

Governance Practices and Stakeholder Participation in the Implementation of Ghana's School Feeding Programme (GSFP) in Tolon District

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the governance structures and stakeholder participation in the implementation of Ghana's School Feeding Programme (GSFP) in the Tolon District. The GSFP, which is a government initiative aimed at improving child nutrition and supporting local agriculture, relies heavily on effective governance structures and active participation from various stakeholders, including government decentralized agencies, local authorities, farmers, caterers, school administrators, community members, and Civil Society Organizations. Using a qualitative research approach, the study explores how the various stakeholders engage in the implementation process and decision-making. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation with key stakeholders in the district. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of the governance structures is limited by issues related to coordination, stakeholder participation, capacity, and sustainability, such as transparency and accountability, which significantly impact the smooth implementation of the GSFP. The findings also found that civil society organizations have mobilized in northern Ghana to form a Platform to work together to collaborate with government officials at the local and national levels. However, the findings revealed challenges such as insufficient local capacity, limited stakeholder engagement, and poor communication among actors in the district and how much such challenges hinder the full prospects of the Programme. The study highlights the need for more inclusive governance frameworks that encourage greater stakeholder involvement, particularly at the local level, to enhance the sustainability and success of the GSFP. Policy recommendations focus on strengthening local coordination structures, improving transparency in the implementation processes, and ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are meaningfully engaged in the implementation and monitoring of the Programme.

KEYWORDS: Governance, School Feeding, Stakeholders, Participation, Ghana, Practices

1. INTRODUCTION

School feeding programmes have, over the years, become one of the most widespread social-protection instruments in many countries, used simultaneously to advance household food security, school participation, and local agricultural development (Mainje et al., 2024). Within sub-Saharan Africa, the integration of "home-grown" concepts into school feeding policy has reinforced the developmental rationale of these programmes by coupling nutritional objectives with market opportunities for smallholder farmers (Mensah, 2019). Ghana's flagship intervention in this regard, the Ghana School Feeding Programme, was launched in 2005 on a pilot basis at one primary school in each of the country's then ten administrative regions with the explicit purpose of providing one hot, nutritious meal per day to kindergarten and primary schoolchildren using locally-grown foodstuffs (Sulemana, 2016). By 2019, the programme supported more than 1.7 million primary and kindergarten pupils across all 216 districts of Ghana (Mensah, 2019). This scale of operation carries substantial fiscal, logistical and governance implications, and positions the GSFP as an instructive case for studying how decentralised social policy is administered in resource-constrained settings.

The governance architecture of the GSFP is structured along a four-tier, decentralised model. At the apex, a National Secretariat, accountable to a ministerial oversight committee, is responsible for policy formulation, the setting of institutional standards and the channelling of funding to implementing structures (Akuamoah-Boateng & Sam-Tagoe, 2018). Inter-ministerial coordination has historically been problematic: the original steering committee comprised five separate ministries, and the competition over authority among them produced power struggles that ultimately required a streamlining of oversight responsibility (Akuamoah-Boateng & Sam-Tagoe, 2018). At the regional level, Regional Coordinating Councils monitor implementation, while at the district level, District Implementation Committees (DIC) are entrusted with procurement supervision and caterer oversight (Aliyar et al., 2015). At the school level, School Implementation Committees (DIC) are tasked with menu design, the recruitment of cooks, kitchen organisation, and quality assurance. The catering model that has dominated implementation since the original pilot phase transfers responsibility for procurement, preparation and serving to private caterers contracted through Metropolitan, Municipal

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and District Assemblies; a deliberate shift from the earlier community-based model that reflects a policy preference for stable funding flows over direct community involvement (Mensah, 2019).

While this architecture is formalised, its administration in practice has been fraught with documented challenges. Aurino and colleagues (2020) observed that reimbursements to caterers are routinely delayed in some documented cases by half a year or more and that these delays were associated with reductions in portion size and compromises in nutritional quality. Tendering and procurement procedures at the district level are often inconsistent or absent, and the Ghana Education Service, despite possessing relevant technical competence, has been described as a stakeholder "in name only", without substantive engagement in caterer selection or school-eligibility decisions (Iddrisu, 2022). Mohammed (2021), working in northern Ghana under the fiscal-austerity conditions introduced after the 2015 IMF-mandated adjustments, further shows that street-level bureaucrats adopted discretionary coping strategies that constrain meal quality and regularity. Comparable governance and stakeholder coordination difficulties have been documented in school feeding programmes in Tanzania (Roothaert et al., 2021) and South Africa (Qila & Tyilo, 2014), suggesting that the challenges facing the GSFP are not untypical of decentralised social-policy implementation in the Tolon District.

