Asian Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Science (ISSN: 2320-9720)
Vol.3, No, 5), 2026

Research article www.ajehss.com Open Access

Food Sourcing Strategies and the Home-Grown Procurement Objective of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP): Evidence from Tolon District, Ghana

Dr John Issah Alhassan, Carlos Abdul-Latif Adam

Department of Languages and International Relations, Tamale Technical University, Ghana
Department of Languages, St Vincent College of education

Abstract

The Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP), introduced in 2005 as a home-grown school feeding (HGSF) intervention, aims to provide nutritious meals to schoolchildren while stimulating demand for locally produced food. This study examined food sourcing strategies in the implementation of the GSFP in the Tolon District, Northern Ghana, and the factors shaping linkages between the programme and smallholder farmers. Using a qualitative case study design and a policy implementation perspective, data were generated through 22 semi-structured interviews, four focus group discussions of 6–8 participants each, and a documentary review. Participants, including caterers, agricultural extension personnel, farmer representatives and local food aggregators, were selected purposively and through snowball sampling. Data were analysed thematically. While direct sourcing from individual smallholders was rare, procurement relied on larger market centres and local aggregators. Participants attributed this to fragmented output, difficulty in meeting required amounts, and farmers' preference for fast payment as against delayed government reimbursement of caterers. Aggregators were preferred because they could supply larger quantities and, in some cases, offer credit. Weak coordination, notably the absence of a functional district-level mechanism connecting farmer supply with school feeding demand, compounded these constraints. The study argued that the gap between the home-grown objective and procurement practice reflects a misalignment between policy design and implementation conditions rather than non-compliance by caterers. Strengthening the objective requires predictable payment, functional aggregation, structured procurement arrangements and district-level coordination.

Citation: Dr John Issah Alhassan, Carlos Abdul-Latif Adam, *Food Sourcing Strategies and the Home-Grown Procurement Objective of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP): Evidence from Tolon District, Ghana.* Asian Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Science ISSN: 2320-9720, 3 (5) 2026: 13-28.

Keywords: Ghana School Feeding Programme; home-grown school feeding; food sourcing; policy implementation; smallholder farmers; caterers; food aggregators; Tolon District

1. Introduction

The Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) was inaugurated in 2005 as a social protection intervention to provide one hot, nutritious meal per school day to children while stimulating local agricultural production. By 2011 it had reached more than 1.6 million primary school children in all 170 districts (Gelli et al., 2016). Its home-grown school feeding (HGSF) orientation reflects an approach in which public expenditure on school meals is expected to generate demand for food produced by smallholder farmers in and around beneficiary communities (Gelli et al., 2016; Sulemana, 2016). Food procurement is therefore not merely a logistical component of school feeding. It is the mechanism through which the programme is expected to connect social protection, nutrition, education and agricultural development.

The evidence on the programme's direct benefits to children is relatively strong. Experimental work from Ghana points to positive effects on learning, cognition and nutrition (Aurino et al., 2023; Gelli et al., 2021). The evidence on its agricultural component is weaker. Gelli et al. (2021) found that caterers sourced largely through traders and detected no strong effect on smallholder income, concluding that the agricultural objectives remain aspirational. Mohammed (2021) linked delayed government disbursements to procurement practices that favoured market-based suppliers able to provide goods on credit. Botchwey (2021) reported that local farmers had been registered to supply caterers in some districts, but also documented political patronage in the selection of beneficiary schools. A recent photovoice study has examined decentralised procurement through the eyes of school caterers (Liguori et al., 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that the implementation of local procurement is conditioned by financial and institutional arrangements rather than by policy intention alone.

The procurement architecture of the GSFP involves actors at national, regional, district, school and community levels. School-level structures are expected to provide supervision, district-level structures coordinate implementation and monitoring, and caterers are responsible for procuring food and preparing meals. Smallholder farmers, farmer-based organisations (FBOs), aggregators and traders occupy different positions in the supply chain. The effectiveness of local procurement consequently depends on the relationships and capacities of these actors.

Tolon District offers a useful setting in which to examine these relationships. It is predominantly agrarian, with the production of cereals, legumes and vegetables forming an important part of local livelihoods, so the coexistence of substantial agricultural activity and institutional demand from schools creates clear potential for linking local production to the programme. Existing research in the district has addressed the effect of school feeding on enrolment (Dari & Nyatsikor, 2023), but little is known about how procurement decisions are actually made in predominantly agrarian districts, or about the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain relationships between smallholder producers and school feeding actors.

