

How Austerity Undermines School Feeding Programmes: An Analysis of Ghana's Home-Grown School Feeding Model

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ABSTRACT

Starting in 2015, the government of Ghana implemented austerity as a response to economic challenges in the country. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how a political climate of austerity undermines the goal of linking local agricultural production to school feeding markets. The paper draws on one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 service providers and one expert from the international NGO SEND-Ghana to examine the implication of austerity for Ghana's home-grown school feeding programme. The findings reveal that austerity has meant that the actions and decisions of the service providers undermine the critical goal of linking the school feeding market to local agricultural production. Specifically, due to significant delays in reimbursing service providers for services delivered, the service providers are forced to deliver the programme by relying on credit purchases from the open market, rather than purchasing 80% of their foodstuff from the local smallholder farmers as required of them. Thus, Ghana might miss out on the development policy potential of stimulating local agricultural production through its connection to school feeding markets.

1. Introduction

In September 2000, the United Nations set — among other goals — the goals of reducing hunger and malnutrition, as well as universalising primary school education. School feeding programmes were seen as an essential policy instrument to help achieve these goals. In its simplest form, school feeding programmes are programmes designed to provide meals and fortified micronutrients to school children. School feeding programmes are universal, as almost every country implements one form of school feeding or the other (Molinas & de la Mothe, 2010). Globally, about 368 million children are fed daily in schools, with India having the most extensive programme providing food to some 114 million pupils daily in Indian schools (World Food Programme [WFP], 2013, p. 11). It is estimated that between US\$ 47 billion and \$75 billion is spent on school feeding programmes annually worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO] & WFP, 2018, p. 4). The almost universal implementation of school feeding programmes is because they are seen as human capital investments, with significant future returns when children, hopefully, become productive adults in future. For instance, in a recent study, the WFP estimates that for every US\$1 invested in school feeding programmes, a return of US\$3 to US\$10 is realised (2016, p.1).

In line with the trend of implementing school feeding programmes in low-income countries, the government of Ghana in 2005 implemented the country's flagship school feeding programme with the Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF) outlook (Partnership for Child Development, 2011; Drake et al., 2016; Ghana School Feeding Programme 2011 Annual Operating Plan, 2011). A fundamental difference between school feeding programmes in general and the HGSF programme is that the latter aims to not only simply provide meals to school children, it also focuses on creating nationally owned and provided feeding programmes through the linking of 'local' agricultural production to the school feeding market. Therefore, the HGSF programmes broadly have the twin goals of increasing access to primary education and stimulating the local agricultural market. Accordingly, to achieve these twin goals, Ghana's HGSF programme requires service providers to purchase 80% of their foodstuff

from local smallholder² farmers (Ghana School Feeding Programme 2011 Annual Operating Plan, 2011, p. 6). Among other things, the rationale behind the requirement to purchase 80% of school feeding foodstuff from local smallholder farmers is that doing so will provide an assured and ready market to farmers.