Stakeholder participation is widely treated, in both policy and the scholarly literature, as indispensable to the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of school feeding programmes. The lived reality of participation within the GSFP, however, remains uneven. Iddrisu (2018) demonstrates that teachers, the most proximate school-level administrators, are largely excluded from operational decision-making in the programme, with adverse consequences for trust, cooperation, and service delivery. Milledzi, Keney, & Amponsah (2017) found that while caterers and food suppliers have livelihoods tied to the programme's success, other community members nonetheless express a desire for greater involvement in shaping menu choices, in the use of locally produced foods, and in the maintenance of school farms. From a governance perspective, stakeholder participation in the GSFP vacillates, then, between instrumental involvement where stakeholders benefit economically from the programme and substantive involvement, where they genuinely co-design and co-deliver it; the latter remains underdeveloped in documented practice (Milledzi et al., 2017). Where community actors do not actively perform their oversight roles, school-level administrators and district executives have been observed taking unilateral decisions on behalf of beneficiary pupils (Akuamoah-Boateng et al., 2018). The systemic implication is that the formal provisions for stakeholder participation embedded in the SICs, DICs and the national steering committee often sit alongside substantive disempowerment at the level of implementation.

The Tolon District provides a particularly instructive setting for such an examination. As one of the GSFP-implementing districts in northern Ghana, Tolon District is characterised by higher rates of poverty and lower baseline education outcomes than the national average, and by a correspondingly heavier reliance on social-protection instruments. Yet despite the scale of public investment in the GSFP in the district, existing empirical work has concentrated largely on enrolment and nutritional outcomes rather than on the governance and stakeholder arrangements that mediate those outcomes in practice at the district and school levels.

Against this background, this paper examines governance practices and stakeholder participation in the implementation of the Ghana School Feeding Programme in the Tolon District. Specifically, the study seeks to: characterise the governance structures and administrative arrangements through which the GSFP is delivered at the district and school levels in Tolon; analyse the nature, depth, and patterns of stakeholder participation across the stages of planning, implementation, and oversight; identify the governance and stakeholder-related obstacles that constrain the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme; and recommend institutional arrangements that can strengthen the programme's long-term sustainability in Tolon District and similar settings. By centring Tolon District as a case, the paper contributes to the broader literature on decentralised social-policy implementation in resource-constrained contexts, and offers actionable evidence for national, regional, and district-level policymakers tasked with administering one of Ghana's flagship social-protection interventions.

2. Governance, Administration and Stakeholder Participation in the Ghana School Feeding Programme

Institutional Frameworks

The institutions and agencies in charge of designing, implementing, and overseeing the running of the GSFP according to the programme's policy directives are those referred to here as institutional frameworks. This institutional framework makes sure that all the relevant structures are actively involved in the Ghana School Feeding Programme and that it is efficiently administered and managed with distinct lines of accountability. Various ministries, departments, and agencies at various levels of government (national, regional, and local) are included in the frameworks of the GSFP. For instance, there are ministries, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and International Organizations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), and Partnership for Child Development (PCD), all playing varied roles in assisting in the implementation of the GSFP, especially in areas where the central government has limited capacities (Barrientos, 2013).

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The GSFP's institutional framework was established under Ghana's 2015 National School Feeding Policy. Under this framework, the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (MoGCSP) is designated as the ministry responsible for the initiative's strategic oversight and for developing social protection policies and other pertinent instruments. At the time of its founding, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) oversaw the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP), which was later moved to the MoGCSP. The move was welcomed since it offered a vital chance to connect social assistance with social inclusion and productivity, as well as to coordinate school feeding with other initiatives aimed at enhancing the lives of food crop growers and economically disadvantaged families. Representatives from various other agencies of government, including the Ministries of Finance, Education, Health, Food and Agriculture, Trade and Industry, Local Government and Rural Development, the National Development Planning Commission, and the Food Research Institute, are part of the institutional framework that facilitates the implementation of the GSFP (GSFP, 2015).

The main goals of this institutional framework are to build on the wealth of knowledge and experience with school feeding models, as well as to provide information for the programme's implementation and to harmonise current techniques and technologies. To optimise the programme's benefits, an operational plan that transforms the outcomes discussions into specific goals, targets, and implementation arrangements is outlined in the framework. Such a strategy is not only essential to the programme's effectiveness and sustainability, but it also supports the operational model selections made to meet the desired goals. The institutional framework, thus, describes the nation's current position concerning the national school feeding programme, its desired future state, and its intended course of action.

The establishment of an institutional framework aids in securing sufficient financial and human resources as well as consistent and coordinated participation under government leadership. It also serves as the cornerstone for fostering alliances between public, business, and civil society organizations.

Following the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (WFP & UN, FAO, 2018) publication on the Home-Grown School Feeding Resource Framework-Technical Document, an operational Institutional framework strategy was created by making the required decisions on institutional frameworks to ascertain the degree to which the programme is:

- i. Aligned with state policy directions;
- ii. Consistent with government strategies, particularly in the areas of education, social protection, health and nutrition, and agriculture;
- iii. Efficiently implemented, with a realistic understanding of how to obtain sufficient financial resources in the short and long terms; and
- iv. Capable of involving and building adequate and robust operational capacities.

Policymakers and practitioners from all sectors and communities may participate more easily when there is an institutional framework that is credible and inclusive. The process of creating and modifying the institutional framework for a school feeding programme is flexible and iterative. To optimize their performance and sustainability, they must be examined and improved regularly using monitoring data and other assessments and evaluation approaches. Table 1 illustrates the institutional framework of the GSFP, which is a systematic system that delineates the roles, duties, and connections between diverse stakeholders at varying levels, such as government agencies, local authorities, schools, and communities. To promote efficiency and sustainability, this framework makes sure that there is coordination, accountability, and resource management. It also shows how the programme's alignment and reporting mechanisms work.