This study addresses that gap. It asks four questions: (1) What food sourcing strategies do GSFP actors use in Tolon District? (2) What factors influence the selection and implementation of these strategies? (3) What roles do local food aggregators and farmer organisations play in

linking local agricultural production to the programme? (4) What do existing procurement arrangements imply for the home-grown procurement objective? The paper contributes an account of procurement as an implementation process, grounded in a district-level case, and shows that the reliance on traders and aggregators reported in national evaluations can be explained by the interaction of payment arrangements, supply fragmentation and weak coordination rather than by the preferences of individual caterers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Home-grown school feeding and the GSFP

The GSFP emerged within an international movement promoting HGSF as a way of linking school meals to domestic agricultural production. Its design drew on experience from Brazil and on the framework of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Gelli et al., 2016; Singh & Fernandes, 2018). More broadly, public food procurement has been argued to be a lever for sustainable development because it combines a large, predictable buyer with social and environmental objectives (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008), and school feeding is increasingly discussed in relation to climate-resilient agriculture (Singh et al., 2026). The Ghanaian programme was designed to pursue educational and social protection objectives while creating a demand-side stimulus for agricultural production.

Evidence from Ghana suggests, however, that the agricultural objective has been unevenly implemented. Gelli et al. (2021) found that caterer procurement was substantially mediated by traders, and Mohammed (2021) identified delayed payments as an important factor affecting local procurement. Studies from other settings, including Ethiopia and Tanzania, similarly stress that HGSF depends on coordination among agricultural, education and local government actors and on the resolution of practical implementation challenges (Desalegn et al., 2022; Roothaert et al., 2021). The implementation challenge therefore concerns the translation of a policy objective into functioning procurement relationships. A policy may specify local sourcing while implementing actors confront constraints relating to liquidity, quantity, storage, transport and supplier reliability.

2.2 Food sourcing strategies

The literature identifies several mechanisms through which school feeding programmes can source food locally. These include direct purchases from farmers, purchases through traders or aggregators, community-managed grain banks and procurement through farmer organisations. Direct farmer procurement potentially creates a short supply chain, but its feasibility depends on farmers' capacity to supply the required quantities at the right times (Liu et al., 2023). Intermediated procurement can address fragmentation by consolidating produce from several producers. Although intermediaries add a layer to the supply chain, they may provide logistical and financial services that enable institutional buyers to access smallholder production. Mensah (2019), for example, drew on the Netherlands Development Organisation's grain banks initiative in northern Ghana to show how an organised aggregation mechanism can give smallholders access to the school feeding market and contribute to household food security. Private commodity-supply models for school meals have also been documented in Ghana (Acharibasam et al., 2026), and studies of staple supply chains in the north show that policy frameworks shape how those

chains operate (Saani & Salisbury, 2025). The literature therefore suggests that the effectiveness of a sourcing strategy depends not simply on its proximity to farmers but on the interaction of supply, aggregation, finance, logistics and governance.

2.3 Sustainability and school feeding supply chains

Sustainability has been conceptualised in the school feeding literature in multidimensional terms, incorporating economic, social and environmental considerations (Kretschmer et al., 2014; Singh & Fernandes, 2018). Kretschmer et al. (2014) identify supply base, demand stability, logistics, financial flows and governance as important components of sustainable school feeding supply chains. These dimensions are relevant to the Tolon case because local procurement depends on the availability of agricultural products, predictable demand, functioning logistics and financial relationships among government, caterers and suppliers. The present study does not attempt to measure the overall sustainability of the GSFP, which qualitative evidence about participants' experiences cannot by itself establish. Instead, it examines procurement conditions that may support or constrain the continuity and resilience of local sourcing arrangements.

2.4 Procurement and smallholder participation

A central concern in the HGSF literature is whether institutional procurement creates meaningful opportunities for smallholder farmers. Singh and Fernandes (2018) argue that school feeding can contribute to the diversification of local production systems when procurement is deliberately connected to them, and Pingali (2015) makes the broader point that agricultural policy needs to look beyond staple grains if it is to improve nutrition. Yet institutional demand does not automatically guarantee farmer participation. Farmers must be able to meet quality, quantity, timing and payment requirements, and menu planning needs to be consistent with what local production can supply (Aliyar et al., 2015). Where these conditions are not met, intermediaries may become important in connecting fragmented production to institutional buyers.