Ghana's economy slumped in 2013 and ushered the country into an economic crisis. In a sense, Ghana's recent economic crisis is characterised by growing public debt. The country's public debt as of December 2014 stood at GHS 76 billion (67.1% of Gross Domestic Product [GDP]), up from 55.3% of GDP in 2013 (Acheampong and Barkers-Okwan, 2015; African Development Bank [AfDB], Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] & United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015). Recent data from the Bank of Ghana shows that as of November 2018, Ghana's public debt had increased to GHS 172.9 billion (Bank of Ghana, 2019). To navigate the economic headwinds arising due to the economic crisis, the government of Ghana secured a US\$918 million bailout from the International Monetary Fund [IMF] (Minister of Finance, 2015). The bailout was to correct macroeconomic imbalances such as dwindling government revenue, high budget deficits and rising public debt. As a condition for the bailout, the government of Ghana implemented a programme of austerity. Key components of the financial bailout agreement between the government of Ghana and the IMF were: Front Loaded Fiscal Adjustment (significant cutbacks in government spending); Entrenched Structural Reforms (public sector payroll management, right-sizing of the civil service, prudent debt and borrowing); and, Preservation of Stability through, for example, targeted social safety nets (Minister of Finance, 2015). On the basis of these conditionalities, austerity in Ghana has meant significant government spending cuts and the imposition of new levies and taxes, among others. For instance, the Minister of Finance in 2015 announced a GHS1.5 billion public spending cuts to reduce the budget deficit (GhanaWeb, 2015). Second, subsidies on petroleum and utility products have been abolished, leading to sharp increases in tariffs. For example, the Public Utility and Regulatory Commission (PURC) in June 2015 approved 51.73% and 15% hikes in electricity and water tariffs, respectively (Citifmonline, 2015). Furthermore, austerity has impacted statutory payments, as the transfer of funds to state agencies and District Assemblies have been in arrears for several quarters³. Statutory payments to the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), and the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) were all in arrears for several months (ModernGhana, 2013; GraphicOnline, 2014; National Health Insurance Scheme, 2015).

In this context of austerity, this paper, therefore, examines to what extent, if any, austerity has impacted the goal of linking local agricultural production to the school feeding market. This study is essential because, up till date, the programme evaluation reports and other studies on the Ghana School Feeding Programme have tended to focus on measuring to what extent school feeding programmes live up to the promise of increasing school enrolment. Also, while austerity is real in Ghana, its impact on social programmes have been largely understudied. This study is divided into four sections. The second section reviews the literature on the concept of HGSP programmes and concludes by briefly discussing relevant aspects of Ghana's school feeding programme. The third section discusses the data collection methods, while the fourth section presents and discusses the findings. The final section concludes the paper.

2. Contextualising the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme Model

Two important events have led to a proliferation of school feeding programmes with the HGSP outlook in sub-Saharan Africa. First, in 2003, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme was crafted by the Africa Union to — among other things — find sustainable means of stimulating local food production, end hunger and malnutrition, and invest in the human capital of its citizens (FAO & WFP, 2018). To help realise these objectives (particularly the objective of stimulating local agricultural production), the HGSP programme was seen as an important policy option (Fernandes et al., 2016). Subsequently, there was an explosion of interest in implementing school feeding programmes with the HGSP rationale in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2014, of the 54 countries in the continents, 47 were implementing school feeding programmes, with at least 20 of those running on the HGSP model (Fernandes et al., 2016, p. 2). Second, the majority of the school feeding programmes in sub-Saharan Africa started off by relying on external funding and food provision (Gelli, Neeser, & Drake, 2010). However, in recent years, an emerging policy consensus on the design of school feeding programmes has been the need to provide sustainable and nationally owned school feeding programmes. In this vein, the HGSP model has been the policy instrument to achieve the aim of providing school feeding programmes using locally sourced foodstuff. In other words, the HGSP model is an important policy choice for low-income countries desirous of weaning themselves off externally driven school feeding programmes towards nationally owned and provided school feeding programmes (Gelli, Neeser, & Drake, 2010).

At its core, the HGSP programmes aim to decentralise 'some or all procurement of foods for school feeding programmes to community producers or markets' (Fernandes et al., 2016, p. 2). Thus, the HGSP model is an 'attempt, actively and explicitly, to

² Farmers who cultivate five acres or less (World Food Programme, 2012: 23).