Table 1. Institutional Framework for the GSFP

Level	Institution/Body	Responsibilities
National Level	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP)	Overall policy direction and oversight Coordination with other ministries.
	National School Feeding Secretariat	Day-to-day management of the GSFP. Training and capacity building
	Ministry of Finance	Budget allocation and financial management.
	Ministry of Education	Coordination with schools.
	Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA)	Ensuring local food procurement. Supporting farmers to meet supply demands.
	Ghana Health Service (GHS)	Nutrition and health education. Monitoring the nutritional impact of the program.
	Development Partners	Providing financial and technical support. Engaging in monitoring and evaluation

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	Regional Coordinating Councils (RCCs)	Coordination of GSFP activities at the regional level
	Regional Coordinator of GSFP	Monitoring and supervision of district-level implementation
District Level	District Assembly	Local-level policy direction and oversight Monitoring and evaluation of programme implementation.
	District School Feeding Secretariat	Coordination of GSFP activities within the district. Liaison between schools, caterers, and local farmers.
	District Agriculture Office	Support to local farmers to ensure the supply of food Monitoring the quality and quantity of food provided.
	District Health Directorate	Monitoring the health and nutritional impact of the GSFP Nutrition education and promotion activities
Community Level	School Management Committees (SMCs)	Oversight of school-level implementation Ensuring community involvement
	Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs)	Community engagement and support Monitoring the quality and quantity of food served.
	Caterers	Preparation and serving of school meals Ensuring food safety and hygiene.
	Local Farmers	Supplying locally produced food items Engaging with district-level authorities for market access.
National-Local levels	Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)	Advocacy and policy influence at various levels. Monitoring and reporting on GSFP implementation. Capacity building and technical support.

Source: Researcher's design, 2026

The Administrative Systems of the Ghana School Feeding Programme

Efficient administrative systems are vital for the effective delivery of the GSFP. These systems include beneficiary identification, registration, payment, and monitoring mechanisms. The capacity of administrative systems varies significantly across countries, influencing the efficiency and reach of social protection programmes. For instance, countries with advanced digital infrastructure leverage technology to improve the efficiency of social protection delivery through electronic payment systems, biometric identification, and real-time monitoring (World Bank, 2018). On the other hand, in contexts where administrative capacity is weak, challenges such as delays, inaccuracies, and fraud would undermine the effectiveness of such social protection programmes (Garcia and Moore, 2012). Akenroye (2016) argues that effective administration is only possible if the following guidelines are adhered to when managing school feeding programmes across nations. After all, every school feeding programme is well thought out, and much more is required to operationalise it. The proposed guidelines by Akenroye (2016) for governments to take into account to support and make the school feeding programme sustainable in the implementation process are below:

1. Considering social accountability concerns among actors of the school feeding programme is not an option but it is a significant matter. The local government institutions and agencies should form an independent social accountability committee with members from the public, smallholder farmers, NGOs, parent-teacher organizations (PTAs), and schools. The committee should be charged with the responsibility of monitoring performance, inadequacies, and the SFP's implementation process regularly. The committee should also be responsible for holding public officials and school administration accountable.
2. Advocating for participatory implementation of school feeding programmes must always be sustainable to raise awareness of the initiative or remind actors of their responsibilities in its implementation. The opportunities for food supply in schools should be communicated to farmer groups and caterers in particular through a flexible communication approach.
3. Building actors' capacities gives them more confidence to perform. Establish associated sessions or training programmes to increase the ability of stakeholders (school representatives, local public officers, farmers' organisations, caterers, and PTAs), institutions in charge of administering the SFP, collaborating with development partners, non-governmental organisations, and independent experts. As a result, this would encourage important stakeholders to participate actively and engage early.

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4. The government could be more efficient by implementing a prompt payment mechanism for local farmers and caterers who take part in the SFP. Central government, service providers, and other stakeholders all benefit from regular payment schedules. Better collaboration is facilitated by this trust, which makes it simpler to handle problems and put the programme's benefits into action. For instance, a study by the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration and the Center for Global Development in Ghana (2023, page 31) indicated:

...there has been extensive discussion in the media that the provision of adequate funding promptly is a significant constraint that is hampering the implementation of the GSFP. The main funding challenge is that the rates paid per child are inadequate. This is further compounded by an irregular reimbursement regime. That is, the service providers do not know when the next payments will be made. Often, when the payments are eventually made by the government, the amount owed to the service providers is not paid in full.

Administrators of school feeding programmes must create toolkits to facilitate the operation of the programme. To support operational tasks, standard toolkits must be created, particularly concerning record-keeping. Schools, caterers, and farmer-based organisations must all maintain uniform records regarding the number of students served, the frequency of cooking sessions, and the food that is bought from local farmers. This makes it simple for local designated public officers to gather the information required to keep an eye on programme execution and compliance

It is also important to encourage private sector involvement in the administration of school feeding programmes. Since the commercial sector can provide more resources, efficiency, and creativity, involving it in the management of school food programmes is essential (Sarfo, 2024). The proficiency of private enterprises in logistics, supply chain administration, and food production can enhance the caliber and uniformity of dishes. Additionally, having public-private partnerships in SFP administration has the potential to benefit from corporate social responsibility programmes, which entail businesses investing in the well-being and education of the communities in which they operate.