The role of intermediaries is therefore analytically ambiguous. They may increase transaction costs, but they can also reduce them by aggregating produce and providing credit. Sulemana (2016) points to the importance of social embeddedness, that is, the way trust and community relationships shape transactions in home-grown school feeding in Ghana. The empirical question is how intermediaries operate within particular institutional contexts.

3. Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored in a policy implementation perspective, which distinguishes policy intentions from the institutional processes through which policies are translated into practice (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Dye's (1972) understanding of public policy as deliberate government action intended to influence social outcomes provides the starting point. In the GSFP context, the home-grown procurement objective is an intervention intended to link school feeding expenditure to local agricultural production. Policy intentions, however, are mediated by implementation structures and by the actors who work within them. Lipsky's (1980) work on street-level implementation draws attention to the discretion that front-line actors exercise within resource constraints, which is relevant to caterers who make daily sourcing decisions.

The study accordingly treats procurement practice as the outcome of four interconnected elements (Figure 1). Policy design concerns the objectives and rules governing local procurement. Institutional arrangements concern the responsibilities of the GSFP Secretariat, district and school structures, caterers and supply actors. Implementation resources include financial flows, aggregation facilities, supply capacity and logistical resources. Actor behaviour encompasses the decisions and relationships of caterers, farmers, aggregators, traders and programme officials.

Figure 1. Analytical framework: policy implementation and procurement practice



This framework allows the analysis to move beyond an actor-centred explanation of procurement outcomes. Rather than asking whether caterers complied with or violated policy, it asks how the institutional environment shaped the choices available to them. It generates four analytical questions for the Tolon case: what the policy sought to achieve; what institutional arrangements were available to implement it; what resources and constraints shaped implementation; and how actors responded. The framework is applied in the discussion to explain the observed gap between policy and practice.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and study area

A qualitative case study design was adopted because the study sought to understand how procurement decisions are made and how actors experience the institutional conditions under which they operate, questions that are not readily answered by counting transactions. Tolon District, in the Northern Region of Ghana, was selected as the case because it is predominantly agrarian, producing cereals, legumes and vegetables, and because it hosts GSFP implementation in schools that could in principle be supplied by local farmers. A single-district case permits close examination of the relationships among caterers, farmers, aggregators and programme officials, although it limits generalisation (see Section 7).

4.2 Participants and sampling

The study population comprised actors directly involved in, or knowledgeable about, GSFP implementation and procurement: district programme managers, education officials, agricultural extension officers, school heads, implementation committee members, caterers, farmer representatives and local food aggregators. Purposive, criterion-based sampling was used to identify participants with direct knowledge of GSFP implementation, food sourcing, agricultural production or supply relationships. Snowball sampling was used where necessary to reach strategically positioned actors who were not accessible through formal programme structures. The final dataset comprised 22 individual interviews and four focus group discussions (FGDs), each involving approximately 6–8 participants (Table 1). Data collection continued until additional interviews and discussions generated no substantially new themes, which was taken to indicate information saturation.

Table 1. Participants by category

#	Respondents	Number	The reason for selection	Procedure for Selection
1.	The District Ghana School Feeding Programme Coordinator (DGSFPC):	1	He has the knowledge to clarify the details of the implementation processes.	He was selected after reviewing the GSFP implementation plan.
2	District Coordinating Director	1	Provided the GSFP perspective on resource allocation and the coordination of the programme across different sectors at the district level.	Upon reviewing the GSFP policy guide, the director was chosen
3	Caterers	7	They provided direct knowledge of the local supply chain.	A snowballing approach was used to select the caterers.
4	Farmer-Based Organisations	4 groups of FGDs (two each for male and female FBOs.	To determine whether the FBOs can meet the supply needs of the GSFP	The district agricultural unit helped to identify the active groups.
5	The District Agriculture Development Unit (DADU)	3	To obtain essential data about the district's state of agricultural productivity	The district agriculture director has agreed to designate two staff members of the unit to participate in the research.