³ For instance, the GETfund was owed arrears from July 2013 to June 2014. A youth activist therefore sued (and won the lawsuit) the Ministry of Finance in 2014. The Ministry was subsequently ordered by the court to pay the arrears to GETfund (See GraphicOnline, 2014).

link agricultural development with school feeding' (Devereux, Sabates-Wheeler, & Martínez, 2010, p. 5). The HGSP programmes, therefore, have two broad beneficiaries: children and supplying farmers. The children are expected to have access to education, better nutrition and health; while supplying farmers have increased income through stable demand, reduction of post-harvest losses, access to credit, among others (FAO & WFP, 2018). These anticipated benefits to farmers are primarily on account of how schooling is structured. As school is run for a fixed number of days each term, school feeding, therefore, becomes a source of stable and predictable demand for local farmers (Gelli, Neeser, & Drake, 2010; Drake et al., 2016; FAO & WFP, 2018). With access to a stable and structured market, the HGSP model improves the livelihood of smallholder farmers through increased food production and income (Devereux, Sabates-Wheeler, & Martínez, 2010). Increased food production subsequently creates jobs in the agriculture value-chain, stimulating the local economy for economic growth.

Situating these benefits to farmers in context, it is important to briefly highlight the general condition of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. Agricultural production in many sub-Saharan Africa and other low-income countries is done on a subsistence basis, making smallholder farmers the backbone of agriculture in these contexts (FAO & WFP, 2018). For instance, in Ghana, smallholder farmers produce 90% of the country's food production (WFP, 2007, p. 10). Nonetheless, these smallholder farmers are one of the poorest segments of the Ghanaian society. Smallholder farmers have limited access to capital to expand, lack mechanised and modern farming techniques as well as agricultural inputs (WFP, 2007). Smallholder farmers also experience post-harvest losses (FAO & WFP, 2018) where a significant share of their harvest goes waste because there are no ready markets for their produce or due to their inability to transport their foodstuff because of poor road networks. Considering these challenges experienced by smallholder farmers in low-income countries, linking school feeding markets to local agricultural production is believed to play an important role in improving the wellbeing of farmers.

Looking at the bigger picture, it is critical to link-local agricultural production and school feeding because 'low farm productivity, poor agricultural market development and poor educational and nutritional outcomes are mutually reinforcing and jointly determine key aspects of rural hunger and poverty (WFP, 2007, p. 4). Thus, these two programmes can ultimately help in reducing poverty and hunger. Therefore, the WFP and the New Partnership for Africa's Development launched the HGSP programme to stimulate local agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa, address the food security challenges of the continent, and create nationally owned and provided school feeding programmes (Bundy et al., 2009; Partnership for Child Development, 2011; Drake et al., 2016). The United Nations World Food Summit in 2005 also endorsed the concept of the HGSP programme, describing the programme as having 'quick impact' and recommended 'the expansion of local school meal programmes, using home-grown foods where possible' to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations World Food Summit, 2005).

With the rationale of increasing access to primary education and the anticipated benefit of stimulating local agricultural production, the government of Ghana implemented the HGSP programme concept in 2005 (Partnership for Child Development, 2011; Drake et al., 2016). Per the programme design, the delivery of the programme is outsourced to private sector caterers who are awarded contracts to provide the service in select schools at a government determined feeding rate per child. The programme is designed to be implemented on a pre-finance basis. That is, the service providers pre-finance the purchasing, processing and delivery of the food to the pupils to be reimbursed later by the government. Due to the HGSP component, Ghana's school feeding programme is conceptualised to rely on home-grown food production, rather than imported food. Consequently, there is the explicit policy requirement mandating service providers to purchase 80 per cent of the foodstuff used for the GSP from local farmers (Ghana School Feeding Programme 2011 Annual Operating Plan, 2011: 6). As highlighted previously, this paper, therefore, examines to what extent, if any, austerity has impacted the goal of linking local agricultural production to the school feeding market.

3. Research Method

The paper benefits from qualitative data that were collected in the northern region of Ghana. 25 service providers were engaged in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25. Furthermore, one interview with a key informant from SEND-Ghana was included to complement the findings from the service providers by cross-checking some of the claims being made. SEND-Ghana is an international NGO that has been providing periodic Ghana school feeding programme evaluation reports for the government since the programme's inception. Each of the 25 service providers was in charge of delivering the programmes to a school in the northern region. Responses to the bio-data and employment-related questions show that the service providers were either sole proprietors managing their restaurants (prior to delivering the school feeding programme) or simply individuals with some other catering experiences who applied to the District Assemblies to be employed as service providers. As such, the service providers are not formal employees of organisations.