Mechanisms for Accountability and Transparency

In order to guarantee the equitable and effective implementation of social protection programmes like the GSFP, accountability and transparency are essential. Mechanisms for addressing complaints, keeping an eye on programme performance, and making sure money is spent wisely should all be part of governance frameworks. Independent oversight organizations, community-based monitoring programmes, and open reporting procedures are a few examples of these methods (International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2018). Strong accountability and transparency frameworks guard against corruption and resource mismanagement while fostering public confidence in social protection programmes. This involves vertical coordination between the national, regional, and local levels of government institutions as well as horizontal coordination between various government departments and agencies. In certain situations, social protection initiatives must also work in tandem with other fields, like health, education, and the workforce, in order to effectively address the complex dynamics of poverty and vulnerability (Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, 2024)

According to the Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII, 2016), politics is making accountability and openness in Ghana less significant. Accountability and transparency policies have unintentionally become swinging targets. Through undermining established structures, creating opportunities for favouritism and exploitation, hiring unqualified people, and diverting funds for personal or family advantages, this disturbs the governance frameworks of social intervention efforts and opens avenues for corruption. Ensuring that every dollar spent on the GSFP goes where it should be possible through the implementation of anti-corruption fundamentals like clear systems of accountability and transparency throughout the intervention, parental and community participation in governance, codes of conduct for programme actors, and access to information on SFP policies.

The supervisory ministry should keep fostering relationships with community stakeholders to support effective governance structures that are transparent and accountable. It should also ensure that community engagement is incorporated into the programme's design as a means of achieving sustainability. Furthermore, a clearly defined stakeholder engagement approach is necessary to improve excellent governance structures and the efficient application of transparency and accountability in the high-quality administration of the GSFP. Identification and agreement with interested and willing organizations should be the first steps in the process. It is necessary to identify certain capacities, and the involved organizations must be able to fully utilise them, devote resources to the process, and apply their best practices. Thus, it is imperative to implement efficient mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating. This helps evaluate the GSFP's development as well as further consolidating responsibility and openness among the several participating administrators.

Development Partners and the running of the Ghana School Feeding Programme

Ghana is only one of the many developing nations where Development Partners are critical to the management of social protection programmes. Several of them are donor agencies and international organizations that advocate for the expansion of these social intervention programmes in areas with the greatest need. In fact, the International Community and Agencies were named as

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strategic partners in the 2015 GSFP strategy policy guide for managing the programme domestically. According to the guide, the GSFP's objectives will remain unrealized unless the programme aggressively engages with other strategic partners who have an interest in agriculture, health, and education. The World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, and the World Bank have all provided financial and technical support to the GSFP. For example, the WFP has helped with the creation of standards for the implementation of school feeding, training caterers, and monitoring tool development. These collaborations improve the programme's ability to address malnutrition, boost school attendance, and encourage local food production (WFP, 2021).

Global initiatives to establish and maintain school feeding programmes have been led by international organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Programme (WFP) as revealed in FAO et al (2017). The WFP runs school feeding programmes in many nations, including Ghana where lots of school children receive daily meals from these programmes, but they also act as a springboard for more general developmental objectives including advancing gender equality, better nutrition, and improved education (WFP, 2021).

The WFP's school feeding programmes are made to cater to the unique requirements of local communities, guaranteeing that the meals served are both nutrient-dense and culturally suitable. By encouraging families to bring their children to school, these initiatives have been demonstrated to boost school enrollment and attendance, especially among females (WFP, 2021). Furthermore, the WFP works with governments to strengthen local institutions' ability to oversee and continue these initiatives in the long run.

Undoubtedly, donor agencies such as government aid agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private foundations contribute significantly to the funding and implementation of school feeding programmes. UNICEF is one significant international organization that focuses on the connection between nutrition, education, and child protection. UNICEF's approach to school feeding programmes is integrated with its broader mandate to ensure that every child has access to quality education and healthcare (UNICEF (2020). UNICEF helps countries develop and implement school feeding programmes that are aligned with national education, agriculture, and health strategies by providing technical assistance, policy guidance, and financial support. For instance, school feeding programme in Ghana have long been supported by the Partnership for Child Development (PCD) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Through their initiatives, nations can enhance the nutrition and literacy of school-age children by establishing and maintaining school feeding programmes with financial and technical support (USAID, 2022). In a similar vein, as part of its larger agendas for social safety and education, the World Bank has played a significant role in funding school food programmes. The World Bank assists nations in creating extensive school feeding programmes that are integrated with other social safety nets by offering loans, grants, and technical assistance. These initiatives support the long-term sustainability of school feeding programmes in addition to their immediate effectiveness (World Bank, 2021).

In addition, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Save the Children and the Global Child Nutrition Foundation (GCNF) are essential partners in the implementation of GSFP. These groups frequently act as implementing partners, collaborating directly with governments, communities, and schools to provide meals, provide staff development, and keep an eye on programme results. Their community-based methodology guarantees that school feeding programmes are customized to meet the unique requirements of the surrounding populace and that community opinions are taken into consideration during the planning and implementation of these projects (GCNF, 2021). The scope and efficacy of school feeding programmes have been significantly impacted by the engagement of these international organisations and donor agencies. It has been demonstrated by studies that by raising enrolment, attendance, and academic achievement, these programmes enhance educational results. For instance, a WFP study in Ghana discovered that school feeding programmes have increased enrollment and attendance by 10% and 6%, respectively in some parts of the country, with even greater improvements among girls (WFP, 2020).

