days while at school, while only 4.40 percent of boys and 7.28 percent of girls said they were hungry most of the time or often during the same period. In addition, nearly 90 percent of both boys and girls at endline said they had eaten food at school the previous day.

Endline qualitative data from community members, learners, and MeREECE personnel confirm the popularity of the school feeding program. As one learner reported in an FGD, "We eat here at school every day, and many students don't have the means to have breakfast in the morning and so they always come to school."

WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE

At midterm, both boys and girls each had equal and reliable access to latrines, and access slightly improved at endline. More than 70 percent of learners at endline reported that boys' and

⁹ The classroom observations observed both math and literacy activities. In cases where an item was skipped, the item score was treated as zero. Each question was equally weighted. This means that all activities were given a possible score of 1. While some items were treated as a binary yes or no, a number of questions used ordinal response items, asking the enumerator to rate the quality of an activity. In this case each question received a total possible score of 1, with each rating incrementally increasing in value from 0 (e.g., 1-4 will be transferred to 0, .33, .66, 1 respectively).

girls' latrines are always open during the school day.¹⁰ The proportion of learners who said that girls and boys help to clean latrines at school also increased from midterm to endline. For example, the proportion of boys who said boys help clean the latrines increased from 18.18 percent at midterm to 29.52 percent at endline.

Nearly three-fifths of the latrines observed at endline on the day of school visits were pit latrines or buckets (58.89 percent). Of the 86 schools that had latrines, seven of them (9.81 percent) were unavailable for learners to use on the day of school visits.

As part of its school feeding intervention, MeREECE organized capacity strengthening trainings and refresher trainings for cooks on hygiene, food preparation, and storage in 350 schools, with 2,118 individuals trained over the course of the project; provided cooking materials including spoons, bowls, and aprons; conducted close monitoring of schools; and raised awareness regarding clean kitchen management standards.

The endline evaluation also examined the status of school kitchens. CRS provided kitchen materials to all 350 project schools, including bowls, spoons, scales, and other equipment, according to project monitoring data. Although enumerators took an inventory of school kitchens, all the materials may not have been present in the kitchens on the day of data collection. Although more kitchens had everything they needed at endline (65.56 percent) than at midterm (55.56 percent), fewer were totally clean at endline (64.44 percent) than at midterm (75.56 percent). At endline, all schools had a storeroom, according to internal project data. Having a storeroom was a precondition for participating in the project. At endline, school directors corroborated the presence of storerooms

The project reports that it has provided storage support materials to school council members, PTAs, school officials and conducted trainings on storage minimum standards. A fumigation activity and monthly physical inventory have been conducted at the CRS central warehouse before the food distribution calendar.

The lack of drinking water remains an issue. On the day of data collection at endline, 30.00 percent of schools had no water available, which was lower than midterm (38.89 percent of schools with no water available). The construction and rehabilitation of water infrastructure was not included in project activities, according to project personnel. Students have utilized schools' pre-existing water infrastructure.

Despite modest improvements in handwashing practices from midterm to endline, they could still be improved. The proportion of schools in which more than half of children were observed to wash their hands increased from 43.33 percent at midterm to 53.34 percent at endline. Still, at endline, fewer than a quarter of learners washed their hands at 27.78 percent of schools visited.

The project reports that, during the COVID-19 period, handwashing devices were purchased by the project and distributed in beneficiary schools with the aim of improving hygiene practices. The project also established health clubs in 87 schools to encourage good practices on health and nutrition.

¹⁰ All learners were asked this question. If it was not applicable to the learner because no latrine was available, the response was recorded as 999.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS AND CAREGIVERS

Teacher support is a vital classroom component of learning, and a lack of teacher support can hinder a child's educational development. Throughout the project, teacher trainings were conducted, and teaching tools were provided to increase teacher competencies in pedagogy, mathematics, and Portuguese.

The proportion of learners who stated that their teacher(s) helps them most or all of the time when asked if their teacher helps them do better at school increased from midterm to endline. At midterm, while only 15.71 percent of boys and 16.53 percent of girls stated that their teachers help them most or all the time, at endline, 52.49 percent of boys and 49.68 percent of girls said their teachers did.

The proportion of learners who reported their teachers help struggling learners all the time also increased from midterm to endline. At midterm, 35.52 percent of boys and 32.38 percent of girls stated that teachers help learners all the time if they are struggling, while at endline, 54.48 percent of boys and 55.54 percent of girls reported their teachers did.

The proportion of learners who reported their caregivers were supportive of their education increased from midterm to endline. For instance, the proportion of girls who reported their caregivers read to or with them most of the time or always increased from 26.99 percent at midterm to 55.72 percent at endline. The trend was similar among boys, growing from 26.10 percent at midterm to 53.93 percent at endline. While no specific activities were developed for caregivers as part of the project, some of the caregivers were included in the teachers' training.