The service providers were approached using the data supplied by the Northern Regional School Feeding Secretariat. This government institution is directly in charge of coordinating the activities of the school feeding programme at the regional level.

As such, they have the data on all the service providers delivering the meals at which schools. With the information about service providers and in which schools they deliver the programme, I ranked the service providers by order of longevity of service (that is, the service providers who had been delivering the programme for the longest time). The rationale for selecting the service providers with the longest experience in delivering the programme was based on my assessment that these service providers were in the best position to discuss the impact of austerity on the Ghana school feeding programme, especially during the pre-austerity period.

The identified service providers and the key informant from SEND-Ghana were approached by using information leaflets specifically designed for each category of respondents and thereby soliciting for their consent to take part in the research. Having agreed to participate, interview dates and venues were agreed on. At the start of each interview, participants signed consent forms and agreed to have the interviews audiotaped. The interviews were conducted using interview guides that were drawn broadly around themes of financing the school feeding programme, the impact of austerity on service delivery, and then the sources of food purchases for the programme. The service providers were interviewed first, followed by the key informant from SEND-Ghana. These interviews were transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic data analysis framework. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Sheffield's research services.

4. Findings and Discussions

Two broad themes relevant to austerity's implications for Ghana's HGSP programme emerged from the data analysis: (a) *Funding Arrears* (where austerity has meant a staggered and piecemeal reimbursement regime exist, creating a system of arrears) and therefore (b) *Service Delivery on Credit* (Service providers purchasing foodstuff on credit to deliver the programme). Together, these two themes explain how austerity has affected the delivery of the programme, necessitating a disregard for the programme design requirement of purchasing 80% of foodstuff from local smallholder farmers. These themes are presented and discussed below.

4.1 Funding Arrears

The service providers interviewed in this study argued that austerity in Ghana has had significant funding challenges for Ghana's school feeding programme. While the financial constraints identified by the service providers range from inadequate and frozen feeding rate to funding arrears arising out of a regime of piecemeal reimbursements, for purposes of this paper, however, the theme of funding arrears will be focused on. As already highlighted above, the funding design of the GSFP requires the service providers to pre-finance the delivery of the programme, to be reimbursed later. However, according to the service providers, the government of Ghana's austerity programme has led to a system of non-reimbursement for up to one year after service delivery in many cases. Two of the service providers made the following observations:

They [the government] don't pay you all your money so that you can also pay your debts and then keep the balance. They will pay 20 days, or 25 days, out of the number of days owed. Currently, we have 75 days of arrears unpaid, plus this current term [academic] and the last term... (Service Provider 5).

[The] government owes us about three academic terms [almost one year]. They haven't paid this term, there are some days remaining [to be paid] for last term, and the term before that (Service Provider 2).

We have no idea when we are going to pay us, I will not lie to you. Because as at now, the money owed us are plenty. More than one year of service delivered hasn't been paid to us. And the debts keep piling up (Service Provider 1).

The service providers talk about being paid in terms of the 'number of days' because the school feeding programme is scheduled to run on a specified number of days in each academic session. For example, a typical academic term of 3 months works out to an average of 60 days of service delivery. Therefore, the service providers explain that they provide the service without knowing when they will be reimbursed for the delivered service, as Service Provider 1 notes. Importantly, however, when it is time for reimbursement, the government does not fully honour its debt obligation to the service providers, paying 20 or 25 days as recounted by Service Provider 5. Ultimately a system of arrears builds up, sometimes leading to more than one year of service delivery without reimbursement from the government. Service Provider 5 notes that 'we have 75 days of arrears unpaid, plus this current term.' To understand these complaints, it is important to provide the pre-austerity reimbursement context. The service providers' narrations of delayed and non-reimbursement complaints should be understood in the context of past reimbursement processes and regimes. Accordingly, the service providers were asked to reflect on their general experiences with the reimbursement systems since they started delivering the service. Consider the following extracts:

When we started [delivering] the service eight years ago, the payments [reimbursements] were much more regular, predictable and frequent than we currently experience. Previously, it was better.