To help with food preparation, effective programme delivery, and the implementation of complementing programmes like deworming or water and sanitation, many SFPs collaborate with other civil society organizations (CSOs). Nongovernmental stakeholders, active community groups, and local structures all contribute to the running of SFPs.

3. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore governance practices and stakeholder participation in implementing Ghana's School Feeding Programme (GSFP) in the Tolon District. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of stakeholders' experiences, perceptions, and interactions, as well as the institutional and power dynamics that shaped the programme implementation. This approach was suitable for capturing the meanings actors attach to their roles and participation within the GSFP governance framework.

The study focuses on key district and community-level stakeholders involved in the GSFP implementation, including District Assembly and decentralised government agencies like the District Directorates of Education, Health, and MoFA. Others included caterers, headteachers, local food suppliers, farmers, and some civil society actors. Participants were selected using purposive

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sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases, complemented by snowball sampling where necessary. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions, guided by flexible instruments developed around themes such as governance structures, roles and responsibilities, participation mechanisms, coordination, accountability, and implementation challenges.

4. RESULTS

The successes and achievements of the objectives of the GSFP are contingent on good governance of the programme and the effective participation of the various stakeholders in the value-chain process of the programme. The interface of these actors provides room for the effective implementation of the programme as envisaged by the structures of the initiative, as well as the involvement of the multifaceted stakeholders. The findings of this research study were analysed and discussed under three (3) thematic areas: 1) GSFP governance structures; 2) Engagement of multi-stakeholders; and 3) CSOs participation in the programme.

Governance Structures of the GSFP

The GSFP governance structures in the districts are designed to be the core actors of the programme to facilitate the effectiveness of the programme's implementation. The interplay of these structures, how information is disseminated, how decisions are made, and the roles each structure plays contribute significantly to the programme's success. The structures responsible for the implementation of the programme at the district level are the DICs and SICs. The composition of the DIC is the chief executive of the DA, a traditional ruler or representative, two representatives from the district social services subcommittees, an opinion leader, and the district directors of education, health, food and agriculture, and the head teachers of the corresponding beneficiary primary schools. The DIC is in charge of making decisions at the local level, food procurement processes, and overseeing the other essential operations that make the programme work efficiently. SIC is at grassroots level responsible for the day-to-day running of the programme including supporting to procure food from the local communities.

However, it was found during the study that the structures in the Tolon district are nonexistent. Interrogating key actors as per the programme policy guide revealed that many of them do not know that they are supposed to be part of the programme implementation in the district. Except for the GES which is periodically consulted because it has oversight responsibility of schools, the other major stakeholders identified in the composition of the structures are not consulted in any decision-making for the programme. It was observed that even those involved in the programme's running hardly meet. Meetings of the focal persons at the DA level for the programme to make decisions are very irregular. Besides the absence of the DIC in the district, it was also observed that no SICs formed in the respective schools. The absence of the DIC and SICs in the district brings to the fore how consultative decisions about the running of the GSFP implementation are made. It could be seen from the findings that; decisions are arrived at without broad consultation of major stakeholders. The targeted schools are selected with minimal consultation of education sector actors. The district education director lamented that most of the beneficiary schools were selected before informing the office. The criteria used in selecting those schools were not known to the education directorate.

The lack of a broad consultation of major players in the programme and the nonexistent of the DIC and SICs affects the quality of the programme in the district. Headteachers do not know their roles, community members are not involved, and caterers do what they think is good for the programme. During the interviews with the head teachers, many of them were wandering the enrollment figures caterers present for payments as some of them had never met the caterers cooking for the children in their schools. They only see cooks and any question asked about the meals, the cooks refer them to the caterers. All these concerns cast negative implications on the operations of the GSFP implementation in the district. Thus, the realization of the programme's objectives is jeopardised in the absence of functional structures. The programme document spelt out the functions of DICs and SICs in the management and running of the initiative, as seen in Table 2.

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Table 2. DICs and SICs functions

DIC Functions	SIC Functions
i. Be in charge of overseeing the district's overall programme implementation; ii. Payment of funds to SICs and caterers; iii. Purchasing food from local farmers for the programme; iv. Recruitment of caterers for the appropriate schools; v. Selecting beneficiary schools vi. Monitor on how the programme is running in the district	i. See to the day-to-day running of the programme in the schools ii. Receive funds for the schools from the DICs iii. Procure food for the programme from the local farmers iv. Sensitise members of the communities to own the programme v. Mobilise community support for the programme vi. Provide monitoring reports to the DIC

Source: GSFP Policy Guide, 2015

Table 2, as seen above, has detailed the terms of reference (functions) for these local players of the programme, but unfortunately, the study has revealed that no structure exists, let alone any role, due to a lack of knowledge of their roles. This study has confirmed SEND Ghana's 2008 study on the functionality of DICs and SICs. In a question posted by SEND Ghana on why the DIC and SICs are not responsive to the GSFP implementation according to plan, a respondent from a particular district said; "community members are part of the DIC and SICs structures and hence it is their responsibility to facilitate other community members to be part of the SICs" (SEND Ghana, 2008; pg 14).

