U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TOGO McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Project

Midterm Evaluation

Project Background and Purpose

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is implementing a McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition (McGovern-Dole) Program, *Santé, Transformation et Apprentissage pour une Réussite Scolaire* (STARS)[1], in Togo. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the project aims to improve literacy and primary education in Togo's Savanes and Kara regions by reducing hunger among students. It is designed to achieve these goals by providing school meals, training teachers and school administrators, improving water and sanitation facilities, providing school infrastructure, and building skills and knowledge.

CRS began implementation of the STARS project activities in fiscal year (FY) 2020.[2] STARS aims to reach 36,341 primary school students at 138 schools in its first year and expand to 46,925 students by FY24 totalizing 71,248 students for the life of the project due to anticipated enrollment increases. The objectives of STARS align with the standard strategic objectives (SO) of the McGovern-Dole Program:

- SO 1: Improved literacy of school-aged children; and
- SO 2: Increased use of health and dietary practices of school-aged children.

This report presents the findings of the STARS midterm evaluation. The evaluation establishes midterm values for all performance indicators, generates data for comparative analysis, and validates project strategies and assumptions. This report elucidates contextual factors that can improve student health and literacy in the Savanes and Kara regions and will enable the McGovern-Dole STARS project team to establish questions to test their theory of change and refine indicator targets.

[1] In English: "Health, Transformation and Learning for School Success"

[2] CRS received approval from USDA to begin some activities prior to the submission of the baseline report due to lengthy delays in data collection resulting from the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Evaluation Design, Methods, and Limitations

The external evaluation of STARS is being conducted over five years. Baseline data collection for the evaluation took place in November 2020, followed by midterm data collection in November 2022. The endline will occur in spring 2024. At each time point, the evaluation will use a quantitative approach that includes five data collection tools:

- Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and student survey
- Head teacher survey
- Parent survey
- School observation tool
- Classroom observation tool

School-to-School International (STS) was contracted as the external evaluator to undertake the baseline, midterm evaluation and final evaluation of the STARS project. Data were collected from a sample of 80 schools in which the project is intervening across the Savanes and Kara regions. A regional data collection firm, Innovative Hub for Research in Africa (IHfRA), was contracted to manage the fieldwork. IHfRA enumerators administered the EGRA and student survey to 20 randomly selected students enrolled in grade 3 at each school—10 boys and 10 girls—using a random number generator application on their tablets.[3] Enumerators collected additional data using school-based tools at each site, including a survey with the school's head teacher; a parent survey with three parents of students who also had a child younger than 2; and school and classroom observations.

Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when reviewing the findings of the STARS midterm evaluation:

- **Insufficient resources for EGRA adaptation workshop and pilot.** The midterm data collection utilized the same tool as at baseline, which was an existing French EGRA tool that had been adapted in Djibouti. Therefore, the tool was not created specifically for the Togolese context. While the development of a new EGRA tool through a thorough and local adaptation workshop is best practice, STS and CRS Togo reviewed the existing tool prior to baseline and deemed it acceptable. The resources required to conduct an adaptation workshop, primarily time, budgetary, were not available. Alongside of COVID-19 limitations, it was deemed unfeasible to implement. In order to keep continuity in the project that will allow for the best comparisons between stages of the project, the same tool was used at both baseline and midterm.
- **Language of the EGRA tool.** The learning assessment was not designed or adapted to the Togolese context. Further, the language of the assessment—French—is not the mother tongue of the vast majority of the students; instead, their mother tongues include the local languages of Konkomba (Dankpen), Gourma (Kpendjal), and Ngam-gam (Oti-Sud). However, based on the

[3] There were cases where there were less than 16 students available at the school. In this case, all available students were sampled. The following schools had less than 20 students: EPP DJABONLI, EPP KOUTEOU, EPP MONDOFOALI, EPP NANDJONKARGOU, EPP DAKALFAM, EPP DJABIGNON, EPP SANLOAGA, EPP KOUTEGOU, EPP DJANTCHOGOU, and EPP DJANKPENTENE.

listening comprehension task results, it is likely that many students struggle with listening comprehension in French and may not have understood the instructions or testing content. This known limitation was discussed with CRS at baseline as well, and it was determined that providing an EGRA tool in all local languages would not be feasible. There are many different dialects and mother tongues spoken across the regions the project is working in. For this reason, CRS Togo decided to us the official language of instruction, French. To balance this limitation, IHfRA primarily contracted enumerators who were from the study area and have language affinity in these regions. The tools were not formally translated but enumerators were instructed to provide clarification or support in local languages if necessary.

- **Inherent bias in sampling children present on the day of assessment.** Students' EGRA results may be biased towards students who attend school regularly and may exclude those students who are enrolled but do not regularly attend school. However, the method of randomly sampling on the day of the assessment is preferable to sampling students in advance, as it may create opportunities for school-based actors to manipulate the sample to have only high performers participate. This sampling approach will remain the same for future assessments, and therefore the comparison across timepoints will be valid.
- **Inherent bias in sampling parents.** One such bias is gender, women being more likely to be available during the day. The sample reflects this with the overwhelming majority of parents interview being women. Additionally, the types of parents willing to participate may be different then those unwilling to participate. However, given the voluntary nature of participation this potential bias is unavoidable.
- **The design of the study does rely on key assumptions. The main assumption is that project interventions affect the literacy results presented in this report.** It is important to note that there may be other unknown factors directly affecting learning outcomes at these schools that may not have been captured by the current tools. However, this design, plus local contextual information from CRS, suggests this relationship to be unaffected by confounding variables or treatment effects.
- **Interruption in schooling for primary school students**. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, students in Togo lost approximately four months of instructional time from the end of the 2019-2020 academic year and the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. At midterm, it is likely that lingering effects and educational losses remain from the school disruptions.