6	Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)	3	To assess information on their policy advocacy and influencing initiatives related to the GSFP implementation.SFP and involvement in farmer cooperatives in agriculture and food security.	Through email conversations with the directors of these organisations.
7	Ghana Education Service (GES)	2	Their engagement considers factors that are critical to the effectiveness of the school feeding intervention.	GSFP policy document mentioned GES as a strategic partner of the programme
8	Headteachers	4	They have a direct impact of the programme and engage with caterers and parents.	The District Director of Education facilitated the selection of these headmasters
9	Ghana Health Service (GHS)	2	Since the GHS is in charge of public outreach	Reference was made to this institution by the GES directorate.
10	Aggregators	3	Deal with farmers in the communities	Caterers referred to them

Source: Field Study, 2024

4.3 Data collection

Three instruments were used: a semi-structured interview guide, an FGD guide and a document review checklist. Interviews were conducted in English or Dagbani according to participants' preference and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Each FGD lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Documentary review covered GSFP policy and operational documents, district records, procurement-related records, payment or disbursement information, meeting minutes

and evaluation reports (for example, Ghana Audit Service, 2023; SEND Ghana, 2011; World Food Programme, 2020). Fieldwork took place between April, 2024 and July 2025.

4.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data were analysed thematically following the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): repeated reading of interview transcripts, FGD materials and documentary evidence; initial coding; development of categories; identification and refinement of themes; and interpretation in relation to the research questions and the framework. The principal themes were food sourcing practices, factors influencing procurement choices, farmer–caterer–aggregator relationships, institutional coordination and financial flows, and implications for the home-grown procurement objective. The analysis distinguished participants' accounts from information corroborated through documentary evidence. Where documentary verification was unavailable, statements were treated as reported experiences rather than independently verified facts.

Trustworthiness was addressed using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation across interviews, FGDs and documents, comparison of perspectives across participant groups, and probing questions to separate actual procurement practices from perceptions of policy intentions. Transferability was supported through detailed contextual description, recognising that the findings apply primarily to the institutional and agricultural conditions of Tolon District but may offer insights for comparable agrarian settings.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary, and written or recorded informed consent was obtained before each interview and FGD. Participants were informed that they could decline any question or withdraw at any time. Quotations are attributed to broad participant categories rather than names, and recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

5. Findings

5.1 Food sourcing practices

GSFP food procurement in Tolon combined sourcing from local communities, purchases from larger market centres and procurement through local intermediaries. Participants identified Tolon, Nyankpala and Tamale as important market locations. Direct procurement from individual smallholder farmers was described as limited. One caterer said that farmers were not sufficiently organised to provide food in the required quantities. Another explained that farmers' preference for cash payment, combined with delays in GSFP reimbursement, made it difficult to buy directly from them. Although this caterer preferred to source from local farmers, the absence of immediate cash prevented her from doing so consistently. Caterers therefore relied on traders in larger marketing centres, particularly Tamale, who were more willing to provide food on credit on the strength of established relationships. One caterer during the interview said:

If the farmers here could give us food on credit, we would buy from them, but they always want cash. Since the GSFP payments are delayed for so long, we go to the big marketing centres like the Tamale market, where traders trust us and allow us to take goods and pay later. It is not

that we do not want to buy from our farmers; it is just not practical with the way things are with our payments from the central government. (Caterer)

This account shows that the limited involvement of local farmers was not necessarily a result of unwillingness to source locally. It was strongly influenced by the timing and predictability of programme payments. Farmers required immediate payment, whereas traders in larger markets could extend credit, which made them the more practical source for caterers operating under delayed reimbursement. Payment arrangements within the GSFP can therefore indirectly undermine the objective of linking school feeding demand with local production.

5.2 Local aggregators

Local food aggregators emerged as important intermediaries. One aggregator reported supplying two caterers with rice, maize, oil, cassava, groundnuts and pepper, and described buying produce directly from smallholder farmers. Asked why farmers preferred dealing with her rather than with caterers, she attributed it to the trust and familiarity built through her long-standing presence in the community. She had been born and raised there and had a reputation for reliability and honesty. Her relationship with farmers extended beyond purchase: she sometimes gave them financial assistance to undertake farm activities and acquire inputs. These reciprocal ties gave farmers confidence that she would honour her commitments, and her familiarity with their farming activities allowed her to verify the quantities and types of produce they claimed to have. In her words:

I was born among them in this community. I have no other home than here. I have never run away with anyone's money. This is why they trust me. I give some of them financial support to go to their farms, either to plough or buy farm inputs. We know each other very well. If someone says he has this or that number of food items, it is easy to ascertain if he has it or not. (Aggregator)

This account indicates that social embeddedness and interpersonal trust facilitated local procurement. The aggregator's close relationship with farmers reduced information asymmetry about the availability of produce and encouraged farmers to transact with her. It also suggests that local procurement was shaped not only by formal GSFP arrangements but also by informal community relationships and reciprocal economic support.