Stakeholder Engagement in GSFP

Assessing the involvement of the various stakeholders, questions were posed as to how well they were aware and involved in the programme. The responses of the stakeholders were intriguing. This was so because most of the stakeholders' knowledge of the programme was unimpressive. The major stakeholders agreed that involving a wide range of stakeholders in every facet of the programme's implementation will promote improved decision-making, resource mobilization, and local ownership, all of which would help the programme to succeed. Many of the stakeholders' respondents indicated that they were not involved in the implementation of the GSFP. They have only heard of the programme in the schools but do not know about its operations. The community stakeholders, in particular, indicated that they are only aware that their children in the schools are being fed by the government. One key issue arising from the findings with the stakeholders on the level of engagement was the fact that information on roles in the implementation of the GSFP is inadequate. Respondents were of the view that all stakeholders should know what is expected of them in the programme implementation. Either was the view that there should be broad-based consultations and engagements, and a meeting schedule drawn for interface interactions. Some of the respondents mentioned the need for broad monitoring indicators for all stakeholders to use to monitor the programme. All stakeholders within the district should be involved in developing these broad monitoring indicators that will be shared among stakeholders to monitor the programme. Revealing that, improved stakeholder participation through education and sensitisation of all participants on their roles and responsibilities would promote their interest and involvement in the programme implementation.

The district Ghana School Feeding Programme Coordinator remarked:

.... Intensifying awareness creation and sensitisation of the programme among all stakeholders is very important. Such is the best way to create platforms where key stakeholders such as state and non-state actors can dialogue on emerging issues.

Respondents also noted that there was no clarity of roles for the seemingly parallel structures at the school and the district assembly level, especially the roles of the DIC, SICs, and SMCs. What they observed was a setback to promoting a cordial relationship and successful implementation of the programme at the district and school levels; as such, efforts should be made to rectify it. Respondents raised concerns about the funding of the GSFP and expressed their views on the need to have legal backing. This, they said will ensure that specific budgetary funds are allocated to the programme to ensure its smooth running and

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measure the level of performance as against allocations. Throughout the investigation, the investigator noted that the GES, as a major stakeholder, lacked authority and minimally impacted the GSFP's functioning. This study has confirmed Iddrisu (2022) when he quoted the director of Tolon GES lamenting that:

...in the school feeding programme document, we are referred to as partners, but in practice, we are not. You cannot characterise a programme beneficiary as a partner who is not playing any role. Even as the district education director, I have no idea how the programme works or functions in my schools.

This lamentation was a sign that the GES in the area was not involved in the GSFP operations. On paper, the GES was listed as a collaborator, but not involved in practice. These revelations demonstrated that GES was not associated with the GSFP's operations in many GES offices across Ghana, and not limited to the Tolon district. It was instructive to find that, the District Director who is supposed to be part of the selection of the schools under his control does not have any information on how these schools are chosen. The results established the influence of political meddling in the selection of beneficiary schools, the contracting of coordinators and caterers without GES inputs. This helps to explain why the GSFP's functional structures revolve around political figures, with the DA contracting coordinators and caterers.

It was realized during the interviews with the MoFA officers that they have minimal knowledge of their involvement in the GSFP. The impression was that the government was buying excess food items through the Buffer Stock Company and selling them to caterers in the GSFP. It was therefore not a surprise when farmer participants indicated they had never received any form of information from agriculture extension agents (AEAs) regarding their roles in the GSFP implementation. Responding to the question of whether it was worth linking farmers to caterers of the GSFP, the response was positive. The respondents felt that the GSFP was a source of market for the farmers. However, the caution was that it is possible, provided the farmers can get realistic prices for their produce. AEA 2 added:

.... I have one farmer who has enough rice in stock in one of the communities. If the price of the caterer is good or even commensurate with prices in the open market, the farmer will be willing to sell to the caterer to avoid travelling to the main markets. So, it is achievable to link the farmers to the GSFP.

It was also realised from the interviews that, in the Tolon district, the GHS have been providing training and capacity-building support to school staff, caterers, and cooks as part of their routine activities to ensure compliance with health and safety standards. They have seen the GSFP in some community schools as an added advantage. Revealing that, it was their responsibility to carry out education on food hygiene, proper food handling practices, and sanitation measures to prevent foodborne illnesses and other health risks among children. The District Nutrition Officer who is designated to be responsible for school-health activities had this to say:

...As part of our routine activities, we regularly examine school-age children for infections, parasite illnesses, and other conditions to detect and treat any health problems. Schoolchildren who receive early detection and treatment are more likely to stay healthy and make the most of the school nutrition programme. By so doing, cooks, coordinators of the school feeding programmes, and other staff members are trained and given capacity-building opportunities. This training guarantees that handlers of food items are expected to have the know-how to uphold hygienic standards, cook wholesome meals, and respond effectively to health-related apprehensions.