Findings and Conclusions

Students showed statistically significant improvements in literacy outcomes on many measures since baseline.

- **Both boys and girls were significantly less likely to receive zero scores**—to not answer a single item correctly on a subtask—**on the letter name identification and initial sound identification subtasks.**
- **Mean scores significantly improved** from baseline to midterm for both girls and boys on two subtasks—**initial sound identification and letter sound identification.**

Gendered differences in performance were seen in literacy outcomes at the midterm evaluation.

- The proportion of boys with zero scores on oral reading fluency significantly decreased from baseline to midterm, but the proportion of girls with zero scores did not decrease significantly.
- Boys scored significantly higher than girls on all literacy subtasks except reading comprehension.

Even with the significant improvement in some areas, overall literacy is still low.

- The proportion of students with zero scores on subtasks was very high.
- **No students reached the pre-determined reading comprehension threshold.**

Significant changes in teacher performance were observed at midterm.

- The **proportion of teachers demonstrating quality teaching practices during a lesson improved** from baseline to midterm.
- **The number of quality supervision tools being used at schools increased** from baseline to midterm.

While unable to causally link increased teacher performance to student behavior, we observe high levels of student engagement and attendance.

- At midterm, **79.4 percent of observed classrooms had engaged students.**
- At the 80 sampled schools at midterm, **87.2 percent of students were present on average**.

Results on parent behavior were less consistent with some improvements, and some backsliding was observed.

- About two in five parents—or 37.13 percent—stated that at least one of their children missed school in the past month. Additionally, **94.1 percent of all parents** stated that their child (or children) missed school over the past month due to illness.
- Only 26.3 percent of parents stated that they had helped their children with homework in the last week.
- **About three of five respondents—**or 61.1 percent—**reported having participated in three or more education activities with their child or children at home.**

The project saw great success in the improvement of school sanitation facilities.

- ***Sanitation facilities at the 80 sampled schools in the midterm evaluation significantly improved from baseline.*** Fewer schools had no toilets available—a decrease from 29 at baseline to 24 at midterm—and more schools had composting toilets—an increase from 10 at baseline to 18 at endline.
- ***The state of handwashing systems has also improved in sampled schools since baseline*.** The number of schools with running water or a hand pour system increased from 28 at baseline (36.4 percent) to 36 at midterm (48.7 percent).[4]

[4] The questioned asked enumerators to indicate whether a school had: "There is running water OR a hand pour system (with the wastewater separated from the clean water for washing hands) AND soap."

More room for development with water sources is possible, as improvement was seen in only some measures.

- There was no significant change in handwashing stations' level of accessibility since baseline.

At midterm, enumerators were able to collect learners' weight and height, in addition to the learning assessment and observational data.

- On average, **body mass index (BMI) scores for learners measured at midterm were not considered underweight.**
- **BMI was not correlated with literacy outcomes** for those learners sampled at midterm.

These results are broken down in greater detail in the report, providing a better understanding of students' reading performance and project movement on the strategic objectives. Tests were used to determine if the difference in measures from baseline to midterm, as well as between boys and girls, were statistically significant. Statistically significant differences are noted where applicable.

Recommendations

STS proposes the following recommendations for CRS project implementation, as well as considerations for the endline evaluation.

Implementation Recommendations

- **Examine existing student and teacher French language abilities.**
  Overall student performance, particularly on listening comprehension, indicates that students have a limited ability to understand spoken French. CRS may want to consider undertaking more targeted research into the reasons for this gap in comprehension. Additionally, the project should consider what this means for data collection with students outside of the literacy assessment. CRS may want to consider strategies to ensure students are understanding what is being asked of them if the survey questions are in French.
- **Interventions related to SO2 should focus on water sources.**
  At midterm, although notable improvements of school facilities were observed, upgrades of water facilities remain necessary. Project interventions could make an impact by focusing on water source accessibility.
- **Examine gender constraints within target communities.**
  Girls' underperformance compared with boys deserves further exploration and may warrant a specific focus within the project to address the underlying causes of these gender disparities. When comparing baseline to midterm, these gender gaps in learning outcomes appear to be either remaining stagnant or even growing. Project interventions should focus resources specifically targeted to girls' literacy.

Recommendations for Endline Evaluation

- **Data collection methods on BMI should be refined to ensure measurement validity.**
  BMI was collected for the first time at midterm. In review of this process, better procedures can be developed to ensure data recording is more robust. STS, with the support of IHfRA should

include this refined process as an addition to the current training and practice it during a school visit during training.

- **The project could consider the addition of qualitative data collection to contextualize results.** Both the widening of the gender differences, as well as the backsliding in measures on parent behavior, could be investigated more deeply with focus groups or semi-structured interviews.
- **The possibility for modification to the EGRA should be considered.** Performance on the nonword reading subtask—with measurably low outcomes—suggests that this subtask may not be appropriate for either the Togolese context or the grade level. Removing this subtask should be considered to decrease student fatigue and frustration, which will ultimately increase data validity.
- **Existing survey items, indicators, or definitions should be modified to allow for greater accuracy during data collection.** CRS should consider reviewing existing indicators and definitions within their Performance Monitoring Plan to identify any areas for clarification or refinement. Corresponding changes could be made to the tools to reflect more nuanced definitions and indicators. Specifically, reviewing indicators related to school absences, as well as teacher and administrator behavior, are recommended.