5.3 Institutional coordination

Participants' accounts indicated that there was no functional district-level mechanism for coordinating the supply of locally produced food to schools. The District Assembly, GSFP, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), schools, caterers, FBOs and individual farmers were all involved in food production and procurement, but they largely operated independently. Caterers determined what, when and from whom to buy mainly on the basis of immediate needs, individual relationships and available suppliers. This fragmentation limited the district's ability to consolidate school food requirements and to communicate demand to producers in advance.

The absence of coordination also constrained collective procurement, farmer aggregation and forward planning. Individual caterers buying relatively small quantities had limited capacity to negotiate favourable prices, organise transport or establish reliable supply arrangements with farmer groups. Farmers, for their part, lacked information about the quantities, types, quality standards and timing of GSFP demand. Procurement therefore tended to be reactive rather than planned around local production cycles, which encouraged caterers to rely on traders and

aggregators who could meet immediate needs, even when supplies originated outside the district. One participant said:

There are no systems at the district level where they bring the caterers, farmers and the GSFP together to plan what the schools will need. Each caterer is on her own. When you need food, you look for where you can get it and buy it. If there were a district arrangement, the farmers would know what we need and could produce and supply in groups. (Participant)

The weak linkage between local production and the GSFP was thus not simply a consequence of inadequate local production. It also reflected weaknesses in institutional coordination and market organisation. The absence of a district-level coordination mechanism created a structural gap between local producers and institutional buyers.

5.4 The policy–practice gap

The findings reveal a substantial gap between the home-grown procurement objective and actual food sourcing in Tolon. Although the HGSF approach seeks to use school feeding as an institutional market for local food, procurement was often influenced by immediate availability, convenience, existing supplier relationships and suppliers' ability to provide food on credit. Caterers largely made independent decisions, and the absence of effective district-level coordination limited communication between GSFP demand and local farmers. Purchasing from local community markets therefore did not necessarily translate into direct sourcing from local producers.

The gap was shaped by financial, institutional and agricultural constraints. Delays in reimbursement reduced caterers' ability to buy directly from farmers who required immediate payment, while traders and aggregators could supply on credit. Farmers faced limited access to credit, limited aggregation and insufficient information about GSFP requirements. In some cases, informal relationships between caterers and farmers did facilitate direct sourcing, but these arrangements depended on personal trust and social networks rather than institutionalised procurement mechanisms.

Overall, the gap did not appear to result from actors rejecting the HGSF objective. It reflected a dissonance between policy expectations and the conditions for implementation. Policy envisaged a coordinated system linking local production with predictable school feeding demand, whereas practice was characterised by fragmented procurement, weak coordination, financial uncertainty and reliance on intermediary suppliers. The GSFP thus functioned partly as a market for locally available food but did not consistently operate as the structured institutional market for smallholders that the home-grown objective envisages.

6. Discussion

6.1 Policy design and the implementation gap

The central finding is the divergence between the GSFP's home-grown procurement objective and the procurement practices reported in Tolon. Policy implementation theory helps to explain it because it directs attention away from policy statements and towards the institutional conditions under which they are implemented. At the level of design, the GSFP establishes an agricultural-development rationale for school feeding by linking food demand to local production (Gelli et al., 2016; Singh & Fernandes, 2018). The policy logic is straightforward: public

expenditure on school meals generates institutional demand, which can create market opportunities for smallholders.

The findings show, however, that policy intention does not automatically create a functioning market relationship. Implementation requires institutional mechanisms capable of translating demand into transactions, and in Tolon those mechanisms appear incomplete. The absence of a functional district-level coordination mechanism is particularly important. Where individual caterers are expected to identify suppliers, negotiate prices, organise transport and manage payment relationships on their own, connecting fragmented smallholder production to institutional demand becomes difficult. The policy–practice gap should therefore be interpreted as an implementation capacity problem rather than as non-compliance by individual caterers.

6.2 Implementation resources and financial flows

The second-dimension concerns implementation resources, and the findings indicate that financial flows strongly shape procurement behaviour. Caterers reported delayed reimbursement, farmers generally required cash payment, and traders and aggregators could provide credit. The supplier offering the most operationally convenient transaction was thus not necessarily the one located closest to the school. This is consistent with Mohammed's (2021) argument that delayed disbursement can undermine the home-grown objective, and with Gelli et al.'s (2021) finding that trader-based procurement is an important component of Ghana's school feeding supply chain. It also fits the caterers' perspective documented in recent work on decentralised procurement (Liguori et al., 2025).