A question was asked as to what their observations have been regarding the health services in the general running of the GSFP in the schools within the district. The response was that their visits to the schools were not to monitor the GSFP implementation, but to perform regular school health activities as required by GHS. They see their support by way of training cooks, caterers, and menu preparation as an obligation to promote general health in the district. The district nutritionist when asked about what she has observed concerning the food served to the children, responded that "the food cannot measure any standard meal for proper growth of children". She explains further that the meals lack nutritional standards. It was stated categorically that GHS has never been invited to any meeting to talk about their involvement in the GSFP implementation. However, they were quick to add that they have provided many trainings to schools, including GSFP beneficiary schools. Nevertheless, a high proportion of the cooks indicated that they have no basic training in food handling and do not have health certificates to be cooks. Corroborating with the accession of the cooks, the District Director of GHS acknowledged limited involvement in the implementation of the programme and the role that is expected of the health services. The takeaway question from the interview with GHS was: how can the GSFP achieve the objective of providing nutritious meals to schoolchildren when a major stakeholder like the GHS is not involved in the implementation?

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) Contributions to GSFP Implementation

Civil Society Organisations have become increasingly involved in a range of social services delivery and social development across nations, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Ghana especially those in the northern regions have been instrumental in the GSFP implementation, providing support in various capacities ranging from advocacy and monitoring to direct service delivery.

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To get in-depth status information about CSOs and their involvement in the effective implementation of the GSFP, some key CSOs were interviewed as part of this study. These Civil Society Organizations were interviewed because of their interest and participation in one activity or the other towards the successful implementation of the GSFP. Some key activities carried out by these organisations were; providing advocacy activities at the grassroots levels, monitoring the programme implementation at the local level and providing feedback to the national level implementors, organizing policy dialogue with the government, and providing complementary services to the programme. Some of these organisations provide capacity building and training to local farmers to boost food production.

The study established that some of the CSOs have had a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the National Secretariat of the programme. For instance, SEND Ghana because of the MoU came out with its Grassroots Economic Literacy and Advocacy Programme (GELAP) which seeks to foster and sustain the GSFP's good governance practices, accountability, and equity in the implementation of this pro-poor GSFP initiative. It was seen that SEND Ghana in collaboration with other CSOs has influenced policy education and sensitization among citizens to be aware, monitor, and provide regular feedback on the implementation of the GSFP. The CSOs have extended their influence and sensitization to the general public including government bodies who are supposed to play roles in implementing the GSFP at various levels but have limited information about the policy and the role expected of them.

During the interview with the focal person in charge of advocacy in SEND Ghana, it was demonstrated that the organization have had campaigns and meetings at the regional and district levels between the regional minister, coordinating directors, and directors of the various collaborating ministries, departments, and agencies, on one side, and the advocacy team on the other. The purpose of the meetings was to discuss findings from beneficiary schools across the region and to identify a way forward to ensure the programme is implemented in accordance with the government-prepared programme document. This author came across some monitoring reports of SEND Ghana and SNV on the GSFP. These reports include; "Whose Decision Counts? "Challenges of Institutional Collaboration," and "One Meal Many Benefits."

The CSOs attributed the poor participation of many stakeholders in implementing the GSFP to communication breakdowns. These breakdowns left key stakeholders out of the decision-making process and undermined community engagement. Directions and guidance were not always followed, especially at the district level by implementing partners and institutions, thereby creating several operational challenges. It was also reported that decisions on the selection of beneficiary schools, the purchase of foodstuffs, and the planning of actual feeding were not consistent with the GSFP guidelines. The interviews also revealed that CSOs had concerns about the involvement of decentralised stakeholders. Thus, major stakeholders such as the district directors of the GES, MoFa, and GHS were left out at the district level by the DA, whilst representatives of the parent-teacher associations, school management committees, and pupils were equally left out of school-level decision-making processes regarding actual programme implementation. These exclusions undermined the realisation of the GSFP's objectives and its sustainability.

Another revelation of the findings regarding the CSOs has to do with social accountability and transparency, which were found to be weak. Inconsistent procurement procedures, including breaches in procurement guidance, alongside poor financial management, hindered the programme. An officer from Urban Agriculture Network (UrbaNet) indicated that CSOs might not want to take the credit, but it is believed their involvement in the programme has helped in exposing corruption and mismanagement of the GSFP. It is believed that through CSOs' investigative reporting and advocacy campaigns, they bring these issues to the public's attention, putting pressure on the government to take corrective actions. A mention was made of the Dutch Government suspending support for two years following adverse revelations from an audit report on the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) by Price Waterhouse Coopers in 2007.

On the question of the contributions of CSOs to boosting agricultural production in support of the GSFP implementation, UrbANet, which is into agriculture, touted their contributions by saying that they have established and promoted school gardens meant to help schools in their practical lessons in agriculture and also to use the produce to supplement the school feeding programme. They have done that in over 10 community schools in the northern region. Also, they have established and formed FBOs to link them to GSFP as part of the activities of the organisation. For instance, they have linked many GSFP caterers to their vegetable growers in the Tamale and Tolon areas. The organization is also building salons and warehouses for smallholder farmers to reduce post-harvest losses.

What this case study shows is that CSOs have played important roles in independently monitoring and providing supplementary services to the implementation of government programmes, especially at the grassroots levels. It also illustrates the importance and effectiveness of using monitoring, evaluation, and advocacy through a bottom-up approach to exert pressure on policy. Such an approach requires a collaborative effort with other CSOs and individuals as well as sustained citizen-led campaigns.