[During] Kufuor's time [past president], they were paying us caterers every two weeks [after service delivery] ... It is just like 3 years ago when they started this thing [reimbursement arrears panning one year] (Service Provider 8).

During our time, when we started, we were told the government will be paying us at the end of every month but this is not the case. Sometimes we are paid after a term. But those who started before us told us they were paid every 2 weeks, or 3 weeks (Service Provider 1).

If you look at how the other caterers in times past were paid in three weeks or a month or sometimes after a term [three months], we don't experience that. One month, two months, or one year and you have not been paid, what are you going to use in buying it [foodstuff]? (Service Provider 7).

The extracts above highlight an important issue relating to the reimbursement of service providers. Generally, the service providers note that in recent years, there has been a shift in the reimbursement period, from an initial reimbursement period of every month to a maximum of three months, to a gradual deterioration of the reimbursement duration of up to a year after service delivery. Service provider 8 recounts how, eight years ago, when she started delivering the service, the reimbursement regime was predictable and stable, noting that the situation worsened three years ago. The service providers recounted that the longest period they ever went without reimbursement in the past was three months, although the regular pattern of reimbursements was within a month. Therefore, they were generally conscious of a change in the frequency of reimbursement. Although they could not link that to austerity, they all noted that the shift was 'recent', with Service Provider 8 above noting that it has been the last three years.

Several studies have demonstrated how austerity impacts the delivery of social programmes at the frontlines. The impact of austerity on the implementation of social programmes are both direct and indirect. For instance, Ridge (2013), O'Hara (2014) and Loopstra and colleagues' (2018) research show that some of the direct effects of austerity on social programmes include cuts in benefits to revision in programme eligibility requirements and caps on the value of benefits among others. Conversely, the indirect effects of austerity on social programmes could be pressure from the central government on welfare departments and officers to reduce operating costs, leading to job losses, growth in part-time and casual work, and low wages as Fletcher (2011)'s study of the UK's Jobcentre Plus and Courtney and Hickey's (2016) research into the Department of Human Services in Canada shows. In the case of Ghana's school feeding programme, the data shows that the impact of austerity has been mainly indirect. Unlike the cases highlighted in the preceding paragraph which show how austerity affects social programmes in some countries in the Global North, the impact of austerity for Ghana's school feeding programme does not happen in the form of budget cuts or the tightening of eligibility requirements. Rather, it happens inexplicitly and subtly.

Reimbursements to service providers by the central government have been in arrears for almost a year after service delivery due to the government's stated aim of cutting public spending to reduce the budget deficits. This state of affairs is hardly surprising. It follows the general trend of payment arrears highlighted in the literature review section. Specifically, in an attempt to cut public spending and in fulfilment of the IMF conditionality on reducing budget deficits, statutory funds transfers to state agencies have also been in arrears for several quarters (ModernGhana, 2013; GraphicOnline, 2014; National Health Insurance Scheme, 2015). Therefore, freezing payments to the service providers of Ghana's school feeding programme for up to one year does not seem to be out of the ordinary. Because of the extreme financial challenges of non-reimbursement, the service providers argue they have had to resort to, among other things, the credit purchases of foodstuff in order to be able to continually deliver the programme. Credit purchases, nonetheless, have a significant direct impact on the goal of the HGSP programme.