The theoretical implication is that financial resources are not simply an administrative input. They actively shape implementation behaviour. When government payment is unpredictable, actors develop coping mechanisms: caterers look for suppliers who can absorb payment delays, and farmers protect themselves by requiring immediate payment. The resulting procurement pattern emerges from the interaction of these strategies. Reliance on traders should therefore not automatically be read as evidence of caterers' unwillingness to support local farmers. It may be a rational response to an institutional financing problem.

6.3 Actor behaviour within institutional constraints

The third dimension concerns the behaviour of implementing actors. Caterers are private service providers with commercial interests, but the data do not permit the conclusion that profit maximisation was the primary driver of their procurement decisions. Participants repeatedly referred to payment delays, supplier credit and the need to obtain food in adequate quantities. Implementation actors operate within structures that both constrain and enable their choices (Lipsky, 1980). Caterers exercise discretion, but it is conditioned by the timing of reimbursements, supplier relationships and food availability. The study therefore conceptualises caterers as street-level implementation actors working within resource constraints, rather than as autonomous agents whose commercial motives independently determine the pattern of procurement. This does not rule out commercial considerations, and the study cannot say how far they matter relative to payment constraints.

6.4 Intermediaries as institutional actors

The aggregator findings further demonstrate the importance of actor relationships. An intermediary may seem to contradict the home-grown principle because the transaction between caterer and farmer is no longer direct. Yet the aggregator in this study performed functions

that helped connect fragmented production with institutional demand: consolidating produce, verifying supply through local knowledge, and extending finance to farmers. This is consistent with supply chain research that treats aggregation and logistics as core components of HGSF systems (Kretschmer et al., 2014) and with Mensah's (2019) evidence that organised aggregation can facilitate farmer participation in school feeding. It also echoes Sulemana's (2016) emphasis on embeddedness: trust and community ties made transactions possible that formal arrangements did not. The policy implication is not necessarily to eliminate intermediaries. Policy should instead distinguish between unregulated intermediation that obscures farmer participation and productive aggregation that eases transaction and liquidity constraints. The data come from one aggregator's account, so how far this distinction holds across the district remains to be tested.

6.5 Farmer organisation, governance and coordination

Smallholder participation is conditioned by organisational capacity. Caterers reported difficulty obtaining sufficient quantities from individual farmers, which is consistent with the structure of smallholder production, where individual producers may have a limited marketable surplus at any given time. From a policy implementation perspective, farmer organisation is part of the implementation infrastructure. If policy assumes that farmers will supply institutional buyers but provides no mechanisms for aggregation, coordination and market information, responsibility for implementation is effectively shifted to individual producers. FBOs could in principle fill this gap by aggregating production and coordinating delivery, but participants described them as operating independently of procurement, and the data do not allow their capacity to be assessed. Their effectiveness would depend on production planning, quality standards and reliable payment arrangements.

Governance is a further dimension. The intended multi-level structure of the GSFP requires coordination among national policy, district administration, schools, caterers and agricultural actors. Where coordination is weak, each actor addresses immediate operational problems independently: caterers seek credit, farmers seek cash buyers, and traders draw on existing relationships with both. The supply chain continues to function, but it does not necessarily reproduce the developmental logic of the HGSF policy. This explains how the programme can continue to provide meals while failing to establish strong farmer linkages. Operational continuity and policy fidelity are not the same thing, and that distinction is central to interpreting the Tolon findings.

6.6 Analytical synthesis

Taken together, the findings suggest that procurement outcomes under the GSFP in Tolon emerged from the interaction among policy intention, institutional arrangements, implementation resources and actor responses. The policy intended to promote local procurement and strengthen linkages between school feeding demand and smallholder production. Its realisation was mediated by institutional arrangements, including district and school structures, caterer contracts and supplier relationships, and by the availability of resources such as timely reimbursement, credit, aggregation, logistics and local supply capacity. These conditions shaped the responses of key actors: caterers selected suppliers on the basis of availability, affordability, trust and credit; farmers preferred buyers who could pay promptly; and aggregators responded to opportunities to consolidate produce and extend credit. Procurement

outcomes were thus produced by the interaction of these factors, and not by policy design alone.