Notably, ***the majority of learners' caregivers speak a language at home different from Portuguese, the language of instruction.*** Only 12.61 percent of boys and 18.37 percent of girls answered that their caregivers speak Portuguese at home, which was a decrease from the baseline proportions of 27.64 percent and 30.93 percent, respectively.

CHILD-CENTERED PROCESSES

The proportion of learners who stated that they often or always engage in child-centered processes in the classroom increased from midterm to endline. For instance, approximately two-thirds of both boys and girls at endline said their teachers encouraged them most of the time or always to ask questions at school, compared with 43.57 percent and 43.66 percent, respectively, at midterm.

Child-centered processes in the classroom can be vital to supporting literacy development. Outside of the classroom, MeREECE developed extracurricular activities to support children learning apart from the school environment.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT AND TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The nature of the materials used in a classroom, including their sentiment and representation, can have a strong effect on learners' experiences and development in the classroom. ***The proportion of learners who said that their teachers tell positive stories about girls and boys and that their homework requires them to engage with their community sometimes remained relatively unchanged from midterm to endline.*** Learners' attitudes about what they learned at school

changed, however, with the proportion of learners who said it helped them very much in life increasing from midterm to endline (18.40 percent to 60.45 percent for boys, and 19.02 percent to 60.98 percent for girls).

The project engaged with education content by supporting the development of teaching and learning materials in partnership with the National Institute for Education. These materials were provided to schools and utilized in teacher trainings.

SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Learners' high self-reported levels of safety while en route to school and in the classroom remained high at endline. More than 90 percent of all learners said they feel quite safe or always safe while travelling to and from school and while at school. In addition, the proportion of learners who said they rarely or sometimes felt welcome at school decreased from more than a quarter of both boys and girls at midterm to 14.1 percent of boys and 10.5 percent of girls at endline.

Safety and perceptions of safety can drastically impact learners' ability to learn. Although the project did not implement a specific activity regarding safe learning environments, some awareness was raised during teacher trainings. In addition, a video is being produced to increase child and teacher awareness of child protection, which will be distributed at the community level in the future.

SPECIAL STUDY

In conducting KIIs and FGDs with project stakeholders and staff, it is clear that project schools have benefited from changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and practices in communities, thanks to work from SMCs. MeREECE has especially helped SMCs better fulfill its first of three primary roles in contributing to school activities through donations, volunteering, and community engagement, while also bolstering its third of three roles—management. It was not as clear, however, how well the project has built SMC capacity to fulfill its second of three key roles—developing a vision for future school projects once the project itself closes in August 2024.

Lessons Learned

With the changes analyzed between baseline, midterm, and endline reading outcomes, the special study conducted of the project activity to build the capacity of SMCs, and other various metrics compared between midterm and endline, this evaluation presents multiple lessons learned for the project:

1. Project interventions to support literacy did not have the desired effect necessary to reach project goals, which prompts questions about their design and whether the foundational skills required for reading with comprehension were adequately addressed.
2. Exposure to Portuguese in and out of the classroom is directly related to higher literacy levels.
3. Although the project's work on increasing infrastructure for kitchens, storerooms, and latrines has been successful, it could not improve access to water at schools as part of its design due to budget constraints, which may have limited the impact of the feeding program.
4. Communities are willing to become more active participants in their schools if partners effectively engage with them and follow through on their own commitments, as community-based respondents in FGDs said MeREECE did; however, these respondents said if they

approached local government authorities with requests to upgrade school infrastructure or make other improvements, the local officials would usually not do anything in response.

5. If the project does not focus on long-term strategic planning for sustainability with SMCs, short-term successes are in danger of not continuing once the project closes.

Recommendations

1. Concentrate on boosting children's foundational reading skills in future literacy projects.
2. Conduct further research on specific activities that may impact children's reading skills that this evaluation was unable to evaluate due to design and sampling constraints, including pilot reading clubs and libraries in project schools, and examine reasons how general reading interventions could be revised through a full review.
3. Examine the Portuguese language abilities of learners and teachers.
4. Future project funding should consider efforts to expand activities, including those related school to school infrastructure, WASH, and girls' education.
5. Determine why some project kitchens do not meet standards of cleanliness.
6. Identify the drivers of teachers' and students' attendance rate increases from baseline to endline, as well as the reasons that rates did not meet project targets.
7. Future project designs should incorporate the same successful activities the project used to strengthen SMCs so that communities, not just schools, are engaged in improving teaching and learning conditions at school.
8. The creation of a draft roadmap for sustainability of community-based projects should be a milestone included in future project graduation and sustainability plans so SMCs, SILCs, and other community-based organizations can develop sustainable plans well in advance of the project closing.