4.2 Service Delivery on Credit

Delivering Ghana's school feeding programme in the context of extreme resource constraints (manifested in uncertain reimbursement dates) has several implications for the realisation of the programme's 'home-grown' goal. While not the scope of this paper, it is essential to state that the financial challenges experienced by service providers have compelled them to adopt a host of unsanctioned coping strategies that directly impact the quantity, quality and frequency of the service delivery. More importantly, for this paper, the fiscal challenges experienced by service providers have directly undermined the critical goal of linking school feeding programmes to the local agricultural production. As already stated, Ghana's school feeding programme's design requires that the service providers purchase 80% of foodstuff directly from local smallholder farmers. However, the data suggests that the service providers routinely flout this directive, as the extracts below show:

We used to buy [foodstuff] from them [smallholder farmers] until we got to a point where we could no longer do that. The local farmers would not sell to us on credit. They [GSFP administrators] have told us several times to buy from the local farmers but this is not possible... (Service Provider 4).

We don't buy from local farmers. The local farmers will not sell to us on credit, unlike the market women do. When they were paying us monthly and [within] two months, the farmers were selling to us on credit. But since they started paying us once in a long time, the farmers don't sell to us again. They want cash... (Service Provider 5).

Defending the actions of the service providers, the Regional Director of SEND-Ghana argued:

If you did evidence gathering in say ten districts, you wouldn't find two in which it is the farmers selling to the caterers. So how do you achieve the objective of increasing farmers' income in that district? Payments are always in arrears and the farmers are not willing to sell on credit so the caterers go to Tamale [regional capital] to buy on credit. So, in as much as caterers would love to buy from farmers, as far as payments are not regular, they will be faced with constraints because the farmers cannot afford to sell on credit for that long period.

Significant resource challenges manifested in up to a year of non-reimbursement after delivery has created a programme implementation context where the service providers have resorted to purchasing foodstuff on credit as a coping strategy. However, inferring from the extracts above, it is clear the smallholder farmers do not sell their foodstuff on credit to the service providers. A caveat is warranted here. Although the smallholder farmers generally do not sell their foodstuff on credit, when the reimbursements from the government were predictable and in shorter periods, the farmers sold to the service providers on credit. Service Provider 5 notes above: 'When they [the government] were paying us monthly and two months, the farmers were selling to us on credit.' Nevertheless, as the service providers are now confronted with long delays of non-reimbursement (of up to a year), the farmers have also stopped selling on credit. It is important to note that the smallholder farmers are generally poor and work on a subsistence basis. Therefore, considering that the HGSP programme model was conceptualized as a means of helping smallholder farmers (Gelli, Neeser, & Drake, 2010; FAO & WFP, 2018; Drake et al., 2016; Devereux, Sabates-Wheeler, & Martínez, 2010), selling their foodstuff on credit to the service providers will likely worsen their plight. These are poor smallholder farmers who face significant challenges in the line of their work. Therefore, it is impractical to expect that they can sell their crops on credit for up to one year. In sum, what the findings suggest is that, within a programme implementation context of uncertain reimbursement dates, service providers are compelled to deliver the programme by purchasing foodstuff on credit. However, since poor smallholder farmers cannot sell their foodstuff to the service providers on credit, the service providers resort to credit purchases from the market.

All the service providers interviewed admitted that they do not buy their foodstuff from the smallholder farmers. Rather, all of them buy their foodstuff from the local traders in the open market. Although buying from the local traders adds an extra layer of financial costs for the service providers, they were left with no option. It is an open secret among traders that the service providers delay in paying their debts for the foodstuff bought on credit. Therefore, the market women artificially inflate the prices of goods sold to the service providers on credit. For instance, Service Provider 4 notes: 'Today [June], a woman came here trying to sell a bag of maize to me at GHS 80 a bag, but I bought the same bag of maize in January when school reopened at GHS 150 a bag because I had to buy that on credit.' In this instance, the cost of the item was more than doubled for the service provider, only because she bought the items on credit. Despite this reality, the service providers are compelled by circumstances to still purchase their foodstuff on credit. They have no option but to agree to the terms of such credit purchases from the local market women because that is their only source of foodstuff.