The observed pattern cannot be attributed to a single implementation failure. It reflects a misalignment between the home-grown objective and the conditions within which implementing actors operate. While the policy sought to establish school feeding as a predictable market for local producers, caterers faced financial uncertainty, farmers faced supply and market constraints, and the district lacked mechanisms for coordinating demand and supply. The analytical contribution of the study is to show, for a single district, that the effectiveness of home-grown procurement depends on the degree of alignment among policy objectives, implementation structures, available resources and actor incentives. It adds a district-level qualitative account to national and experimental evidence that agricultural objectives have been difficult to realise (Gelli et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

This study examined food sourcing strategies within the GSFP in Tolon District and the institutional and operational conditions shaping connections between school feeding and local agriculture. Procurement involved multiple channels: local purchases, purchases from larger market centres and transactions facilitated by aggregators. Direct procurement from individual smallholders appeared limited because of fragmented supply, difficulty in meeting required quantities, farmers' preference for cash and delayed reimbursement to caterers.

Local aggregators were important because they could consolidate produce and provide credit, thereby addressing constraints that make direct farmer–caterer transactions difficult, and their role should be understood within the wider institutional structure of the procurement system. Analytically, the study shows that the policy–practice gap in home-grown procurement is better explained by the interaction of policy design, institutional arrangements, implementation resources and actor behaviour than by attributing responsibility to caterers.

Strengthening the home-grown procurement objective requires more than encouraging caterers to buy locally. It requires predictable payment systems, functional aggregation mechanisms, stronger farmer organisations, structured procurement relationships and effective coordination between programme and agricultural actors.

8. Recommendations

The recommendations that follow from the findings are:

First, the GSFP Secretariat should strengthen mechanisms for predictable, timely and regular reimbursement to caterers. Delays and uncertainty constrain caterers' ability to buy directly from smallholders who often require immediate payment, and they encourage dependence on traders, vendors and aggregators who supply on credit. A reliable payment schedule, better financial planning and closer monitoring of payment processes would give caterers a more stable basis for engaging directly with local producers.

Second, district-level procurement coordination should be established, bringing together GSFP officials, schools, MoFA, FBOs, caterers, aggregators and community representatives. Such a mechanism would support demand forecasting, aggregation of produce, communication among

stakeholders, quality assurance and monitoring, and would help to move procurement from an individual, caterer-driven process towards a coordinated system.

Third, local aggregators should be formally recognised as potential supply-chain partners where they can consolidate produce from dispersed smallholders and ensure reliable delivery to schools. Their participation should be governed by transparent arrangements that promote accountability, traceability and fair pricing, including records of farmer sources, quantities purchased and prices paid, so that the programme can assess whether farmers receive fair and timely returns.

Fourth, procurement planning should be aligned with seasonal production patterns and the availability of local commodities (see also Aliyar et al., 2015). Coordination with MoFA and FBOs would allow the programme to anticipate surplus and scarcity, and farmers and FBOs should receive timely information on expected quantities, quality standards, delivery arrangements and payment procedures. Information alone is not enough, however; it must be accompanied by reliable payment, aggregation arrangements and delivery infrastructure that make participation feasible.

Finally, governance and accountability should be strengthened at national, regional, district and school levels, with clear responsibilities for procurement planning, oversight, monitoring and payment administration. District actors should be empowered and resourced to monitor compliance with local sourcing requirements and to identify barriers that prevent caterers from buying directly from local producers. Transparency in the selection and replacement of caterers and in financial management should also be strengthened.

9. References

1) Acharibasam, V., Jia, F., & Abunga, M. (2026). Enhancing child nutrition through sustainable agricultural sourcing: The Savannah & Sahel Commodities Limited model for nutritious, affordable school meals in Ghana. *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*. https://doi.org/10.22434/ifamr.1316.
2) Aliyar, R., Gelli, A., & Hamdani, S. (2015). A review of nutritional guidelines and menu compositions for school feeding programs in 12 countries. *Frontiers in Public Health, 3*, Article 148. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2015.00148.
3) Aurino, E., Gelli, A., Adamba, C., Osei-Akoto, I., & Alderman, H. (2023). Food for thought? Experimental evidence on the learning impacts of a large-scale school feeding program. *Journal of Human Resources, 58*(1), 74–111. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.58.3.1019-10515R1.
4) Botchwey, G. (2021). School selection and local food production in Ghana's school feeding programme. *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos, 41*, 63–90. https://doi.org/10.4000/cea.6273
5) Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
6) Dari, L., & Nyatsikor, M. K. G. (2023). Impact of school feeding on school enrollment in the Tolon District, Ghana. *Creative Education, 14*, 623–640. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2023.144054.