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DISCUSSION

The extent of collaboration among stakeholders shapes the effectiveness of the GSFP. Findings from the Tolon district highlighted weak coordination between farmers, caterers, vendors, and the district authority, which undermined the programme outcomes. A way forward is to create inclusive platforms at the district level where the assembly, farmer groups, local communities, caterers, traditional leaders, civil society organisations, and parent associations can jointly discuss challenges and propose solutions. These fora would improve transparency in food sourcing, build trust, and ensure that decisions reflect local realities. Moreover, increasing community awareness about the GSFP's objectives would dispel misconceptions that the initiative is solely government-driven. When parents, leaders, and communities see themselves as co-owners, they are more likely to contribute resources, monitor implementation, and advocate for improvements. This shared responsibility enhances accountability and ensures that meals align with local nutritional needs and cultural preferences.

Weak monitoring and accountability emerged as recurring challenges in the Tolon District. The GSFP must therefore institute a vigorous district-level monitoring system. These should include trained inspectors to oversee food quality, storage, and hygiene, as well as community feedback platforms where farmers, parents and teachers can report on issues observed. Caterers should also receive regular training in nutrition, menu planning, and food safety to improve meal quality. Transparent reporting and sanction systems would ensure adherence to standards, reduce leakages, and improve cost-effectiveness, ultimately leading to better nutrition and health outcomes for children, and thereby linking the programme to food production.

Since civil society organisations (CSOs) have continuously filled important gaps left by governmental structures, they should receive more support and be methodically incorporated into the Tolon District's GSFP implementation. Their contributions to infrastructure provision, capacity-building, community mobilisation, and lobbying have strengthened program efficacy and supplemented state initiatives. Enhancing collaborations with entities like SEND Ghana, UrbaNet, and other CSOs involved in the GSFP will provide a more dependable and varied local food supply chain in addition to encouraging increased community ownership. Their knowledge of encouraging school gardens, sustainable farming methods, and farmer involvement can also help smallholders become more resilient, enabling them to make valuable contributions to the programme.

Furthermore, CSO assistance in educating caterers and other food handlers about food safety, nutrition, and cleanliness requirements can enhance adherence to the programme's directives, protecting schoolchildren's health and guaranteeing that meals are safe and nourishing. The GSFP can achieve greater alignment with local development priorities, long-term sustainability, and stronger accountability by formalising a partnership with CSOs.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It was found that governance structures and the state of involvement of major stakeholders are weak and unsatisfactory. The DIC, SICs and other relevant participants were not involved in the implementation processes or decision-making for annual plans for the GSFP in the Tolon district. Many of the structures are ignorant of the operations of the programme. As a result, stakeholder involvement in the programme implementation has been severely affected, leading to weak and poor delivery of relevant services to the programme.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study have proven that the GSFP is capable of improving educational outcomes, healthcare of schoolchildren and boosting agricultural productivity if all stakeholders play their roles. There are several ways to increase stakeholder involvement in the Ghana School Food Programme. First and foremost, better coordination and stakeholder participation are required. Second, functional structural policies should be put in place to regulate operations. These policies also need to be created in a multi-sectoral approach. Involving stakeholders in the management and administration of the GSFP would result in a programme that is delivered more effectively and efficiently. Additionally, as low stakeholder engagement might impede the programme's performance, it is important to raise stakeholder participation and engagement levels. Enhancing the involvement of stakeholders in the Ghana School Food Programme necessitates collaboration across multiple sectors, coordination, and active participation from educators and all other relevant parties.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the formal reconstitution and strengthening of the District Implementation Committee (DIC) and School Implementation Committees (SICs) as the central governance and coordination mechanisms for the Ghana School Feeding Programme in the Tolon District. This recommendation responds directly to findings of role ambiguity and weak inter-agency coordination. Clear terms of reference should be established for all DIC/SIC members, with mandatory participation and regular meetings embedded within district administrative structures. Strengthening the authority and functionality of the DIC/SIC would improve coordination, accountability, and alignment between GSFP policy intentions and local level implementation practices.

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The monitoring and evaluation process should run in parallel to ensure ownership of the programme by all actors in the implementation. In this way, the district should institutionalise a multi-stakeholder monitoring platform for assessing performance. Developing simple monitoring and tracking tools for district actors would enhance participation.

The study suggests specific capacity-building programmes for DIC/SIC members and the district and grassroots level actors engaged in the GSFP governance. Governance duties, financial oversight, monitoring and evaluation, participative management, and conflict resolution should all be covered in training. By increasing capacity, actors would be better equipped to comprehend the GSFP policy directives, uphold standards, and positively interact with each other. For the GSFP policies to be effectively implemented locally, institutional capacity must be strengthened.

Establishing transparent and regular channels of communication between all GSFP stakeholders in the Tolon District is another recommendation. Timely and easily available dissemination of information is necessary for funding releases, menu rules, procurement expectations, and reporting procedures. District officials, school administrators, caterers, farmers, and communities might all benefit from regular briefing meetings and streamlined communication tools. Better coordination, fewer misunderstandings, and broader engagement in programme governance would all result from improved information flow.

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