In the end, as service providers are not buying their foodstuff from local farmers because they are owed several months of arrears by the government, it raises genuine questions about the practicality and usefulness of requiring that they purchase 80% of their foodstuff from local farmers. More worryingly, however, if the service providers are not buying their foodstuff from local smallholder farmers because of the financial challenges they experience, it raises even more critical questions about the fate of the lofty promises of stimulating local economies, enhancing farmers' incomes, reducing post-harvest losses, and then ultimately enhancing farmers' capability to secure funding as argued by the HGSP ideologues such as the FAO & WFP (2018) and Drake et al. (2016)? These questions are central to the welfare of local farmers as although smallholder farmers produce 90% of Ghana's food product, they have limited access to capital to expand their production, lack modern farming techniques and agricultural inputs (WFP, 2007). Thus, the concept of stimulating local agricultural production by linking it to school feeding programmes in low-income countries indeed offer significant promises of improving the condition of farmers and ultimately the economy. However, as this study has demonstrated, until the government of Ghana insulates certain programmes such as the Ghana school feeding programmes from the effects of austerity, the goal of stimulating agricultural production at best remains an aspiration, and at worst, a missed opportunity.

5. Limitation of the Study

The study aimed to understand how, from the service providers' perspective, austerity impacts the goal of linking local agricultural production to the school feeding market. The focus was on the service providers because they directly deliver the service, and the responsibility of purchasing 80% of their foodstuff rests on them. However, there are multiple actors involved in realising the requirement of linking local agricultural production to the school feeding market. Accordingly, future research that explores the challenges confronting the HGFS programme, from the perspectives of smallholder farmers could shed fuller light on both the extent of the challenges as well as the potential policy remedies available.

Another limitation of this study is Ghana's seemingly improved economic growth rate. The latest round of austerity in Ghana seems to have been comparatively short-lived, lasting between 2014 to 2019 when the country exited the IMF bailout programme. Growth rates have also improved. The Ghana Statistical Service (2019) reports that growth rates improved, reaching 8.1% of GDP in 2019. An improved economic situation might suggest an equally improved repayment system, relative to Ghana's school feeding programme. If this is true, then it implies the experiences of the service providers, as narrated below, might be short-lived.

On the other hand, there is the real possibility that Ghana, as are many other countries worldwide, might be heading to another round of fiscal austerity, inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic. From a high of 6.5% in 2019, the projected economic growth rate of 6.8% for 2020 has been considerably revised downward to 0.9% (Minister of Finance, 2020, p.62). A 0.9% growth rate is significantly lower than the 4% growth rate in 2014 when the country started the last round of austerity. Therefore, while it is certainly the case that there have been some positive economic indicators after the data for this research was collected in 2018 — suggesting an easing of the regime of fiscal austerity — the current global economic situation does not give assurances that Ghana would not resort to austerity again. In sum, these are the key nuances that must be borne in mind while reading the findings in this paper.

6. Conclusion

The paper started with the goal of highlighting how austerity undermines the goal of linking local agricultural production to the school feeding market in Ghana. The findings show that a regime of fiscal conservatism has meant that the service providers are not reimbursed for up to one year after the delivery of the service. Consequently, as a coping strategy, they resort to credit purchasing to deliver the programme. Since smallholder farmers are generally poor, they are unable to sell their products to the service providers on credit. Accordingly, the service providers source their foodstuff from the open market, and in the process, undermine the policy requirement to purchase 80% of foodstuff from farmers. The study has shown that while an essential component of the HGFS (school feeding market) equation exists, it is by no means sufficient in actualising the goals of the HGFS programme. Bringing this information to the fore, it is thus critical for policymakers and the government especially, to pay attention to challenges that undermine public policies and programmes. Future research could engage the small holder farmers directly, rather than solely focusing on the perspectives of the service providers. By engaging all stakeholders, future research would shed a broader light on the phenomenon, suggesting a more comprehensive approach to dealing with the negative impacts on austerity on Ghana's home grown school feeding programme.

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