7) Desalegn, T., Gebremedhin, S., & Stoecker, B. J. (2022). Successes and challenges of the Home-grown School Feeding Program in Sidama Region, Southern Ethiopia: A qualitative study. *Journal of Nutritional Science, 11*, Article e85. https://doi.org/10.1017/jns.2022.77
8) Dye, T. R. (1972). *Understanding public policy*. Prentice-Hall.
9) Gelli, A., Masset, E., Adamba, C., Alderman, H., Arhinful, D. K., Aurino, E., Folson, G., Osei-Akoto, I., & Asante, F. A. (2021). *School meals as a market for smallholder agriculture: Experimental evidence from Ghana* (IFPRI Discussion Paper 2045). International Food Policy Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.134616.
10) Gelli, A., Masset, E., Folson, G., et al. (2016). Evaluation of alternative school feeding models on nutrition, education, agriculture and other social outcomes in Ghana: Rationale, randomized design and baseline data. *Trials, 17*, Article 37. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-015-1116-0.
11) Ghana Audit Service. (2023). *Report of the Auditor-General on the public accounts of Ghana: Ministries, departments and other agencies for the year ended 31 December 2023*. Ghana Audit Service.
12) Kretschmer, A., Spinler, S., & Van Wassenhove, L. N. (2014). A school feeding supply chain framework: Critical factors for sustainable program design. *Production and Operations Management, 23*(6), 990–1001. https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.12109.
13) Liguori, J., Savy, M., & Laar, A. (2025). Understanding the decentralised school food procurement model in Ghana through the lens of school caterers: A photovoice study. *Maternal & Child Nutrition, 21*, Article e70141. https://doi.org/10.1111/mcn.70141.
14) Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
15) Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
16) Liu, X., Liu, C., & Bi, J. (2023). Shortening food supply chain in home-grown school feeding: Experiences and lessons from south central China. *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review, 26*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.22434/ifamr2022.0154.
17) Mensah, C. (2019). Incentivising smallholder farmer livelihoods and constructing food security through home-grown school feeding: Evidence from Northern Ghana. *Revista de Direito Internacional / Brazilian Journal of International Law, 15*(3). https://doi.org/10.5102/rdi.v15i3.5922.
18) Mohammed, A.-R. (2021). how austerity undermines school feeding programmes: An analysis of Ghana's home-grown school feeding model. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies, 3*, 154–165. https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2021.3.5.3.
19) Morgan, K., & Sonnino, R. (2008). The school food revolution: Public food and the challenge of sustainable development. *Environment and Planning A, 40*(5), 1141–1161. https://doi.org/10.1068/a3916.
20) Pingali, P. (2015). Agricultural policy and nutrition outcomes: Getting beyond the preoccupation with staple grains. *Food Security, 7*(3), 583–591. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-015-0462-x.
21) Pressman, J. L., & Wildavsky, A. (1973). *Implementation*. University of California Press.
22) Roothaert, R., Mpogole, H., & Hunter, D. (2021). Policies, multi-stakeholder approaches and home-grown school feeding programs for improving quality, equity and sustainability of

school meals in northern Tanzania. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, 5*, Article 621608. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.621608.

23) Saani, A. S., & Salisbury, R. H. (2025). Sustainable rice supply chains in Northern Ghana: The role of policy frameworks. *Discover Sustainability, 7*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-02391-3.
24) SEND Ghana. (2011). *School feeding programme in Ghana: A policy implementation review*. SEND Ghana.
25) Singh, S., & Fernandes, M. (2018). Home-grown school feeding: Promoting local production systems diversification through nutrition sensitive agriculture. *Food Security, 10*, 111–119. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-017-0760-5.
26) Singh, S., Jordan, I., Hunter, D., Milani, P., Muthoni, P., & Borelli, T. (2026). Promoting climate-resilient agriculture and food security through school feeding. *The Lancet Planetary Health, 10*(2), Article 101414. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanplh.2025.101414.
27) Sulemana, N. (2016). *Under the lens of embeddedness: A socio-cultural perspective on home-grown school feeding in Ghana* [Doctoral dissertation, Wageningen University]. https://doi.org/10.18174/378326.
28) World Food Programme. (2020). *School feeding in Ghana: An evaluation*. World Food Programme.