

Background

The average Human Capital Index (HCI) for the Sub-Saharan Africa region ranked the lowest globally, with a significant number of West African nations situated at the bottom of the HCI scale. The convergence of global challenges over the past three years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating inflation, and the conflict in Ukraine contributing to heightened costs of fuel, grain, and fertilizer, has compounded the challenges in building human capital. This has exacerbated the recovery from the human development setbacks experienced during the COVID-19 period, particularly impacting children in impoverished households and amplifying overall inequality.

The current education system in West Africa is at capacity, and the demand will increase with nearly 750 million children expected to be of school age by 2060¹. The rapid increase in cohorts of children and young people presents a significant fiscal pressure on West African governments in terms of service delivery needs, early childhood development interventions, and sustained investment in accessible and quality education for all, especially girls.

It's time to redefine our perspective on human capital, turning investments in education and nutrition, including through initiatives like Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF), from mere expenditures into high-impact contributors to GDP. Just one extra year of education correlates with a 10% increase in household income, and integrating comprehensive nutrition programs like school meals can lead to a 2.5% higher GDP per capita in the West African context².

The School Meals Coalition is at the forefront of this transformative agenda. Already driving efforts to provide accessible, nutritious meals in schools, the coalition is shaping a narrative where education and nutrition are strategic investments, not just in personal growth but as drivers of economic prosperity across West Africa. By aligning with the School Meals Coalition, we amplify these impactful initiatives, moving towards a future where investing in our children's well-being directly fuels the economic growth of our region.

Importance and Linkage of HGSF in Food Systems Transformation

Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF) plays a pivotal role in the broader context of food systems transformation. By sourcing food locally and integrating it into school feeding programs, HGSF contributes significantly to the sustainability and resilience of local food systems. This approach not only enhances food security but also stimulates economic growth by supporting local farmers and fostering community development.

The linkage between HGSF and food systems transformation extends beyond providing nutritious meals to schoolchildren. It becomes a catalyst for broader agricultural and economic development, promoting sustainable farming practices and creating market opportunities for local producers. Through these initiatives, HGSF becomes an integral component of the transformative changes needed for resilient and sustainable food systems.

¹ World Bank <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2023/07/25/africa-human-capital-heads-of-state-summit>

² World Bank <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2023/07/25/africa-human-capital-heads-of-state-summit>

Rational and Objectives

The commitment of ECOWAS member states to Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF) programs was prominently demonstrated at the ECOWAS Regional Technical Conference on HGSF in October 2023 and the School Meals Coalition summit in Paris. These events showcased achievements in empowering women, boosting local economies, and implementing evidence-based actions to strengthen human capital. Building on these successes, we propose a two-day Technical Stock Taking Conference followed by a one-day Ministerial Summit in May 2024 to further advance HGSF initiatives in the ECOWAS region. Notably, several countries, including Cameroon, Senegal, Chad, The Gambia, and Liberia, have committed to expanding school meals coverage, highlighting a shared dedication to transformative education and nutrition programs. The upcoming event is scheduled to be hosted by ECOWAS, with strong indications of active support from the Nigerian government and the African Development Bank. The World Food Programme (WFP) will co-host with ECOWAS and others, as well as serve as the secretariat for the event. In addition, there has been significant interest and support expressed by various partners, including the Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank. Several other partners have also indicated their eagerness to co-host and contribute funding, highlighting a collective commitment to ensuring the success of the conference and summit.

Objectives of the 2024 Technical Stock Taking Conference:

The 2024 Technical Stock Taking Conference prioritizes three key objectives to advance Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF) initiatives across ECOWAS member states:

- 1. Fill Evidence Gaps and Refine Implementation:** Addressing critical gaps in evidence related to HGSF programs is a foundational objective of the conference. Collaborative efforts with partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), ECOWAS, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Research Consortium on School Health and Nutrition (SHN), the Government of Nigeria, and other key collaborators will lead to the publication of 2-3 collaborative works. These publications will not only identify and resolve existing evidence gaps but will also contribute to refining implementation strategies. Lessons learned from past experiences and emerging challenges will be systematically analyzed, guiding the adaptation and enhancement of HGSF programs to ensure sustained impact and effectiveness.
- 2. Document and Share Best Practices:** The second objective centers on systematically compiling and documenting successful HGSF models and initiatives implemented by ECOWAS member states. By creating a comprehensive repository of best practices, the conference facilitates mutual learning and collaboration. Participants engage in discussions and knowledge-sharing sessions to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of HGSF programs. This ensures that successful strategies are disseminated and replicated across the region.
- 3. Support Knowledge Exchange and Learning Visits:** The final objective is to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among ECOWAS member states through structured learning visits. This initiative aims to create a platform where technical delegates can share valuable insights, discuss challenges faced in their respective contexts, and collectively explore innovative solutions. By facilitating these interactions, the conference seeks to build a collaborative network that transcends borders, enabling participants to draw inspiration and expertise from diverse experiences.

Objectives of the 2024 Ministerial Summit:

The Ministerial Summit for the 2024 ECOWAS HGSF Conference aims to accomplish the following main objectives, each contributing to the overarching goal of advancing Homegrown School Feeding (HGSF) initiatives across the ECOWAS region:

- 1. Showcase Commitments to HGSF and School Meals:** The summit seeks to highlight the unwavering commitment of ECOWAS member states to HGSF initiatives and school meal programs. By showcasing achievements and progress made since the previous conference, participants will underscore their dedication to transformative education and nutrition programs. This objective serves to celebrate successes, acknowledge challenges overcome, and inspire continued commitment to HGSF programs.
- 2. Present Regional Vision and National Commitments:** Building on the commitment showcased, the summit endeavors to develop and present a regional vision for the future of HGSF within the ECOWAS context. This includes communicating national commitments from member states aligned with regional goals. The objective is to create a unified vision that guides the collective efforts of member states, promoting coherence and collaboration in advancing HGSF initiatives.
- 3. Secure Additional Commitments from Partners:** Central to the summit's objectives is the engagement with international financial institutions and other partners to secure additional support for the national commitments. This involves obtaining support for governments in fulfilling obligations related to school meals, education, food systems, nutrition and health, women's empowerment, climate change, and economic development. By leveraging partnerships, the summit aims to amplify the impact of HGSF initiatives and ensure sustained support for the region's broader development goals.
- 4. Develop a Clear Policy Action Plan:** Another crucial objective is to formulate a comprehensive policy action plan that enhances the quality and efficacy of HGSF programs. This involves outlining specific steps and strategies for costing policies, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The summit aims to provide a strategic roadmap that guides member states in the effective execution of HGSF initiatives, ensuring tangible and sustainable outcomes.
- 5. Position HGSF on the Africa-wide Agenda:** The summit places emphasis on the importance of HGSF in addressing key continental and especially regional concerns such as peace, social cohesion, and economic development. It aims to maintain regional leadership by actively contributing to the Africa-wide discourse on school feeding and human capital development. This objective aligns with the broader vision of positioning HGSF as a catalyst for positive change not only within ECOWAS but also on the continental stage.

The 2024 ECOWAS HGSF Technical Stock Taking Conference and Ministerial Summit aim to consolidate progress, foster collaboration, and secure commitments for the continued success of HGSF initiatives in the region. Through these events, ECOWAS member states aspire to make lasting contributions to education, economic development, and the overall well-being of their populations.

Participation:

Participants will include delegates from relevant sectors (education, agriculture, gender/social protection, finance and health, etc.) of ECOWAS member states at technical and ministerial level. Similar to the October 2023 ECOWAS technical conference, invitations will also be extended to technical and financial partners of other relevant stakeholders (Donors, Intergovernmental agencies (such as AU, AUDA-NEPAD, EU), IFIs, UN agencies, Research institutions, School Meals Coalition initiative partners, NGOs, etc.)

Venue:

The technical conference and ministerial summit are expected to take place in May 2024 in Abuja, Nigeria, hosted by the Government of Nigeria, ECOWAS, WFP and other key stakeholders. The date and actual venue details are pending confirmation.